

The Institution of the Rev. Barbara Cawthorne Crafton

as Interim Rector of St. James, Florence

September 7, 2008

It is a good day here in Florence. I think that it is always a good day in Florence, or rather, to be in Florence. There is something about this city, something that speaks to me of our humanity, that first gift from God to us, simply that we are.

Not that I think Florence can replace Paris, of course (!). But there are around the world certain cities that remind us that God created us in a greater image than we think. That we are more than what we have imagined, so far. Great cities are themselves works of art. To live in them is a privilege, therefore, but also a burden. Human beings are always kidding ourselves about why and how we are here. We think the world needs us. Florence laughs at that pretention. And yet we are creatures because we need, and are needed, even in Florence. All art of any lasting value—including the work of art that is Florence—reminds us both that we are more than we have imagined so far, and less than we know we should be.

The Scriptures appointed for today, the Celebration of a New Ministry, remind us of this. I don't know about you, but what strikes me is the theme of discipline. That if we do not shape up, bad things will happen. The Egyptians are going to get whacked, and you will too unless you do the right thing with that roasted lamb. The psalmist sings of wreaking vengeance as a good thing. St Paul tells us to stop quarreling and licentiousness and put off the other works of the flesh. Maybe he was thinking of Florence... And Jesus gives clear conflict resolution guidelines: if someone won't shape up, shun that person.

Some might infer from these Bible selections that I have sent Barbara Crafton to you for St. James to “shape up. Or else.” Not exactly...

I have known Barbara since 1986, when we were Readers together of the General Ordination Examination. This exam is an annual torture of seminarians to make them admit they know nothing but can pretend they do. The test takes a week to write, and then each exam paper is read by two Readers, who then send an evaluation which in those days was addressed to the anonymous examinee, which eventually makes it back to the examinee's bishop.

Barbara was then an experienced Reader, but it was my first time in 1986. By the way, she was about 20 years old then... That year in New York City we were snowed in by a huge storm. After the exhausted group of Readers met for a final time, Barbara produced a hilarious send-up of a Reader's evaluation. For instance, “Your Readers, while impressed with the verve of your sermon text and desire to communicate, must however remind you that the Blessed Trinity is probably not best addressed as ‘Big Daddy, Junior, and the Spook.’” Or something like that, you get the idea. For years, we would see each other at these gatherings, and became friends.

As I was praying to the Lord for a great interim rector for you (this is a true story, really), my Macintosh chimed to tell me an email had arrived. It was from Barbara. She was wondering whether I might have some interim work available. I had discussed with your Vestry my conviction that you needed a fairly long interim period, with a priest who had a lot of skills, especially in helping a congregation focus on its reason for being. We needed a priest with real spiritual insight and depth who can help you turn your attention to Jesus. Back to the sheer gift of God's love for you. To consider that our lives, our being, are here not because God needs something from us, but because it is God's inner nature to give. Or as St. John puts it succinctly, "God is love."

As I read the email from Barbara, I realized that my prayer was being answered. (And you know, God answers all our prayers, often by saying, "No." But in this case it was a big Yes.) I believe she has the gifts and experience to help you the good people of St James re-focus your congregational life on the reason we all are here. And I am very pleased that your Vestry agreed with me when they met her and her husband, Richard Quaintance (whom she calls "Q," by the way).

You know, "Q", when my wife and I were new in our first parish, people started saying, "Things are better since the Whalons came. And she even brought him along." Maybe they'll say that here too: "And Q. even brought her along."

No, Barbara and "Q" are not here to knock you back into line. I didn't send them here to "fix" you. But to do something else entirely.

As you may know, I attended the Lambeth Conference of bishops last month, a three-week-long meeting of most of the Anglican bishops in the world. It went very well, by the way. In the end I think all the bishops in attendance realized that the Holy Spirit is calling the Anglican Communion into a deeper, richer life together. We are a global church, 80 million faithful in 164 countries. We have done and will be able to do great things because we are global. We need to be better at working together while allowing for the necessary variations each local culture needs. I know our life together in the Convocation has taught me that lesson, and I know you know what I mean. Your bishops heard and accepted a call to a deeper, more faithful life together.

But there was more. At the heart of this deeper life lies a fresh vision of who we are in the light of God's love. We talk a lot about mission. St. James has a mission statement and so does the Convocation. The Convocation is living out the decisions we made in 2006 that we call Mission 2006.

The new insight, at least for me, is that we do not have a mission from God. In the Lambeth Conference report, there is a statement that, in fact, it is God who has a mission and the church is only an instrument of that mission. To put it another way, we don't first live and then along comes God the Holy Spirit who then gives us a mission to do. More deeply, the mission is God's own mission—

"So is my word that goes out from my mouth:

It will not return to me empty,

but will accomplish what I desire

and achieve the purpose for which I sent it." (Is. 55:11)

God calls out into the void, and the creation comes into being. God calls to Abraham and Sarah, and makes of them a people. God calls to the Hebrews and makes them the Chosen People, the nation of Israel. God's Word, "through whom all things were made," goes forth into that creation, from that People, "to live and die as one of us." And then the same Word calls forth Jesus' corpse out of death into new creation. And the Spirit creates from the Resurrection the believing community we call the Church. This is the work of the mission of God. The Church is the outcropping into the lives of humanity of the mission of God. You and I as the Church do not get a mission and we are not the mission. God's mission is the act of love to create and sustain. Even we know that love is about someone other than ourselves. This is how we understand God as Trinity.

In the long run, the Holy Trinity cannot be thwarted. We of course can and do put up all kinds of obstacles, mostly because we are afraid of letting go of ourselves. In the short term we can individually and collectively slow God's mission, because one fundamental aspect of the gift of our lives is freedom. Freedom means risk. And risk raises fear. The Church in every generation has to give up the temptation to find security in itself.

There are words for this process: we come under judgment, and we need redemption; or in more modern, less stern-sounding language, conversion and transformation.

This is what happens when a congregation focuses on its reason for being, that it is an instrument of God's mission. Specifically, you, St. James Church, are an instrument of God's mission here in Florence in this time and place. Human life is a continual cycle of conversion and transformation—and resisting those with all our might. "Conversion" may sound better than "judgment," but it is a tough road, risky, scary. But "those who would save their lives," said Jesus, "will lose them."

To get back to life in Florence, a great city is itself a work of art that shows us our inadequacy, and it also calls us to imagine ourselves anew, to outdo ourselves. This is an analogy of God's judgment. It isn't some arbitrary sentence handed down from on high—You Sinner!

No, God's judgment is about showing us that we are created to be more than we have allowed ourselves to become.

When I meet someone who is a better preacher than I am, I judge my own poor work by that preacher's sermons. (Not that I get to hear a lot of other people's sermons...). When I meet someone who is clearly holier than I am, which is fairly frequently, by the way, I feel the inadequacy of my own walk with God. This is what real judgment feels like. But at the same time it is also an offer of help to change. "My Word will achieve that for which I sent it," says the Lord—and that achievement is your life and mine, both past, present, and unending future.

So Barbara and "Q" have come for one year to help you and me get back to basics. We will talk about a permanent Rector in the late winter. For now, you and she have your work cut out for you. Focus on God's love, on Christ's costly sacrifice, on the joy and wonder of the abundant life in the Spirit that is God's free gift to us. Decide once more, good people, to trust God and to risk transformation.

And do not be afraid. Barbara, this means you too. Maybe even you first. “Fear not, little flock,” says Jesus to us. God is the Giver, Christ is the giving gift, the Spirit is the giver of gifts. To paraphrase Anita Mason’s novel *The Illusionist*: “I am the Giver,” says God to you and to me. “Trust Me.”

Have a wonderful, wonderful year together.