A FAREWELL SERMON FOR SAM FAETH

In today’s Epistle, St. Paul confesses: “If I proclaim the gospel, this gives me no ground for boasting, for an obligation is laid on me, and woe to me if I do not proclaim the gospel! St. Paul then proceeds to talk a great deal about himself. “I have made myself a slave to all.” I became as a Jew....” “I became as one under the law.” “I became as one outside the law.” “I became weak.” “I have become all things to all people.” “I statements” are treacherous in ministry.

Jesus understood this truth about ego. In our Gospel this morning, Simon and his companions told Jesus: “Everyone is searching for you.” Jesus answered: “Let us go on to the neighboring towns, so that I may proclaim the message there also; for that is what I came out to do.” What did Jesus come to do? He came to proclaim the message—and in Mark’s gospel today to heal the sick and to cast out demons. It is odd: with Jesus, the message was himself—yet the message did not seem about Jesus. Always, Jesus points to God and what God is doing in God’s world.

God’s message in Jesus Christ and our ministry go hand in hand. Ministry is never about us—and yet it is always about us. This is what makes it so bloody difficult. In March of 1980 Oscar Romero, Archbishop of San Salvador, gave his life as a martyr. He was a witness to the gospel of freedom and the presence of Christ in the poor. He wrote a prayer which is sometimes referred to as a prayer about being a minister. It begins:

“It helps, now and then, to step back

And take the long view.

The kingdom is not only beyond our efforts,

It is beyond our vision.

We accomplish in our lifetime only a tiny fraction of

the magnificent enterprise that is God’s work.”

The long prayer ends:

“We may never see the end results,

But there is a difference between the master builder and the worker.

We are workers, not master builders,

ministers, not messiahs.

We are prophets of a future not our own.”

Archbishop Romero helps me grasp the impossible task of understanding what you and I do as Christian ministers, as “workers” not master builders. Because of baptism, we are all “workers, not master
builders, ministers, not messiahs.” What we do is a “tiny fraction of the magnificent enterprise that is God’s work.” God’s kingdom is here and now—and yet “beyond our efforts...beyond our vision.”

Most of us do not like the idea that what we do can be described as a “tiny fraction...of God’s work.” In a moving short story, Raymond Carver suggests that ministry is also “a small good thing.” In Carver’s story, Ann and Howard Weiss face an unbearable tragedy: the death of their son in the week of his 8th birthday. The birthday boy was hit by a car—and the deep coma that followed slowly pulled the boy from life. Ann Weiss had already ordered the birthday cake. While she was standing watch by her son’s bed, the baker was calling and calling again: “When are you going to pick up the cake?” “There’s a cake here that wasn’t picked up.”

The son dies and Ann and Howard return home to find the baker’s messages on the phone. The last message from the baker is too painful: “Your Scotty, I got him ready for you,’ the man’s voice said. “Did you forget him?”

The grieving mother shouts into the receiver: “You evil bastard!” “How can you do this you evil son of a bitch?” At midnight, the phone rings again...and Ann and Howard, full of grief and anger, get in their car and drive to the bakery. There is an angry exchange of words between the baker and the young boy’s grieving parents.

Then, the baker says: “Sit down now, please.’ ‘Let me say how sorry I am.... I’m just a baker. I don’t have any children myself, so I can only imagine what you must be feeling. All I can say to you now is that I’m sorry. Forgive me, if you can.”

The wise baker then said to his midnight visitors: “You probably need to eat something.... I hope you’ll eat some of my hot rolls. You have to eat and keep going. Eating is a small good thing at a time like this, he said.’”

“They ate rolls and drank coffee. Ann was suddenly hungry, and the rolls were warm and sweet. She ate three of them, which pleased the baker. Then the baker began to talk. Ann and Howard listened carefully. Although they were tired and in anguish, they listened to what the baker had to say. They nodded when the baker began to speak of loneliness, and of the sense of doubt and limitation that had come to him in his middle years. To repeat the days with the ovens endlessly full and endlessly empty. The party food, the celebrations he’d worked over. Icing knuckle-deep. The tiny wedding couples stuck into cakes. Hundreds of them, no thousands by now. Birthdays. Just imagine all those candles burning. He had a necessary trade. He was a baker.”

“Smell this,’ the baker said, breaking open a dark loaf. ‘It’s a heavy bread, but rich.’ They smelled it, then he had them taste it. It had the taste of molasses and coarse grains. They listened to him. They ate what they could. They swallowed the dark bread. It was like daylight under the fluorescent trays of light. They talked on into the early morning, the high pale cast of light in the windows, and they did not think of leaving.”
We honor today one who had a “necessary trade” in our midst. We give thanks for one who has been our baker. A small child once called her the “church lady,” and told her what she did: “You give us the bread, you tell us about Jesus and you love us.” Yes, Sam has given us time and time again the “dark bread” of the Eucharist. We are a people who know that “eating is a small good thing” at the Lord’s table. A baker’s ministry is a “small good thing.” In Raymond Carver’s short story the baker said: “‘Smell this,’ breaking open a dark loaf. ‘It’s a heavy bread, but rich.’” Sam has broken open the dark loaf thousands of times by now. Life is a “dark loaf.” But just imagine all the candles burning that have burned on this altar in Sam’s sixteen years at Immanuel Church on the Hill. Sam, our baker, has said over and over again in word and deed: “Taste and see. Taste and see the goodness of the Lord.” That has been Sam’s message, never herself. “Taste and see the goodness of the Lord.” The imperfect St. Paul said: “I do it all for the sake of the gospel, so I may share in its blessing.” With Paul by her side, Sam’s ministry has been “for the sake of the gospel,” the good news of Jesus Christ.

Sam, your ministry is and will always be a blessing to this parish, to Virginia Seminary, to this diocese, our Church and this Anglican Communion which is our temporal home. You have accomplished a great deal in your lifetime—and for us it is much more than a “tiny fraction of the magnificent enterprise that is God’s work.”

Let me conclude with a few more lines from the martyr’s prayer. Oscar Romero said of Sam and us all who are bakers for Christ:

“We plant seeds that one day will grow.

We water seeds already planted, knowing that they hold future promise.

We lay foundations that will need further development.

We provide yeast that produces effects beyond our capabilities.”

James Barney Hawkins IV

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