

Jubilee Ministry: The Bridge between Loving God and Loving Neighbor

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A ministry of joint discipleship in Christ with poor and oppressed people, wherever they are found, to meet basic human need and to build a just society, is at the heart of the mission of the Church.¹

With this mandate Jubilee Ministry was established by the 1982 General Convention of the Episcopal Church. Then, as now, we are reminded that the ministry we offer is not offered individually, but rather in discipleship jointly with Christ. We are reminded that the source of the vision we pursue finds its beginning and its ending in Christ, and the works we are called to do are done with one eye fixed on providing an immediate response to human need and with the other eye fixed on building a society that is righteous before God. Thus Jubilee Ministry is about works of charity and it is about works of justice. And just like our church's understanding that our response to poverty is not an either/or decision between competing domestic and international interests, we understand that our joint discipleship in Christ is not an either/or decision between the competing interests of charity and justice. Rather, we are called to a ministry in Christ that has the goal of reconciling all creation with God and one another.

Jubilee Ministry is concretely expressed through the works of mercy most readily defined in Matthew's gospel as feeding the hungry, giving drink to the thirsty, welcoming the stranger, clothing the poor, caring for the sick, and visiting the prisoners (Matt. 25). These works are also described in the Book of Tobit, where in addition to caring for the poor and vulnerable, mercy includes a commitment to

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¹ Resolution A080; http://www.episcopalarchives.org/cgi-bin/acts/acts_search.pl.

bury the dead (Tobit 12). These Scripture passages call to mind Luke's story of the beggar Lazarus languishing at the gate of an unsympathetic and rich man (Luke 16). While a compassionate response to the basic human need of the beggar never comes from the rich man, in his death we are taught that God has special favor for the poor. Most importantly for us, we understand that we can be the very instruments of God's compassion if we will allow ourselves to be drawn into the particularity of another person's human struggle for dignity in life and in death.

A Jubilee Ministry can be as simple as a pantry shelf in a church closet that holds basic food supplies for a person in need, or as sophisticated as a multimillion dollar agency providing housing, case management, and medical resources to underserved populations in large cities. There is no limit to God's grace when it comes to being the bearer of a compassionate response to someone in a time of vulnerability and need. And because there is no limit to God's grace, no congregation is exempt from discerning how it is called to marshal its resources as an expression of its own faithfulness as a Christian community.

Most basically, Jubilee Ministry invites us to reflect upon what we do and why we do it. To frame this basic reflection we might consider the two great commandments and then continue with our reflections.

“Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?” He said to him, “‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.” (Matt. 22:36–40)

Like our works of mercy, worshiping in community serves to incorporate us into something bigger than ourselves as we seek to love God with all our heart, soul, and mind. Worship invites us to express both our sense of wonder and our experience of need before God. For Christian communities, that sense of wonder includes contemplating how such an incomprehensible Creator could enter into the time-bound reality of the human struggle, aware of its violent and selfish nature, aware of its deepest desire to love and to be loved, and to do so without condition. Out of our sense of wonder we are drawn through worship to know God more fully, to rehearse the history of

our understanding of God as revealed by Scripture, reason, and our traditions. And in the same moment, worship reveals our experience of profound need for God to transform our lives and to transform the world that sustains us. Ever aware of those sins which separate us from God, we pray that God's will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

Through worship we are led to greater awareness of our worth before God as particular objects of love. We are led to return our gaze upon God with love for all that we have and all that we understand ourselves to be. But God does not allow us to rest idly in the stasis of this cherished existence. We are called to value the rest of creation as highly as we value ourselves. To be faithful to this second commandment would mean being willing to see others as we believe God sees us. And in a world where we derive status by elevating the value of some people over others, this commandment contradicts the structures of the very cultures that sustain us.

Numerous social agencies were created and continue to exist for the purpose of lessening the effects of these cultural imbalances on those most vulnerable and in need. The workers of these agencies are unable to sit by and allow such imbalances to persist unabated. For many the struggle alongside the vulnerable and the needy has evoked a human solidarity between the person doing the assisting and the person who is being assisted. The bonds of struggle itself have united the agents of the powerful with the victims of powerlessness through a heightened awareness of their shared humanity. In those shared bonds, the intrinsic dignity in the very beingness of our neighbors has been revealed by God. But to what end?

It is here that Jubilee Ministry serves to bridge the compatible desires of loving God and neighbor. It is here that Jubilee Ministry links our experience of worship, forged out of our bond of love of God, and our experience of service to others, forged out of our bond of love of neighbor. It is out of this fully developed experience of faith that we have a glimpse of the fullness of love of God and neighbor for which we are created. What we do is worship God and serve neighbor. We worship God and serve neighbor because through our actions in joint discipleship with Christ we are more fully restored to unity with God and each other. Our current actions express our future hope, while our future hope informs our current actions. Neither is complete without the other. Jubilee Ministry holds faith and action in tension with each other so that we know our faith more fully and so that our faith can be more fully known by the way we live.

The Reverends Ali and George Lufkin serve as co-vicars of St. George's Episcopal Church, a small mountain community congregation located in Leadville, Colorado. Through its simple but vitally important community meal, faith and action have been inextricably bound together four days a week of every year for more than thirteen years. And like the meal Episcopalians share every week of every year as communities of faith, no one is considered unworthy to receive nourishment from the abundance of God's grace—if only they will come and ask. Ali describes the deep sense of community interdependence found through their Jubilee Ministry in these words:

At St. George's in Leadville, at the Free Community Meals in particular, we try to confuse things. Crazy idea, but it works. We try, as much as possible, to confuse the issue of who is giving and who is receiving. And the fact is, that it is hard, if not impossible to tell the difference. Is there really a difference? Many volunteers come to the Free Community Meals. Some arrive because probation has assigned them to community service. Others are out of work with extra time on their hands. One woman tells us she was lonely and depressed until she began to volunteer. Others, like me, just feel compelled to participate in this evolution of community and kindness. For each of us, something internal is compelling us to participate. And those of us who come to eat, to enjoy the creations of food warmly prepared, add to the sense of abundance. By eating and enjoying what volunteers prepare, the guests are giving to the volunteers. The appreciation is contagious. It has something to do with creating and enjoying and needing together. Some eat and stick around to clean up. Others eat quietly and leave without much interaction, then show up a month later with a loaf of homemade banana bread. What results is a sense of unlikely neighbors connecting around food, conversation, and the messy cleanup afterward. More often than not, strangers meet over a bucket of mop water or a trip outside to the garbage bins. Even local livestock are part of this experience. Recently, we started giving scraps to some goats in town . . . any wilted or slimy veggies we can't use. . . . The goats have never been so happy, their owner says, and our trips out to that garbage bin are less frequent. Our lives are all better for it. Thank you, thank you, we say. And we say it often, all of us!!²

² E-mail from Ali Lufkin regarding the transformative nature of Jubilee Ministry in Leadville, Colorado, April 12, 2010.

As with other vital community-building ministries, Ali and George were practicing Jubilee Ministry for years before they sought to be designated as such. And as with many ministries in the Episcopal Church, they would have gone on doing what they were doing whether there was a way to recognize their work or not. It is clearly not necessary for a program to become designated as a Jubilee Ministry in order to function as a thriving congregation or church institution. Dating back to its earliest years, the Episcopal Church can proudly claim ownership of thriving church institutions that continue to operate under localized diocesan headings or under recognizable corporate names such as Episcopal Community Services, Episcopal Social Services, and Episcopal Charities. And yet, after all those years of ministry in their communities some of these historic church institutions have sought to be designated as a Jubilee Ministry.

Why do ministries seek this designation? Because members of our church institutions seek affirmation that their ministry exists as a witness to faith in a loving God that nourishes them through the prayers of the body of Christ to which they belong. Jubilee Ministry is more than a designation conferred upon a ministry by diocesan authorities. It represents covenant-making entered into between local ministries and the larger Episcopal Church faith community. These covenants recognize that God grants to each member of the body of Christ gifts to be shared for the building up of the larger body into which the church cooperates in its mission to “restore all people to unity with God and each other in Christ.”³ Through their ministries to poor and oppressed people, Jubilee Ministries covenant to share their gifts with other ministries as expressions of gratitude to God for the abundant blessings they have been given and out of which they are empowered to serve.

In this way, some Jubilee Ministries naturally occur as congregations join forces with other congregations to share resources and vision and the profound experience of encountering the face of Jesus in one another and in the face of the neighbor they serve. Through these collaborations parochial boundaries that privilege one community over another are bridged in the name of shared ministry. Through these collaborations, the body of Christ we call the church becomes

³ *The Book of Common Prayer* (New York: Church Hymnal Corporation, 1979), 855.

animated and more fully alive as gifts for ministry are put to service for the common good.

Though it is true that many Episcopalians find comfort in the familiar setting of a particular congregation, it is also true that many congregations find comfort in the knowledge that they are part of a larger body of faithful. And where the annual convention may bring congregations together to do the business of the diocesan church and to worship, ongoing partnerships in ministry among congregations as expressions of their faith in action become the cement that sustains Episcopal communities year after year. Seeing themselves as a joint discipleship in Christ takes a burden off congregations. They begin to realize that as congregations they do not need to be able to do everything in order for their contributions to cooperate with God's redeeming work. And in a society laced with narcissistic tendencies, it is good for our congregations to be reminded that ultimate redemption belongs to God and that we are simply called to contribute our gifts toward that end, and nothing more. A Jubilee Ministry that comprises the collaborative work of several or more congregations is ministry that frees our congregations from the burden of being all things to all people. Likewise, when clusters of congregations and ecumenical communities cooperate in common mission they are individually able to share in the larger success of the body at work at a level of satisfaction that they could not attain on their own. In all these respects Jubilee Ministry builds community out of communities and contributes to the building of mission-oriented dioceses.

The Diocese of Washington is one such mission-oriented diocese where collaborations among individual congregations toward a much larger common mission expressed as Jubilee Ministry are happening. David Downes serves as Executive Director of Samaritan Ministry, in the Washington, D.C. area. His experience speaks directly to the transforming nature of ministry among homeless people. Embedded in his comments is the acknowledgment that beneath the success of Samaritan Ministry is a foundation of forty-five congregations working as partners in ministry, each of which also is being transformed through collaboration. He describes the importance of this ministry in these words.

Samaritan Ministry of Greater Washington's mission is to bring together people who are homeless and others in need with volunteers and support from about 45 partner parishes in a joint effort

to improve the lives of all. The Ministry's Next Step Program helps to break down barriers imposed by poverty and helps participants develop abilities to help themselves to better lives, most commonly in such areas as employment, housing and health care. By living into the Ministry's core values—sharing God's love, honoring the dignity of all persons, fostering partnerships at all levels and being a part of one another's transformation—volunteers find that their lives are also changed, often radically. They deepen their own faith by building personal relationships with the program participants they seek to serve, and not only learning about, but dealing first-hand with homelessness, poverty, and injustice in the midst of affluence.⁴

The binding of our understanding of charity and justice into the language of Jubilee Ministry provides the people of the Episcopal Church with concrete access to what it means to be in a joint discipleship with Christ. The church, by making itself an offering in God's work of restoring relationships, also becomes a recipient of God's transforming and life-giving power. And from this perspective Jubilee Ministry then becomes God's gift to the church, rather than the church's gift to God.

Thank you, thank you, we say. And we say it often, all of us!

⁴ E-mail from David Downes regarding the transformative nature of Jubilee Ministry in Washington, D.C., April 14, 2010.

