

Church of the Resurrection, Centerville – Proper 13B – 8-02-09  
Sermon by Ruth Eller

*The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ. (Ephesians 4:11-13)*

One year and one month ago Mother Jessica Hatch, representing our Bishop, presided over a brief ceremony in which I became your Interim Pastor. Today Canon Mary June Nestler will represent Bishop Carolyn as we end that relationship.

The strange truth about “interim ministry”, though, is that we are always in one, whatever we call it. No pastoral relationship is permanent, nor is any particular congregation. When you think about it, you realize that the whole life of the Church is an interim ministry. It started about the year 30, when Christ left the apostles, telling them to carry on his mission; and it will end when Christ returns. All else is really “in the meantime”.

This might seem kind of unsettling—is everything really so transitory? But I believe the idea of the whole life of the church being a kind of interim is in fact comforting. It comforts me because I can see the wonderful continuity of the Body of Christ. The Letter to the Ephesians talks about the way we are all knit together, ligament by ligament, in the physiology of the church. We have different gifts for different functions, so that the church body works just like the human body to form a complete, functioning community. We can understand this most easily when we think of a congregation in the present moment: we have our leaders in the vestry, our teachers, our caregivers, and so on. But I believe this is true over time, as well.

You can see this in the simple fact of the little ceremonies I just talked about. Mother Jessica was your interim before I came. She handed on that privilege to me. Mother Mary June worked with your Vestry to plan your future ministries. Father Steve and your Vestry, who also appear in these liturgies, are living proof of the ongoing life of the church from one stage to the next. So the body is knit together over time.

The church—this church and The Church—goes on. But it does not move in a circular motion. Yes, the seasons of the Church Year follow their regular cycle, from Advent to Christmas to Easter, from Easter to Pentecost to Advent once again. Yes, rectors come and go, vestries are elected, potlucks are served, new members are baptized—on and on. But in order for this or any other congregation to fulfill the mission of Christ, there must be growth, as well.

I don't just mean growth in numbers—though Jesus was pretty clear about that. I mean the kind of growth Paul talks about in Ephesians: the growth that happens *until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ.*

The point is, we are not supposed to remain in some perfect state of childlike faith. I know we hear people talk about that as if it's what we should strive for. True, Jesus said we should become like little children. But think about that: what do little children do? They *learn*. I think Jesus is saying just what Paul says, though in a different way: if you want to be part of the kingdom you have to let go of what you think you

know and make room for new knowledge. Try to be like a young child, to whom all knowledge is new. Then—learn, and keep on learning. Question, as a child does—and keep on questioning. That’s how to grow *to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ*.

The people of this congregation do understand that. When you were interviewing me the thing you said you wanted most was help with the adult education program. So we had a lot of different kinds of experiences in that line, from multi-week series on topics like C.S. Lewis to one-shot wonders like Evolution Sunday. I didn’t put it in these terms at the time, but I suppose my hope was that this short interim period would be a mini-version of the spiritual growth Paul envisions for that great big interim between the First and Second Coming of Christ. That would include not only education but the move toward maturity in using all of the gifts Christ has given the members of this congregation: evangelism and newcomers ministry, pastoral care, outreach, teaching—all of those things. This process of discerning your gifts and using them is ongoing, of course. The thing about interims, short or long, is that the work is never complete. The hope is that at least you make a good beginning.

To make a good beginning: what more does God require?

Not much, I think. Because there are two wonderful things about our faith, about traditional Christianity. The first is that there is something called grace. We know that we can never do it all. We cannot do it all—but Jesus Christ makes up the difference. So we don’t have to be anxious all the time about our salvation, or even about creating a perfect outreach program.

This frees us, really, to do our best. Knowing we don’t have to do it all, we can concentrate on using our gifts to grow, to become mature, adult believers, stretching our minds and our hearts to embrace more and more of God’s truth as it is revealed to us in scripture and the world and our fellow human-beings.

So that is the first wonderful thing: we don’t have to stress out, trying to be perfect in the sense of faultless. Instead, we are called to perfection in the original meaning of that word: “thoroughly made”, complete, grown up *to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ*. That’s the important thing to strive for. And God in Christ will take care of the rest.

The second wonderful thing is this: that we don’t have to do it alone. In any interim, long or short, we are not left in isolated little huts in the desert with no companionship and no help. On the contrary: we have all of our brothers and sisters in Christ to help us. Nobody has all the gifts on Paul’s list—not even those who are ordained! In fact, one of the most important jobs ordained ministers have is helping the other members of the body find and use their talents.

We don’t have to do it alone. We don’t have to do it alone in this community, and this community doesn’t have to do it alone in the world or even in this century. We are part of the ongoing, overlapping, series of interims that stretch from the Ascension of Christ *until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ*, and he returns in glory to establish the Kingdom of God’s eternal love.

We’re going to end the service today with one of my favorite hymns, *The day thou gavest, Lord, is ended*. It’s an evening hymn, obviously, but I took the liberty of scheduling it for this morning because I find it deeply meaningful for the end our time

together. I am so very grateful we have had this thirteen-month day—but now it is ended. It is ended—but a new day is beginning for you and for me. And what is true for this Church of the Resurrection and this particular priest is true for the Church Universal, of which we are a part. As the hymn says, “The voice of prayer is never silent, nor dies the strain of praise away.” And it goes on:

*So be it, Lord, thy throne shall never,  
Like earth's proud empires, pass away;  
Thy kingdom stands, and grows for ever,  
Till all thy creatures own thy sway.*

Amen.