

Commencement Sermon by Verna J. Dozier

Seminary of the Southwest

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Men and Women of the Forty-fourth Commencement of the Episcopal Theological Seminary of the Southwest, I feel it is a high honor for me to be here with you today. I remember when John Hines whom I consider one of the great bishops of the Church called this seminary into being, a new thing on the ecclesiastical landscape.

Newness is the very nature of our calling from a God who fed the chosen people in the wilderness only enough food each day for that day. There was no point in trying to hoard it because as the King James version puts it so elegantly, "On the morrow it stank". A God whom the prophet Isaiah heard saying, "Behold I am doing a new thing--now it breaks forth do you not perceive it?" A God whose Incarnation said, "You have heard it said of old, but I say unto you, a new commandment give I unto you."

We are the people of a story, a story that is told through the pages of the Bible, in many forms of literature. No part of it stands by itself. Marcion, a gnostic of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Century, egregiously missed the point, and we do sometimes, too, when we pick out favorite verses and build temples on them.

Those 66 books, different as they are, tell one story, the story of a God who loves that God's creation and wills to be known.

And we are the people of that story--a story that begins with God--and ends with us--the new heaven and the new earth--the home of God among mortals.

At every eucharist we dip into that story at three points: the beginning of the Story: lessons from the Hebrew scripture and the responsive Psalm; the climax of the story, a reading from one of the gospels; and three, the Epistle, a glimpse into how the early church dealt with the dialogue between

the Hebrew Scripture and the Gospel.

Obviously this is a treasure we haven't mined, or we would not be on our way to a General Convention of this part of the people of God with the battle lines drawn.

And obviously I'm making a plea for you to be God's new thing in the Church to call us back to who we are and why we are here--the chosen people of God to be in the world a living presence of what God is about--as Brian Wren says in his lovely communion hymn:

Together met, together bound, we'll go our different ways  
And as his people in the world we'll live and speak his praise.

And as Howard Thurman puts what God is about in creation—

A friendly world of friendly folk  
Beneath a friendly sky.

I think a humble and serious life long study of the Bible will help to clarify that vision for us, and I think that surely is the work you are called to do. You will begin your ministry in the church as teachers and preachers, high and holy callings, callings our Lord found served his purpose as he lived out his ministry of helping the people of God understand what God is about. His mantle falls on you.

If not you, brothers and sisters, who?

Every church has a Bible study group--and Oh, what tragedies are committed in thy name! But human failings are always God's opportunity.

Understandest thou what thou readest?  
How can I unless someone helps me?

An example of a good bible study is this story in Acts. Now there was a student, and Philip was a teacher. Eagerly Phillip leaped into the chariot of the Ethiopian eunuch to give one of the most successful Bible lessons. Here's what the royal servant said at the end of it. What is there to prevent

my being baptized now? What made this a good Bible Study? It started with the question of the learner. All learning begins, not with the answers of the teacher, but with the questions of the learner.

Not so spectacular a success as Peter's three thousand at Pentecost perhaps, but I don't think God deals in numbers--and think how many St Philip's African-American churches there are!

You may not be so fortunate as Philip to get a real student--they are rare--were you a real student? You may remember your own experiences as a student. How could your teachers have helped you? Your answer to that question might help you help another.

A friend sent me a riotous imaginary possibility the Great Teacher might have experienced. Jesus had just finished teaching the Beatitudes. One disciple wanted to know if they had to memorize this. Another asked, will we have a test on it? Another was concerned that it seemed a bit long. Couldn't some of the sections be combined? And Jesus wept. And of course there is always the "been there, seen that, done that" variety of student. But teaching is a faith-filled process. Faith is a risk that we are doing the work of God. Our best efforts fall short of our highest goals. We believe we serve a God who knows our weaknesses and stands by us in our failures. We keep open to the possibility that we may have failed but failure is never the last word. The God who loves us accepts the fact that we didn't make it this time but is always open to our trying again.

Jesus was almost lynched after his first sermon. As long as he interpreted the well known Scriptures as they had always understood them, they had only satisfied admiration for him; but as soon as he interpreted the Scriptures to include those they despised, they rose up in wrath. "Away with this man," sounded early in Jesus' career.

That will probably not happen to you. It is an honor I'm sure you feel you can do without.

The world is out of joint, wailed Hamlet, "O cursed spite, That ever I was sent to set it right."

But that is our calling. The world is out of joint in Biblical language, the world is fallen and we, the people of God are called to show it another way--for which response it does not shower us with gratitude.

A cross looms on the horizon for those of the other way. "Sheep among wolves", Jesus, our realistic Lord warns us. And this reflection from our Gospel this morning brings us to a consideration of the scriptures for the morning as they tell our story.

Did you experience what seemed like a jarring disconnection between the Hebrew Scripture and the Gospel?

From the Hebrew Scriptures we had a vision of the great eighth century prophet, Isaiah (Ch. 2: v. 3b - 4)

**"--- for out of Zion shall go forth the law, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem.**

**And he shall judge among the nations, and shall rebuke many people; and they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruninghooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore."**

and in the responsive Psalm the worshipers rest easily with a God that can do that.

Almost as if we have entered another world, the Gospel confronts us with a drill sergeant getting his troops ready for battle. Jesus, the peasant with an attitude, as Dominic Crossan of the Jesus Seminar calls him, is getting his troops ready for battle, Not a detail is overlooked. He tells them how to dress, how to conduct themselves. He even tells them how to act in the event of failure.

It is a realistic Lord we follow. No dewy-eyed idealist.

We are called to change the world. That is not an easy task. The powers and principalities hold the domain, but the Kingdom of this world shall become the Kingdom of our Lord and of the Christ.

Every time we pray the Lord's prayer, we are praying revolution. When we **pray** it. I have trouble every time we are asked to **say** the Lord's prayer. It is to be **prayed**, "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven" - a call for revolution. The people who want to restore prayer in the public schools aren't interested in **praying** the Lord's Prayer, they want children to **say** it. They want spiritual veneer, not revolution.

I went to school where every day we said the Lord's prayer. At least the children said it while the teachers did paper work at their desks. We never heard the call to revolution--You will never hear it if you are just mouthing the words. Help people to pray it, with all the cost and promise of that. "Thy kingdom come thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven." A call for a world turned upside down--or as one young man said to me, "No Verna, it's a call for a world to be turned right side up." A fallen world lifted up, a new heaven and a new earth. That's the end of the story, and we are called to be a part of that.

And how privileged you are, men and women of the class of 1997 of the Seminary of the Southwest to be commissioned to tell that story, to teach that story, to live that story. God bless you.

In the name of God who created us, who redeemed us and who companions us. Amen.