

Year B* Pentecost 4* Proper 8* 2006* Rick Lawler* Stewards of so Much

We are stewards of so much. So much has been entrusted into our care. Received from generations before us to be passed on to generations after.

At St. Mary of the Hills we are stewards of beautiful buildings and lovely grounds. Often on Sunday mornings, when it is warm enough, I'll walk around the circle out front praying, round and round, stopping now and then to look up at the lovely stonework we've been given, the gardens, the trees. What is it about the bell tower and liche gates and rooflines of this church that simply cry out that this is sacred ground?

I know it popular these days to say the church is not stones and mortar but people. But the stones and mortar of this place speak of people. People who lovingly and generously gave of themselves 25 years, 50 years and 80 years ago for the good of the community and the glory of God.

We enjoy the generosity of thousands of Episcopalians who have gone before us in this place.

We are stewards of beautiful worship. Worship rooted in thousands of years of Christian witness. Our stream of that tradition was channeled to us 500 years ago through the Book of Common Prayer and later the Hymnal. The Book of Common Prayer was the first thing of its kind; a worship book to be placed not in the hands of clergy only but given to the laity as well, in the vernacular, for their daily use. Eucharist, Daily Office, baptism and confirmation, ordination, unction, reconciliation, holy matrimony, all became the work of the people, all of the people.

Here we enjoy the generous devotion of millions of Anglican Christians who have gone before.

We are stewards of the scriptures of the Old and New Testaments and Apochrypha. We value the bible deeply. We read, mark, and inwardly digest the scriptures as the Book of Common Prayer directs us. Through our worship we encounter more scripture in a year than many will hear in their whole lives.

And we steer between two modern errors which plague much of the world today. We do not regard the bible as God's unmediated, infallible word as fundamentalists do. We know the scriptures have a deeply human dimension that carries with it all the limitations and glories of humanity. Being a thoroughly human collection we know we must interpret the meanings of scripture and discern appropriate meanings for each generation as best we can. We are not fundamentalists.

But we also steer clear of the modernist trap of cynicism which rejects the scriptures in total as useless relics of a bygone era. We know and enjoy the transforming power of sacred story. We encounter the mystery of God in the pages of the Bible day in and day out through the Daily Office. In Sunday School we teach our children to both reverence the scriptures through prayer and study but also to develop keen and discerning minds to interpret them.

Here we stand, again, with millions who have gone before us.

We are also stewards of something uniquely begun some 200 years ago. Something tied

to the foundation of our country. The Episcopal Church in the United States of America was born at the same time as our country. And the ideas which shaped the founding of America also shaped our church. In particular; a healthy distrust of consolidated power in one person or class of persons, a willingness to provide a role for all members in the government of the community, and a trusting of the individual's conscience within broad parameters of high and low, left and right, orthodox and heterodox, even right and wrong.

We Episcopalians began to recognize decision making could not and should not rest in the hands of the few in things spiritual as well as political. Before the Episcopal Church bishop's ruled the Church for good and ill. After the formation of the Episcopal Church there was a body of Christians governed by all orders of ministry; bishops, priests, deacons, and perhaps most significantly, lay people.

Authority does not flow from God through bishops to the rest of us. Authority comes through all of us to all of us. We've embodied this belief in our General Convention which just convened last week.

There were 200 some bishops comprising the House of Bishops.

But there were also 800 some lay people, priests and deacons who made up the House of Deputies. All these deputies and bishops were elected by their respective Diocesan Conventions. Our own Cobb Milner the Elder was one of the elected lay delegates from Western North Carolina.

This is important and this is relatively new.

Many denominations, even many branches of the Anglican Communion still fail to recognize that the work of discerning the Spirit is the work of all God's people not just bishops.

Speaking on a human level, there is no one above us especially chosen, inspired, or anointed to rule us. We Episcopalians look to no Pope, no Archbishop, no Presiding Bishop as our spiritual lord.

I am personally delighted that we've elected Katherine Schori the Bishop of Nevada to be our Presiding Bishop. It is an historic and courageous election demonstrating our Church's commitment to all the people of God. But even with all that we must remember she is still just the Presiding Bishop. She is not the leader **of** our Church. She is a leader **in** our Church. She is no pope, we gave that up almost 500 years ago. She's no Archbishop of Canterbury, we gave them up over 200 years ago. And with all due respect we made the right choices.

Neither, I'm sure would Bishop Schori claim authority beyond what our Constitution and Canons grant her. No one is probably more aware of the limitations on the Presiding Bishop's authority than the Presiding Bishop. But that is not the case for many other primates in the Anglican communion.*

In humility and compassion and community we Episcopalians govern ourselves; and by ourselves I mean bishops, priests, deacons, and laity together.

We interpret the bible ourselves.

We decide on the forms of our liturgies ourselves.

We make decisions on the doctrine and discipline of the church ourselves.

Here, though we do not stand alone, we do lead the way.

We are stewards of so much here.
So much beauty.
So much questing for the truth.
So much worship of the mystery of God.
So much desire to be related to others but never dictated to by others.
So much recognition of the authority of all members of the Church.

Such independence means we must rely on ourselves to protect, support, and develop what has been entrusted to us. There is no papa in Rome or mama from Nevada who is going to take care of us. We are our only regular source of financial, volunteer, and skilled giving.

We pay our own bills to keep the lights on and the Church warm or cool.

We support our Diocesan ministries and Bishop.

We provide the funding for the ministry of our Presiding Bishop including Episcopal Relief and Development which grants tens of millions of dollars every year, around the globe, to assist the stricken.

We Episcopalians rely totally on our own generosity.

The scriptures speak powerfully of the generosity of God's people.

Moses said to the people of Israel, "Give liberally and be ungrudging when you do so."

Paul speaking of the Church in Macedonia says, "Their abundant joy and extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity."

We are the stewards of so much.

From our bell tower to our bishops this is our church and we are responsible for it.

*My concern, as one parishioner helped me clarify, is not that the new Presiding Bishop is a woman, that is wonderful. My concern is that the Primates are taking on an authority that we, ECUSA, do not recognize and have never recognized. I've never been happier to be a member of the Episcopal Church and not the Church of England or Nigeria. Our "Primate" is severely limited in his/her authority. This was a very definite, historical, choice on our part, and a good one.