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OUTREACH

What does St. John's do for outreach? Someone asked this very good question just the other day. I think it comes up once or twice a year. And I want to attempt to answer it.

To begin with my reply is that it is true that St. John's is not primarily concerned with outreach. We are primarily concerned with the worship of Almighty God, the praise and love of his holy name. That is why we have centered our minds and energies on making Sunday morning "the main event."

Our intention is to love God with all our heart and soul and mind, and to offer him worship that is fitting to the "beauty of holiness." That is why we have remained steadfast in our use of the 1928 Book of Common Prayer. The '28 Book, in form and content, is the essence of Anglican worship. And, I would argue, classical Anglican worship is the most wonderful synthesis of both the Catholic and Reformed traditions. These traditions, understood in their essential idea and development, are what guide us in our spiritual energy and formation.

The worship of God is our primary focus. But having said this, there is the secondary command of our Lord which is also our duty, and that is to love our neighbors as ourselves. When speaking of outreach this is where we actually begin. Our neighbors are all those who are near us, who live in our neighborhoods and communities and who share in various social organizations with us. How is it that we love them?

And beyond those whom we know through our shared lives, are those in the larger community, all those to whom we have the opportunity to act as neighbor, as we are instructed by our Lord in the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10: 25-37) and in the parable of the Last Judgment (Matthew 25:31-46).

But how we do this is the question. And here we need to think more broadly and historically than we are accustomed to think. Since the rise of Christianity in the ancient world there has been a growing development in the idea of Christian nations. By the time of the reformation, the great Reformers, such as Calvin, Luther, and Cranmer, understood that the state itself has a ministry to care for its citizens.

How that is done would be a matter of deliberation and debate, judicious legislation and governance. It was out of this consciousness that Thomas Cranmer thought the citizenry should pray on its way to

work and on its way home, through Morning and Evening Prayer, with the work day, and the whole attitude toward vocation and profession, enveloped in the daily exercise of prayer. Consider for instance the General Thanksgiving, "And we beseech thee, give us that due sense of all thy mercies that our hearts may be unfeignedly thankful, and that we show forth thy praise not only with our lips but in our lives..." (1928 BCP, p. 19, 33).

Our own country, springing out of the vitality of the Enlightenment, saw individual states provide for the practice of various religions, which for them did not have the full pluralistic notion of various world religions that is popular today, but was thought of as the many different Christian denominations pursuing their doctrine and practice freely, and the states themselves confirming the necessary means for this freedom. The totality of the idea of loving one's neighbor was most wonderfully provided for in the basic institutions which nurtured and cultivated the fundamental freedoms of religion, speech, and association.

Through this historical development in our country we have structured institutions to care for the education, health, welfare, and security of our citizens. How these institutions actually work, or do not work, are successful or are not successful, is a matter of constant political and social reflection. Our political system is dedicated to this reflection and action. Of course we do not have a utopia; we have not made a perfect society. We have made many mistakes, and suffered both mismanagement and corruption. But nonetheless, the idea is accepted and believed that our nation provides the freedom and opportunity to care for its citizenry.

Here is the main point. Who comes to St. John's to worship together and then returns into the community to work? They are we who live our daily lives in our community through various institutions. They are doctors and nurses and care givers who minister God's healing gifts. They are teachers and educators who are instruments of the Holy Spirit, cultivating the minds of our children in the arts and sciences that we use and enjoy in every facet of our lives – including our religion. They are lawyers and judges and civil servants who look after the just administration of law, and property, and various matters of dispute, and finally of justice. They are law enforcement personnel and soldiers that provide our security. And they are businessmen who provide goods for our benefit and pleasure, such as "butchers, and bakers, and candle stick makers." And lastly, and perhaps most important, are those who make our homes.

In the most true sense, those who worship at St. John's and at every parish, are the Body of Christ ministering to our community, "doing outreach" every day of their life. Most may not think they are doing the Lord's work but they are. That is in a most marvelous way true of the sheep in the Lord's parable of the Last Judgment. They did not know that they ministered to the Lord. But he tells them that they did, by ministering to the least of his brethren.

And so when we think of outreach we should first of all think of our lives every day and how we do the work of the Lord in our community in "word and deed." As the Body of Christ we are actually at work for his sake in the world. This is in reality what our first outreach is.

Should, then, we do other things? Should churches commit themselves to special projects, works of mercy, or education, or service? Certainly. And St. John's provides for and participates in a number of these. But these are secondary, ministries of occasion and circumstance. What is more fundamental and important is that we, each one, in our several vocations, renew our institutions to care for our nation's citizens in the best way possible.

In the end, what we are commanded to do is to love God and our neighbor. And then it is "our bounden duty" to give thanks to him "at all times and in all places," and most of all, when we focus our love and all our talent, all of which he has given us, to worship him.

The Rev'd. Dr. Michael L. Carreker

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