

Day 1 Prayer Breakfast

Sept. 12, 2013 | Second Ponce de Leon Baptist Church, Atlanta, Ga.

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Bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of Atlanta

Greetings!

Thank you to Peter Wallace and the [Day 1](#) family for this invitation. And congratulations on the big move and the new digs! May God continue to bless your important work.

This of course is a prayer breakfast. And of course prayer and praise go together. Whenever I pray, I want to sing. Don't you? Of course, God did not give me the gift of song, but that has never stopped me.

Let's sing, *Spirit of the living God fall afresh on us....*

I love that song; it's an oblation wrapped in a petition riding on the wings of adoration. God, let it be so.

Since this is a prayer breakfast, let me share a part of my prayer life with you. I have been bishop of the Diocese of Atlanta for just shy of one year. And of all the prayers I have prayed – believe me, once you put on that pointy hat, your prayer life takes on new depth and dimension – the prayer that seems to have moved into my heart and set up shop comes from Jesus' observation and directive from Luke 10.2:

The harvest truly is great, laborers are few: pray therefore that the Lord of the harvest would send forth laborers into His harvest.

That is my prayer, over and over again, all over the world, Georgia and metro Atlanta. That is the prayer that has attached itself to me. I call it grace.

What captures my imagination about this bit of scripture, as well as the Great Commission for that matter, is both defy the prominent understanding of what a leader is in the world and the church. Both articulate a leadership that is not endowed with charisma or unique ability or some other special sauce. Both define a leadership model that does not come from personality traits, power, influence or position.

Just think of the disciples. Upon study and reflection, the understanding I have come to is that there are no leaders, not really. There are only people who take up

leadership activity, only people who choose to take up certain behaviors that seem to produce certain responses.

If that is so, consider how much more exciting, dynamic and universal the notion of baptism, discipleship and the Great Commission become. Jesus' notion of leadership here seems to be a radically democratized version. And yet this democratization has to be activated by the mature decision to partner with God in purpose. "Who will go for us and whom shall I send?" God asks. Isaiah 6.8
Choose this day whom you will serve. Joshua 24.15

This idea should not really be surprising. Remember who Jesus is. He was born to a day laborer. Joseph was probably not a carpenter; he was probably a stonemason just like some of the men on the corners this morning in front of Lowes and Home Depot. And, Jesus probably watched his mother and father, as well as his community, be trampled underfoot by an oppressive military industrial complex that denied a living wage to the majority of its citizens.

Into this context comes Jesus, the lay person. You do remember that the Lord of all is a lay person? Jesus, with no formal authority and no worldly sanction of any kind, probably inspired by his eccentric cousin, John. But it is Jesus without authority who takes up leadership behavior that mobilizes people and challenges the status quo. It is Jesus who tells the poor people's poems that undeceive all kinds of people. Leadership activity is truly democratized under Jesus.

More than that, John, the writer of the fourth gospel, remembers Jesus saying to his disciples that they should not even be limited to repeating His repertoire of leadership activity, but that "...they who believe on Him, they shall do greater works." John 14.12

So as we read Holy Scripture, we see God insisting on and intervening in this incredible conversation between the prophet and the king, between the spirit and the state, between the temple and that part of God that cannot be captured in architecture and liturgy. Only, God insists and intervenes through flesh, yours and mine, those of us who would take up leadership activity. The rhythm from scripture is clear here: pray, go and say. Or, if you prefer: taken, blessed, broken and offered. Or, still more: salt and light.

The truth is that people we call leaders, in most instances, are simply men and woman with authority – which is, of course, power conferred by others for certain tasks; power that is given and power that can be taken back. The President, our elected officials, mayor and clergy come immediately to mind. Clearly people with authority can use it as resource for leadership activity, but the conundrum is

that leadership activity will cause us to step beyond the tight definition of role authority and job descriptions.

In my case as bishop, I have been granted the authority by the Episcopal Church and the Diocese of Atlanta to ordain, confirm, and co-consecrate other bishops. Also, to answer a mountain of mail and swim in an ocean of e-mail.

But it is possible with this understanding for you and me to do our authorized tasks reasonably well, to even be charming, to live and thrive in our cocoons of formal authority and yet also to never take up any leadership activity! We know already that mismanaged dependency on authority discourages people from engaging with problems when they must! And we know that unhealthy dependency on authority infantilizes and paralyzes people. This may be at work in our churches. These thoughts should chill each of us that are called leaders. What then is leadership activity? What specifically is the harvest labor that Jesus would send us out to do?

It seems clear that we must:

- discern and claim a purpose for our lives consistent with our deepest values.
- Giving primacy to this purpose, we must be mobilized by this purpose ourselves.
- Being mobilized by purpose, we mobilize people to solve problems that confront them, especially the problems we and they would rather avoid.
- Create and maintain crucibles where truth can surface. (Perhaps this is the new definition and understanding of church.)
- Tirelessly give the work back to the people.
- Run thoughtful leadership experiments undeterred by the possibility of failure.
- Create and use disequilibrium so that adaptation can be learned and new norms can be created.

Consider the March on Washington, whose 50th anniversary we have just celebrated. The point of the march was not simply education or fellowship or oratory, though all wonderfully took place. The point of the march was to create

disequilibrium, through risk, to help our nation to adapt and more fully live into its creeds.

You and I taking up these basic leadership activities, without the need for formal authority, are the necessary preconditions of what I like to call an *apostolic future* for the church. And this kind of labor distributed to and shared with the laity seems to me to be the more excellent way forward into fields that Jesus says are ripe for harvest.

In fact I would say, without a revival of this kind among the laity of our church – a new age of the laity – an *apostolic future* for the church is highly unlikely. God does not seem to do for us what God has equipped us to do for ourselves.

But it does seem that God has baked into us the capacity to choose to partner with God in purpose. “We are fearfully and wonderfully made,” as the psalmist says. Perhaps this is part of the dignity we are to see in ourselves first and then respect in every human being.

So we must be transformed by the renewing our minds. And, we mustn't grow weary in well doing, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up. Paul says this and more.

We have this certain treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellence of the power of God may be known. And yes, we are hard-pressed on every side and are perplexed, but we won't give into despair.

And, we are sure of one thing more: “God can do infinitely and abundantly more that we can ask or imagine according to the faith at work in us.” So we labor on.

A mighty fortress is our God. And as Martin Luther has told us, “Although this world with devils filled, should threaten to undo us; we will not fear for God has willed his truth to triumph through us.”

Pray today with me that the Lord of the harvest would send harvest laborers. And let us here be the first to the fields. AMEN.



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