

SERMON PREACHED FOR THE 14TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE OASIS

June 3, 2003 ~ Newark, NJ ~ The Reverend Susan Russell

Deuteronomy 6:1-9; Mark 12:28-34

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be always acceptable to you, O Lord, our strength and our sustainer. AMEN

It is with a sense of some amazement that I stand before you tonight – deeply honored to be the preacher for this 14th anniversary celebration of the prophetic ministry of The Oasis and at the same time wondering how on earth a California girl like me can begin to follow in the homiletic footsteps of Oasis preaching veterans such as Michael Hopkins, Gene Robinson and Elizabeth Kaeton. They are awesome shoes to fill – and I wouldn't be surprised if some of you are asking yourselves, “Can anything good come out of Los Angeles?” But here I am – bringing you greetings from both the Claiming the Blessing Collaborative and the Board of Integrity USA – and here we go: beginning with the familiar recitation of the Hebrew *shema* as recorded in the reading from Deuteronomy. *Hear, O Israel: The LORD is our God, the LORD alone. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children ...*

“Recite them to your children.” They must have been recited to Jesus as a child, for they were precisely the words he used in Mark's Gospel account to reply to those pressing him for answers in Temple – hoping to trip him up -- “Which commandment is the greatest?” *"The first is, 'Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.' The second is this, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these."* After that no one dared ask him any questions.

“Recite them to your children.” Before I became the full time poster child for gay and lesbian inclusion I was – among other things – the chaplain to a parish day school. Every morning – five days a week – we did chapel together and I assure you these words were indeed recited to my children ... over and over and *over* again. I used to tell them they were being “marinated in the lore of the faith” – that they were hearing me whether they thought they were listening or not! My grandmother used to say that the proof was in the pudding, but in parish day school life the proof is more often on the playground!

Like the day I was called up to intervene in a fracas between four fifth grade boys. Jon, our playground supervisor, had separated them, dusted them off and they were sitting – sullenly but shamefacedly – on the sideline bench. After an initial inquiry it was clear that this was only a playground misdemeanor and so I decided to get “chaplainy” to move things along. After all, I had REAL work to do! ☺ So I pulled the “what did we just talk about this morning in chapel” card out of my hat and (as they were clearly as anxious to get this over with as I was) they all had the answer ready to go: “*Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul and mind and love your neighbor as yourself.*”

Satisfied that my work was done, I was ready to send them off to go and sin no more. “So do you think you can manage to love your neighbors for the rest of recess?” I asked them. That’s when Jimi Ogunmola spoke up.

“He’s not my neighbor – he’s a *dork!*” he said defiantly pointing his finger at Jason Salcedo – and an immediate re-escalation of hostilities threatened to commence. What’s a chaplain to do? Well, here’s what I *did*: “Jimi Ogunmola you’re in my office! Anybody else here not sure who their neighbor is?” And suddenly clarity prevailed: EVERYBODY was their neighbor!

Jimi knew what to *say* – but it all went out the window when he saw a dork in front of him rather than a neighbor. And I was reminded once again how easily and quickly we impose our own conditions on God’s unconditional love. That moment on the playground became an icon for me of the difference between knowing and knowing what to do – particularly when confronted by a “neighbor” who we don’t like or don’t understand or don’t relate to. And it’s not a dynamic restricted to the parish day school playground – it’s a challenge we all face. For example, I do pretty well with dorks – but I’m having a little trouble with the current White House administration. And yet the challenge to me is the same as the challenge was to Jimi.

Who is our neighbor? As hard as it is to deal with sometimes, the answer is “Everyone.” Whether we like it or not. Whether it makes us comfortable or not. Whether we think God should be done with us by now or not. That is the answer our radically inclusive God calls us to embrace – it is the challenge Jesus brought to the religious establishment of his day – it is the work we gather to celebrate here tonight in the ministry of The Oasis. The truth we celebrate today is that our work is not and will not be done until no one is left outside the banquet hall and no one who yearns for the blessings God offers is excluded – whether the Primates of the Anglican Communion can come to “consensus” or not; whether the Archbishop of Nigeria likes it or not!

Here's a story told to me by a woman named Dolores Kisting when I was a brand new deacon. It is one I believe bears sharing tonight because it illustrates both how hard and how incredibly simple it can be to live as God would have us live with each other. Dolores writes: *"I was raised in Ohio in a deeply religious Roman Catholic family where bias against those of different faith or color was not tolerated. My father often told us "We are all God's children. God doesn't discriminate ... neither do we."*

Shortly after the start of World War II our local parish sponsored a Japanese-American family deported from California. Their two children – Joe and Amy -- were with our family until 1947. To me they were just another younger brother and sister to put up with ... but to my sister Dorothy, Amy was her best and closest friend. They were inseparable.

And it came to pass that a classmate of theirs was having a birthday party ... and everyone from the class was invited ... except Amy. When Dorothy protested, my mother was forced to bring her face-to-face the harsh reality from which our family life had shielded her: there were places that Amy wasn't welcome because she was different than we were. Because she was Japanese.

*Dorothy's response was to refuse to attend the party herself. Her explanation? "If Amy's not invited, I'm not invited." And I've always tried to go through life remembering the lesson my little sister taught me that day ... remembering all those "Amys" who aren't invited to places I'm included without a second thought ... remembering **that until we're all invited everywhere, God isn't finished with any of us yet.**"*

Indeed ... God is NOT finished with any of us yet – and won't be until we are all invited everywhere! And the way we "love our neighbors as ourselves" is by participating with God in making that dream – God's dream -- a reality. Dolores had her "aha" about that as a child at a birthday party. I didn't have mine until I was a priest behind an altar. Like Jimi Ogunmola on the playground, I knew what words to say – but I didn't quite know what to do about them. But then came the day when I finally understood that this call to inclusion was something I was going to have to stop talking about and start doing something about.

It was the first Sunday after the Lambeth Conference of 1998 and we were still reeling from the pronouncements that had come from the Anglican Bishops. Now, I'm from a "safe" diocese – my orientation was not an issue in my ordination process.

I was easily deployed and happily engaged in ministry as an Associate Rector – and my bishops spoke up quickly and unequivocally with words of reassurance to us in the Diocese of Los Angeles immediately after Lambeth. In spite of what had just come down from Lambeth, I was “just fine.” And so it came to pass that I stood there that Sunday, setting the altar for communion while the Presentation Hymn was sung.

My God, thy table now is spread
Thy cup with love doth overflow
Be all thy children thither led
And let them thy sweet mercies know.

What a privilege to be part of preparing the feast – of setting the table – of feeding the family. I looked around at all the familiar faces, the comfortable, cozy ordinariness of our weekly Eucharistic gathering and thought how blessed I was to be there – how grateful I was to not face the challenges so many others face in places where their ministries are not welcome, not acknowledged, not accepted. How relieved I was that God had not called me to do anything hard or “out there” or risky. And then we got to the fourth verse:

Nor let thy spreading Gospel rest
Till through the world thy truth has run
Till with this Bread shall all be blessed
Who see the light or feel the sun

And suddenly tears rolled down my cheeks as I thought about all of those – at home and abroad – who would hear in the voices from Lambeth exclusion and rejection – condemnation and judgment. Who might never know that they were oh-so-welcome at this table – might never even glimpse the abundant love God calls us to offer each other as God has offered it to us. “Nor let thy spreading Gospel rest” convicted me of my own complacency – challenged me in my own comfort zone. It made me finally understand that until everybody is invited I couldn’t rest – couldn’t settle -- for being invited either.

That day my ministry changed dramatically – and “fast-forward” from parish school chaplain to Executive Director of “Claiming the Blessing” sometimes seems to have happened in a blink of an eye. I may have already been a priest but suddenly I understood that I was also an evangelist (gasp!) – who knew they made a cradle Episcopalian model? I’m one of those born at the diocesan hospital/baptized at the Old Cathedral types – used to jokes like “Evangelize? But my dear, everyone who *should* be an Episcopalian already *is* one.” What on earth could “evangelism” have to do with us – with *me*?

Well, plenty, I've come to find out. The awesome truth is that we have MUCH good news to tell ... and we live and move and have our being in a culture literally dying to hear it. To hear that they are loved. To hear that they are welcome. To hear that they are called to "go and do likewise." That's the Good News of God in Christ Jesus AND the Episcopal Church that we have each and every one of us been commissioned to proclaim. It's Good News that can and will grow the church – maybe even double it by the year 2020 – if we're willing to both claim it and proclaim it.

The momentum of that Gospel – the Good News of God's inclusive love – has been doing anything but "resting" and it is picking up speed we get closer to Minneapolis. Claiming the Blessing will be there -- committed to securing authorization of liturgies for the blessing of same sex unions at General Convention 2003. The Oasis has been a "senior partner" in this collaborative ministry – and I want to both thank you for that and to urge your continued commitment to this important work – for we are as determined as ever to see through this work we have been called to do together.

Claiming the Blessing is about so much more than the authorization of liturgies for the blessing of a tiny percentage of the Body of Christ already blessed by each other's love. It is about what you have glimpsed in the ministry of The Oasis during these fourteen years – where diversity is not just tolerated but celebrated -- where unity does not mean uniformity. It is about the kingdom ready to come. It is about the reign ready to be realized. What will that look like – will we know it when we see it? We will if we're paying attention – and I close with a story by Robert Fulgham of "Everything I Needed to Know I Learned in Kindergarten" fame – a story that makes the point better than I ever could.

Giants, Wizards, and Dwarfs was the game to play. Being left in charge of about 80 children 7 to 10 years old while their parents were off doing parenty things, I mustered my troops in the parish hall and explained the game. It's a large-scale version of Rock, Paper, and Scissors, and involves some intellectual decision-making. But the real purpose of the game is to make a lot of noise and run around chasing people until nobody know which side your are on or who won.

Organizing a roomful of grade-schoolers into two teams, explaining the rudiments of the game, achieving consensus on group identity -- all this was no mean accomplishment, but we did it with a right good will and were ready to go.

The excitement of the chase had reached a critical mass. I yelled out, “You have to decide now which you are: a GIANT, a WIZARD, or a DWARF”. While the groups huddled in frenzied, whispered consultation, a tug came at my pant leg. A small child stands there, looking up, and asks in a small concerned voice, “Where do the Mermaids stand?”

A long pause. A very long pause. “Where do the Mermaids stand?” I say. “Yes, you see, I am a Mermaid.” “There are no such things as Mermaids.” “Oh yes there is, I am one!”

She did not relate to being a Giant, a Wizard, or a Dwarf. She knew her category – Mermaid – and was not about to leave the game and go over and stand against the wall where the loser would stand. She intended to participate, wherever Mermaids fit into the scheme of things, without giving up dignity or identity. She took it for granted that there was a place for mermaids and that I would know just where.

Well, where DO the Mermaids stand? All the Mermaids – all those who are different, who do not fit the norm, and who do not accept the available boxes and pigeonholes? Answer that question and you can build a school, a nation or a kingdom on it.

What was my answer at the moment? Every once in a while I say the right thing. “The Mermaid stands right here, by the King of the Sea!” So we stood there, hand in hand, while the Wizards and Dwarfs and Giants rolled by in wild disarray. It is not true, by the way, that Mermaids do not exist. I know at least one personally. I have held her hand.

And so have I. I have held the hand of more than one who has come to this great church of ours. I have seen the joy and amazement on their faces when they find there is not only a place to stand but there is a community to stand with them ... where they are welcome and invited guests. Where Mermaids stand with Giants, Wizards and Dwarfs – and where the table is spread and the love overflows for them all. That is the Good News we are proclaiming. That is the blessing we are claiming. That is the work we must do together as we look toward General Convention and beyond.

And may we be given the grace to trust that the gifts God gives us will be sufficient to accomplish this work God calls us to do as we continue to participate with God in making the world the place of blessing it was created to be. AMEN.