
The Harvest of Good Relationship

A sermon by Dean Sam Candler
Proper 9 – Year C

“The kingdom of God has come near!”

When we note great organizations in the world—great businesses, great institutions—we can usually say what it is they do, what they produce, what their product is. The Apple company produces computers, the Coca-Cola Company produces carbonated drinks, the UPS company transports and delivers things, Delta Airlines moves people and goods safely through the air.

So, the same question is often asked about churches, about faith communities. What does the Church do? What is the Church’s product?

At first glance, it is easy to identify what we do. We worship God, we pray, we sing, we teach and learn the Bible, we teach and learn the Christian tradition, we serve the poor, we take stands on issues of justice and peace, we counsel; here at the Cathedral, we even have a farmers market now. We do a lot.

Okay, so what is our product? That is a harder question. What do we produce? Do we produce anything? One answer might be easy. We produce Christians. The product of all our doings is Christians. But, this morning, I want to go further than that. Yes, we produce Christians, but I have another word this morning.

My word this morning is “Relationship.” The great product of the church is “Relationship.” It’s not a product like a machine or a food or a tool. It is, mysteriously, a spiritual product. Relationship is a spiritual product. Relationship is produced spiritually. Whatever we serve here at church, and whatever we do here at church, has the goal of relationship.

Our first relationship, for instance, is God. The church exists in order to nurture a person’s relationship with God, with the Holy. Where is God in your life? Do you find God in the same place where you found God last year? The Church designs our prayer and experience in different ways, because we find God differently at different times in our lives.

Our second relationship might be one we don’t think of too often. The second relationship is the one we experience with our own self. The church exists in order for people to find themselves, to learn about ourselves: what our needs are, what our strengths and weaknesses are, who we are.

There are not many places these days that force us to ask hard questions of ourselves, to spend time deliberating on who we are. The Church offers us a safe place, a safe community, in which to do that self-examination.

The third sort of relationship may be the one that instantly came to mind the instant I used the word “relationship.” The third relationship is others. The Church exists to nurture our relationship with others, with other people in the world. Some of those people are quite close to us. They are our family, our next door neighbors, our fellow citizens.

But, wow, the Church also asks us to be in relationship with those far away from us, too! The Church asks us to pray for our enemies, too, to be in a form of relationship with our enemies.

The Other is also the rest of God's creation. The Church exists to nurture our relationship with Creation itself, the earth and the air and the water—and with plants and animals, who are also part of God's holy creation.

Relationship, then, is a mighty goal, a grand vision, and a daunting challenge if we understand its breadth and depth. The challenge of relationship is forever the goal of the Church; and that is why the Church will never go out of business, why the Church will always have a job, a task, a project. Because, in our growth, we always need relationship

One of the most important discoveries I ever made in the Bible has to do with the word "righteousness." That word "righteous" gets used all the time in the Bible, so often that we today tend to understand it as law. We tend to define a righteous person as someone who has learned to get it right, who has obeyed all the law, who has figured it out, someone who has achieved the standard.

But I discovered that the righteousness of the Bible does not have to do with rules and laws at all. In the Bible, the better word for "righteous" is the word "relationship." A righteous person is simply someone who is in good relationship. A person in relationship with God is righteous. A person in relationship with herself or himself is righteous. A person in relationship with others and the world is righteous.

Getting right with people, then, means being in relationship with them. Being righteous means getting right with God. The project of the Church is relationship: how to get right with God, how to get right with ourselves, how to get right with our neighbor, how to get right with the world, God's creation.

In Luke chapter ten, the Lord sends his disciples out to do the work of Church. By then, his disciples were not just twelve people. They were seventy people. And Jesus sent them two by two. That is, he sent them out in relationship.

What were they selling, so to speak? What were they proclaiming? Luke says they were to cure the sick in those villages and towns, and they were to say, "Peace be to this house." That doesn't sound like much, we might think. Surely no one would be against curing the sick and proclaiming peace.

But, apparently, Jesus warned them that some would resist those very things. So, Jesus said, don't let anything else get in the way of this proclamation: no purse, no bag, no second coat, no excess stuff.

What Jesus was really sending his disciples out to do was to proclaim the kingdom of God. In fact, he was sending his disciples out to *be* the kingdom of God. His disciples were to represent what the kingdom of God looks like. That kingdom is, quite simply, peace! But, that kingdom is also, *quite deeply*, peace. It is a peace that is deep and complicated, deep and mysterious, deep and challenging. The peace of God challenges us to be in relationship, to be in deep relationship.

Thus, there are many people who resist the kingdom—even people who go to church, who call themselves Christians, who are our neighbors. There are many people who resist relationship. There will be many people, says Jesus, who resist the kingdom of God. In fact, they will resist relationship. Yet, Jesus says to act the same way towards both the resisters and the accepters. "The kingdom of God has come near." Say it to both of them: "The kingdom of God has come near."

Where is the kingdom of God? The kingdom of God is in you. In fact, the kingdom of God *is* you. The kingdom of God is you, you who are in relationship.

"The harvest is plentiful," said Jesus. And what, then, *is* the harvest that Jesus sends his disciples into? What are we meant to be doing? What is our project or ministry or product?

For some Christians, that ministry is some single issue, some political stance. Gun control, let's say. Or equal civil rights. For some Christians, that ministry is feeding the poor. For others, it is teaching Sunday School. For some, it is arranging flowers on the altar. For some, it is reading the lessons.

But, ministry is much more than what we do in the physical building of the church! For some Christians, that ministry is being a good banker. For some, our ministry is being a good lawyer. It is running a good business. For some of us, it is being a good father, a good mother. It is selling your product and services with goodness and integrity.

In all these activities, the real product is relationship. The real product is the harvest of relationship. Jesus sends each of us out to harvest relationship—here at church, of course, but especially at our places of work, and in our places of play and

life, and, yes, even in our politics—especially in our politics.

As we observe Independence Day in the United States of America this weekend, and tomorrow, we certainly give thanks for this great country. But, from a Christian point of view, we remember that good politics is also about relationship.

Good politics, and Christian politics, is about valuing and nurturing relationship: again, relationship with God, with ourselves and with all the others in our lives. Good politics and Christian politics, is not about “slash and burn.” It is not about disparaging and denigrating the Other. It is not about trying to live in isolation and fear.

“No man is an island,” said John Donne, the dean of St. Paul’s Cathedral, London, four hundred years ago. Watching television last week, I saw those words written on a tee shirt in England, just after the majority of voters there had voted to leave the European Union. The wearer of that shirt had voted to remain in the European Union, because, said John Donne, “no man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main. If a clod be washed away by the sea, Europe is the less, as well as if a promontory were, as well as if a manor of thy friend’s or of thine own were: any man’s death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind, and therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee.”

Indeed. We are part of one another. We are created for relationship. We are not created to flee from others, or to try to protect ourselves from others, or to fear others. The kingdom of God calls us into relationship, not away from relationship. The harvest awaits us.

During this political season here in the United States, it is always worth saying that this country needs good political parties. This country needs good democrats and good republicans. I thought of democrats and republicans when I read Saint Paul’s words in the Galatians lesson this morning. As usual, the brilliant Saint Paul knows how to say two things at once—maybe the work of a master politician!

So, I noticed that, in Galatians chapter six, Saint Paul has supportive words for both the democrats and the republicans among us. In the short span of about three verses, he seems to say two different things, but they are both true!

At Galatians 6:2, he says “bear one another’s burdens.” Ah, surely that is a good thing to do! But then, at Galatians 6:5, he says “all must carry their own loads.” Now, aren’t those two different directives? Of course they are! My theory is that he said one for the democrats and one for the republicans. For the democrats he said, “Bear one another’s burdens.” For the republicans, he said, “All must carry their own loads.” Ha! (A joke!)

Again, the real directive is relationship, and Saint Paul would agree with that. We find our true righteousness in relationship. We find our true harvest in relationship. We find the kingdom of God in relationship. Jesus sends us out in pairs—in relationship!—to do the ministry of relationship. Jesus sends us out in relationship in order to harvest relationship!

And, if you think to yourself today, that you have no one to be sent out with, you have no partner, no one to be paired with in your ministry – or in your life!—if you do not know who your partner is, then go out anyway. Enter the world engaged in what you want to do and like to do, and then look around to see who is next to you. Look right next to you. That person, and that other, the person doing what you like to do and doing what you yourself like to engage in—that person may well be your partner.

Don’t seek the partner; seek the life! Follow the ministry, and your partner will appear!

It will happen that as each of us truly seeks the kingdom of God, as we seek the good life of liberty and justice for all, it will happen that we will form relationships, we will form partnerships. Then, we will form neighborhoods and communities of faith. And then we will form villages and cities, and states and—yes—even countries. Those entities are all relationships, gifts of God, produced for the good of the entire world. The harvest of God is good relationship.

AMEN.

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