

God surely has a sense of humor. After all, who else but God would have chosen these readings today for this first Sunday together?

What pastor wouldn't love to be able, on his or her first Sunday, to be able to say to the congregation: Look, right here in Hebrews, it says "let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, not neglecting to meet together..."

Today as we celebrate 175 years of St. John's as the Episcopal presence in this community, let us be mindful that our world has and continues to change and if we are going to continue to be a viable presence in this community, we must also learn to adapt.

We are charged with discerning the **best** of the past, the **truth** of the present, and the **vision** for the future. *For all that has been, for all that is, and for all that is yet to come, we give thanks to God.*

Provoke often has a negative connotation. We say someone provoked us meaning he or she did something that made me mad. Provoke, though, does have a positive meaning in the sense of encouraging someone to action. That is how it is used in the reading from Hebrews. Stir the pot to get reaction- to get action- to come together as a community of believers. Come together as community to love and support one another *in order* to be sent into the world to love and serve the Lord. When the internal community is strong, the outward work flourishes.

St. John's has existed and flourished in this community for 175 years in part because people were provoked about this or that- including being disciples of Jesus Christ. People have been showing up to witness to the love of Christ and how that love has transformed them and enabled and empowered them to be a presence in the community for 175 years. Indeed, the Mission Statement of St. John's makes this clear: "We are committed to God, to our church, and to each other as a family in Christ, providing and cherishing spiritual growth, and witnessing our faith to the community at large."

The writer of the letter to the Hebrews gives us a road map as well as a challenge.¹ We are to be confident to enter this sanctuary – this place of worship. Christ is present and invites us to be here to be given both strength and solace. To know that each time we come to the table our sins are forgiven and we are members of the one holy, catholic and apostolic church.

We are to hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering for Christ has promised to be faithful. To be with us in joy and in grief, in the sure and certain hope of the resurrection. To be God's people charged with living a life that shows the world what is possible when we act from love and not from hate. When we take the two great commandments to heart: Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and all your mind, and all your soul. Love your neighbor as yourself. Christ has told us we matter- and because we matter to Christ- the presence of St. John's and its witness to the wider world matters too.

¹ Thanks to Jane E. Fahey in Feasting on the Word, Year B, volume 4 (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 302-306.

The writer of the letter to the Hebrews calls us to be a community. We are to meet together. Over the next several weeks, my hope is that you will agree to meet with me so that you can begin to learn about me and I can begin to learn about you. When we know each other's stories, we find common ground. I have had the opportunity to visit with a few of you. One of those conversations was evidence of the Holy Spirit working in unexpected but delightful ways. During that conversation, it turned out that the life of the parishioner and my life have had many similarities. We have lived in the same places, we have similar interests, and on and on it went. Although I cannot speak for the other person, I feel closer to that person because we have some common ground. Because we shared our stories.

Having common ground means when one of us is down and out because the world is weighing heavily on us, we know that we can count on the other's prayers and support. This does not mean that we will always agree. It does not mean that we will understand God in exactly the same way. What it *should mean*, however, is that we can disagree on issues while respecting the person. As Bishop Waynick is fond of saying, *at its best* the church values unity without insisting on uniformity. We can remain focused on what God is calling St. John's to be and to do for the next 175 years even as we discuss, and perhaps disagree, on what this means and how it is lived out. There is room for each and every person in this process and in this work.

Community is part and parcel of who we are as Episcopalians. One of the Search Committee asked a very good question when we were talking about how St. John's might evolve or take advantage of new opportunities while remaining faithful to the Gospel and faithful to our tradition as Episcopalians. This is a question that we will be exploring together as time goes by. You are an important part of this process. Your voice matters. Your presence matters. Be provoked and show up!

Someone who showed up while in great distress and grief was Hannah. She showed up and she prayed even as tears were streaming down her face. She wanted what mattered to women in that day and time, and still matters for many today. She wanted a child and in particular a son. In Biblical times and even today in some cultures, a woman's worth is primarily as child-bearer and in particular as bearer of sons. Nothing else will quite fill the hole of that longing for a child. Even her husband's reassurance that he valued her, a barren woman was not sufficient for her to feel valued and a necessary part of society.

Time and time again in the Bible we read stories of barren women who become, through their faith and through the grace of God, able to bear children – and those children were called to special ministries to the glory of God. Think of Sarah and her son Isaac, who becomes one of the three patriarchs of Israel. So the story of Hannah, her anguish and grief and pleas to God about her situation is not unprecedented. And Hannah does conceive a son who is set aside for God. And it is Samuel who will later on anoint Saul and then David as kings over Israel.

What does this passage have to do with us and with St. John's today? First, it gives us a model on how to behave and what to do when life really is not going how we want it to go. Hannah goes to the temple and she prays. She is not afraid to let her grief and her anguish out. She is not afraid to ask God for what she wants. When confronted and accused of being drunk, she is not afraid to set the record straight. It doesn't matter that the person wanting to kick her out of the temple is a person of authority. She stands up

for what is the truth- her grief has overcome her and brought on her tears. She is not drunk. The lesson for us when we are misunderstood is to have the courage to speak the truth to power. And we are comforted because the Lord remembered her. The Lord granted her prayers and she conceived and bore a son. Now all our prayers may not be granted in quite the same way. Indeed, there are times when it seems the Lord does not remember us.

We can, however, take comfort in the words at the end of the Gospel of Matthew as Jesus leaves his disciples on earth: “And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age” (Mt. 28:20b). Not all of our prayers are likely to be answered in ways we want or even discern. We can, however, rest with the knowledge that Jesus is with us. We do not walk alone.

Following the plea from Hebrews, let us provoke one another to love and to good deeds, and not neglect to meet together. We must meet together – orship together- pray together- if we are going to go forward into the next 175 years as St. John’s and as the Episcopal presence in Montgomery County. We need each other. This is not something that the priest alone, or the priest with the Vestry, can do by themselves. You are needed. Your voice is important. Your skills and talents – your dreams for the future- are necessary if we are going to continue doing the good work that God has called us to do here and now and in the future.

Yes, we do not know what the future holds for us. We can, however, be confident that God is with us if we live into our mission statement. “We are committed to God, to our church, and to each other as a family in Christ, providing and cherishing spiritual growth, and witnessing our faith to the community at large.”

As we begin the next phase in the life of St. John’s, a prayer by Thomas Merton² is particularly apt. Let us pray:

God, we have no idea where we are going. We do not see the road ahead of us. We cannot know for certain where it will end. Nor do we really know ourselves, and the fact that we think we are following your will does not mean we are actually doing so. But we believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you. And, we hope we have that desire in all that we are doing. We hope that we will never do anything apart from that desire. And we know that if we do this you will lead us by the right road, though we may know nothing about it. Therefore, we will trust you always though we may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death. We will not fear, for you are ever with us, and you will never leave us to face our perils alone.

Provoke each other to love and good deeds, not neglecting to meet together but encouraging one another. Be confident that you are welcome and you are a part of this community whose life, individually and collectively, is transformed by the love of Christ Jesus. *Amen.*

² In Thoughts in Solitude, p. 83 found in Listening Hearts (New York: Morehouse Publishing, 1991), 167.

