

Proper 25 Year C: 26 / 27 October 2019
St. James' Episcopal Church, Clinton NY
The Reverend Gary Cyr

“We are intended for a generosity of spirit; not a scarcity of mind.”

Jeremiah 14: 7-10, 19-22
2 Timothy 4: 6-8, 16-18
Luke 18: 9-14
Psalm 84: 1-6

Recently, while I was with my Spiritual Director reflecting on my experience with the Church, the parish, and my daily prayer life, he reflectively shared that over the past few years he had gotten to know me well enough to remind me that he sees within me a prophetic streak. That I have a prophetic voice, and that prophets are not prone to linger long (or survive) in any one community. The only thought that came to mind when I heard him say “prophetic streak” is that I have a white strip down my back marking me as a skunk. I wondered aloud if he was calling me a skunk. We both laughed heartily. But the metaphor is spot on, as we discovered, when we fleshed that out together.

Skunks can create a stink. It is a natural self-defense mechanism that once deployed disrupts the atmosphere and all that exists there in. That, essentially, is what a prophet does: they cause a stink. They cause discomfort for the masses such that folks will seek to eliminate the stench in order to restore normativity – homeostasis. It is the prophet’s role to disrupt that homeostasis in order the God’s purpose may better be revealed, heard, and lived in to. But skunks do not walk about discharging their perfume unless they feel threatened. Only when they feel fear are they prone to employ that defense mechanism. And the thing a prophet fears most is the fear of God. Thus, when they are sent by God into the bowels of power, it is not the masses they fear as much as they are in awe of God and God’s mighty presence. Prophets may be stinkers, but they are faithful to God – imperfect instruments of God’s design and purpose.

They do not always bring doom and gloom; judgment upon the people. They can also bring comfort by reminding the community that though they live through hardships, God is forgiving and merciful, never abandoning them in the plight. Their actions may have gotten

them into trouble, but God is a loving, liberation, life-giving God and thus walks among them and with them always.

“In those days [says the Lord] I will pour out my spirit [upon them].” Do not place your faith in the world, for it will disappoint you. Place your trust in me, says the Lord of All. After all, Joel reminds the people, God is the source of abundance. It is the world – and its greed – that is the source of scarcity. For what is of the world is perishing. It is the love of God that is eternal and life-giving.

That’s the same warning we hear in Luke when Jesus speaks of the Pharisee. Pharisees, along with the Sadducees, were the elite of their society – wealthy and powerful; mistaking their privileges as God’s blessing upon them for their “supposed” faithfulness to the Covenant. Yet, it is the lowliest of the tax-collectors, a euphemism for sinner, i.e. one who walks apart from God, who is exalted in God’s eyes. The Pharisee is mistaken, according to Jesus, in thinking that their position in society is a reward for good behavior when in fact they have misused their position to the detriment of the people. They have lorded it over the meek and lowly, using their power to influence matters to their liking – all in the name of God. Jesus is reminding us: Be humble. Be thankful. And let the charity of your heart give praise to God.

Clement of Alexandria, one of the patristic church fathers, is recorded as saying, “One purchases immortality through generosity; and by giving the perishing things of the world, [one] receives in exchange for those, an eternal mansion in the heavens! Rush to this market, if you are wise, O rich man! If need be, sail around the whole world.” Material goods are fleeting as well as alluring. They give us a false sense of security, a misconstrued understanding of power, a distorted world view of wealth and privilege. All of which we place value in that is material is, as they say, fool’s gold. It can all be taken away in an instant. What cannot be taken away is God’s love and mercy. Clement of Alexandria is simply paraphrasing the Gospel of Jesus, who in turn embodied God’s desire for right-relationship. That prize which is worth chasing after is not of the world, but spiritual in nature. That prize is one of generosity and kindness; of mercy and forgiveness. It is only when we stray from that path that a skunk is sent to cause a stink; to discomfort us from our social norms and awaken us to the realization that we are people of God and as such, are meant to serve one another with a humble heart.

We are intended for a generosity of spirit; not a scarcity of mind.

Shining our Light is the national Church's 2020 stewardship campaign motto, and today marks the beginning of our parish's stewardship campaign, which will culminate on November 24 – Christ the King Sunday – when we have our ingathering and offer our commitment to the Church in thanksgiving for the blessing of our lives. As part of that, you will hear from a few folks as to why St. James is their spiritual home. But to start us off, I wanted to share with you why St. James is a personal blessing to me.

One of the things you learn in ordained ministry is that whether you are a bishop, presbyter, or deacon, you are a lightning rod. You attract energy whether positive or negative. That you are often called upon to shoulder the burden of unrealized expectations – most of which are projected on to you. It is simply the nature of the vocation. And all of that, is often played out publicly. What is less known, are the many blessings that occur, which often happens outside public purview.

They happen as I listen to folks dealing with health concerns; walk with a family as they discern end of life treatment for their loved one; counsel someone dealing with family dynamics; being at someone's hospital bedside and anointing them; working with a family as they grieve and mourn. These are the unknown moments I am privileged be part of which parish ministry offers. The only tell-tale signs are the cards and notes of thanks I receive. Speaking of which, I want to share with you an email I received this past Sunday evening from a parishioner, which is one of many blessings being here with you in ministry has given me.

They wrote that they felt inspired by my retranslation of a verse from the Epistle to read "every scripture that is breathed into by God is useful". They shared that they struggle with the Nicene Creed and its dogmatism and supernatural tendencies. In the end, they creatively crafted a creed reflecting the Spirit's inspiration.

We have faith in and aspire to the Higher Power,
God, the Overarching Truth,
One Force with many names
which is sometimes named as All That Is.
And we long to gain access
to the bounteous creativity, wisdom, and love,
which flow from a cosmic plane of Existence

surpassing Human ability to fully comprehend.

We are followers of Jesus of Nazareth,
the transcendent physical & spiritual Entity
who today is called The Christ and
who revealed to Humankind
through his own Human life and death
a superior way of life and the narrow path
He called Unconditional Love.

We strive to embody and to deliver the Spirit of All That Is,
the Essence of God within Humanity,
the Inherent Truth of Jesus, The Christ,
providing perpetual light and inspiration to the Earth.

We embrace the scriptures and traditions of our Ancestors
while we pray in the blessed name of Jesus that we always
humbly and selflessly employ our life energy and our reason, anticipating
the World defined by truth, justice, and joy. Amen.

What a joy it was to receive such a spiritual gift; to know that the Spirit touched another and that they felt assured enough of how I would receive this gift, to share it, even though they sent it with some trepidation. It is a delight to accompany another in their spiritual walk of faith, and one of the blessings St. James offers me as your priest. My ministry here is made possible through your generosity of heart – of your time and financial offering – and I give prayerful thanks for your continued support of ministry here at St. James in all its many forms.

Stewardship is an invitation into a spiritual practice of sharing our resources in ways that foster God's mission in the world, which we do through our ongoing ministry together. God's Spirit is poured out upon us in the many blessings we experience in everyday life. Stewardship is simply a means to give voice and express thanksgiving for those moments of grace that fill our lives. I am grateful for your generosity which allows me to minister with you.

Thus, as our Stewardship campaign begins – may it be with a generosity of spirit and not a scarcity of mind so that our light may truly shine forth.

Therefore:

Let us pray: "Lord, teach us the power of a generosity that interrupts the logic of scarcity with the extravagant self-giving of divine love. Amen."