

*The Twenty-Sixth Sunday after Pentecost
Proper 27, RCL Lectionary*

November 9th, 2008

*Episcopal Church of Our Saviour
Mill Valley, California*

Let's Build a Church

The Rev. Richard E. Helmer

I was arriving home from a meeting yesterday when our five-year-old son cornered me and asked that I help him build with his lego blocks.

“So, Daniel, what do you want to build?” I asked as he dumped out the bricks on the floor.

“Let's a build a church!” he exclaimed with a smile.

“What kind of church?” I asked, as I tried to conceal a sigh.

I had to laugh a bit as he held his arms up high in the shape of an arch, his grin wide. Sometimes church is the last thing I want to think about when I'm home, especially during stewardship season when the pledge cards are out, the follow-up calls are being made, and the challenges of leading an institution into a new year can weigh heavy. Yet here was my son, bodily demonstrating to me the sign of the institutional church, wanting me to help build yet another one!

I found myself a few weeks ago asking a spiritual directee, “Do you really think Jesus needs all this?” -- meaning, of course, the institution, with its walls and roof, its bills and its revenues, its beauty and its foibles. I wonder that sometimes. I know I wonder this sometimes along with many of you who labor and sweat countless volunteer hours alongside me, our staff, and our other leadership. Who share with me both your joys and frustrations that come with institutional work in this place. And God knows that all institutions can at times behave badly – sometimes embarrassingly so.

For me, today's gospel about bridesmaids and the bridegroom was a critical reminder – painful in some ways – of the embarrassing hubris of churches-as-institutions that played out over the past several weeks. . . Churches as institutions – in my view at least – behaving badly even as a new chapter in the history of civil rights was opening in the presidential campaign. Proposition 8 was ostensibly about protecting marriage, but I'm still not quite sure from what. . . And it narrowly passed in California after institutional churches funneled tens of millions of dollars into less than credible arguments in advertising, cynical appeals to base fears and prejudices, and pressure from the pulpits.

Through all of this, institutional churches unabashedly sent an odd message to the greater world: that somehow Jesus came to defend a particular definition of marriage. You're welcome to disagree with me, of course, but it seems to me Jesus had very little time for defending theological positions about any human institution, let alone marriage. Rather, the gospels tell me that Jesus would be carrying the cross with our sisters and brothers, even members of this very flock. Jesus would be helping shoulder the burdens of our own brothers and sisters whose dignity was slapped down again this week for simply seeking to build peaceful lives and households: peaceful lives with equal protection for their covenants and families.

So for us, and for me as one of your priests, this is not an abstract political argument about religious institutions gone awry. Instead, it's a very real matter of conscience in our midst; a very real matter of solidarity with real lives, real dignity, and real people among us.

In a nutshell, the passage of Proposition 8 with the backing of some pretty big institutional church muscle tells me one thing:

Let's build a different kind of church institution.

Let's build a church that, as the Body of Christ, helps carry the heavy crosses borne by members our own flock and our wider community. Let's offer a Christian institution that includes and transforms in the name of Christ, rather than shuns and condemns. Let's build a church that openly questions how we structure traditional institutions – even our own – especially when they fail to serve real human need and real human dignity. I believe that institutional questioning is one lamp, in the language of today's gospel reading, that we in the Anglican and Episcopal tradition are called to keep burning in the darkness. But you don't have to take my word for it. Just talk to our young people, and listen to what they are telling us.

And there are some other great reasons, too, this year, to re-invest in our own imperfect institution, this parish. Good reasons to keep scrubbing the wood and opening the doors to hope. To continue giving in this place. To invite and to welcome others – friends and strangers – into our shared tradition, our journey of faith, and to be transformed again and again by their coming among us. There are signs that the bridegroom is on the move here, in our midst. Our keeping the lamps lit for Christ in this parish has at last ushered in a new chapter of our journey. Attendance is up, we're welcoming new members regularly, and children are filling our Godly Play and other Sunday programs for young people. These reasons, even each by themselves, are what make this parish institution worth continuing, and worth reinventing. Hey, this is what gives it life and strikes a chord even with a five-year-old, inspiring him to want to build a church!

And I want to first and foremost say thank you to all of you who have kept the lamps burning through thick and thin these past several years. You are not simply why this institution called Church of Our Saviour matters and survives, despite its many foibles, faults, and failings. You are the living faith that, by God's grace, turns this parish institution into a living, breathing, nurturing manifestation of the beloved community – what Jesus in the gospels calls the reign of God. Your gifts are oil for the lamps. Your gracious and generous offerings of time and financial commitment fuel the light of the Gospel shining in this place. They are part of the flow of grace that you steward, coming to you from God and returning to God in the proclamation and living into Christ's transformative work in this community. You stand with the marginalized and feed the hungry. You heal the earth. You nurture the faith of children and call them to lives of conscience and mercy. As you follow the ways of Christ, you make the institution, despite all of our shared checkered history – you and God's grace working through you make it good. You make it worth the sweat and the toil.

Yes, it's stewardship season! Time to rebuild our church, arches and all – well, metaphorically at least – for a new year. Have you starting praying about your financial commitment for 2009 yet? Please do. Have you started thinking and praying about your gifts and passions for the people of God in this place in the new year? Please do. Today after worship, we gather for a Town Hall meeting to talk about where we have been and where God is leading us in the coming year. Let's build a church together.

For we are the bridesmaids keep the lamps of the Gospel fueled and burning, inviting all into the transformative waters of baptism and to the table for the broken bread and the common cup. And then passing that practice on from generation to generation. So for those who are otherwise left in the dark, our children may rebuild the arches, trimming the bright lamps of mercy and Christ's transformative compassion for a new day. *Amen*