

Sermon for Maundy Thursday, Year C  
April 5, 2007  
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## *Get Out of Here!*

Last year during the Spring semester at seminary the Diocese scheduled the annual Deacons' retreat, and since this conflicted with my studies at seminary I wrote a letter to the Bishop politely asking that I be excused from going to the retreat. A few days after I mailed the letter, I had just got home from school when the phone rang: I picked it up and could see from the "Caller I.D." that the caller was the Episcopal Diocese of Kansas. I answered, and sure enough, it was the Bishop himself. He told me that I did not have to attend the Deacons' retreat because he wanted my "primary ministry site" to be the library. Well, I certainly want to keep the Bishop pleased, so when I'm not in class, I am usually in the library.

And although I try to focus on my studies, sometimes my mind wanders, and I glance through the magazines. The other day I got restless and looked at a *Newsweek* magazine about letters sent to America by service people in Iraq. All of the letters were from soldiers who had been killed, and an especially poignant section of were "farewell letters," which were intended to be read only if the soldier were killed. Lance Cpl. Lance Graham, a 26 year old Marine from San Antonio who was killed on May 7, 2005, when suicide bombers hit his convoy, wrote his family in his farewell letter, "Another thing I ask is that at my funeral the Marine Corps hymn and 'Amazing Grace' is played with the bag pipes ... nothing sounds better than the bag pipes playing 'Amazing Grace.'"

These "farewell letters" in *Newsweek* are in many ways similar to what Jesus told his disciples at their last time together during Jesus' earthly ministry. Aware of the threats from the Jewish leaders and that his death is imminent, Jesus has retreated to meet with his disciples into the upper room for a last meal together. We are all familiar with what happens: Jesus passes the cup and the bread among them, and tells them, do this in remembrance of me. And, of course, we do, every Sunday we gather here for worship. In fact, I had never noticed until recently that there are *two* cups in Luke: one before the bread, and another after the bread. So why don't we drink from the cup twice? There's probably good reasons for that, clergy sobriety among them.

You can almost depict the intimate setting: the group of disciples and Jesus huddled in a cozy room, an intimate setting that could be painted by Thomas Kinkade. Most of us can probably appreciate the sense of safety and comfort of that intimate meeting in the upper room. All of the problems with the religious leaders and the Roman authorities are forgotten in that cozy room. I suspect that we all have the urge to retreat from the hassles of the world and to gather with our friends. There's probably a "cave dweller gene" in our DNA, and Jesus' instructions would have triggered it.

But there's a problem with that picture. If those were Jesus' last words to us, his "farewell letter," we'd probably all just stay here, assembled in our safe "holy huddle," being fed

and comforted by each other. If we took a break, it would be to watch the segment from “Living the Questions” where Tex Sample waxes eloquently about the wonderful comforts of Holy Communion. We’d clink our chalices and say “life is good.” and our Christian life would be focused on ourselves. And if the disciples had reached the same conclusion, if they had decided that Jesus’s final instructions were “eat and drink in memory of me,” well, then, they would have never left the upper room themselves. They would have stayed there, eating meals in Jesus’ name while they watched their plasma televisions, and justifying it by proclaiming, “it’s what Jesus told us to do!” and we would have never heard the good news.

Jesus’ last words to his followers at the Last Supper might have been “do this in remembrance of me,” but his *final* instruction to his disciples was given after his resurrection in what we commonly call “the Great Commission.” This is recorded in the Gospel of Mark as “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you” (Matthew 28:19-20a). Summarized succinctly, Jesus’ final commandment was not “Eat and drink in my name,” it was “Get out of here!”

And that is why we strip the altar tonight. We do it not to drive all traces of Jesus from the sanctuary – as if we could ever do that, since Christ is present in all of us in both word and sacrament – no, we strip the altar to drive all of *us* out of here. Jesus doesn’t want us remaining in here, feeding and comforting each other; Jesus wants us out there, in the messy, sloppy, anti-Thomas Kinkade world, sharing and living the good news of his death and resurrection.

And I think that we are doing a good job of just that in our diocese. It was evident in Bishop Wolfe’s pastoral letter about the spring meeting of the House of Bishops, which you can read on our web site. Bishop Wolfe noted that the American bishops had politely rejected a proposal by some of the Primates to turn over part of our governance to an outside authority selected by the Primates. Then the Bishop stressed that there are more important matters being addressed by our diocese when he added that “we remain deeply committed to strengthening our ties of mission with Anglicans around the world, especially with most vulnerable and needy. In this diocese we are expanding outreach to Kenya as we continue our involvement with the people of Haiti.”

I also think that we are doing a good job of sharing and living the good news of the death and resurrection of Christ in our parish. Deb Callaway and Dru Breidenthal have made the Agape Family a priority, and Steve Paddock is involving the parish with Community Linc, an organization which provides, among other services, transitional housing. And the best thing about these activities here at St. Luke’s is that they have been initiated and led by the baptized, the ministers of the church. This is not a case of clergy scolding people; if I said, “what are you doing for others?” you’d probably answer, “what are *you* doing?” The people of this diocese and this parish are living their baptisms. As I heard Darrell Proffitt, the rector of St. Margaret’s in Lawrence remark, the Church is the only organization which exists solely for the benefit of people who are not its members.

And the truth is that we don't go out into the world alone. When Jesus gave his final instruction and sent his disciples out, when he told them to make disciples of all nations, he also gave them his last promise. In the "Jesus of Nazareth" miniseries, after Peter hears the Great Commission, he leans on Jesus' shoulder, and says to him, "please stay with us, for the day is almost over and the night is long." Jesus tells Peter, and us (and the miniseries catches this beautifully as Jesus looks straight into the camera), "And remember, I will be with you always, even to the end of the world."

I mentioned the farewell letter of Lance Cpl. Lance Graham, who was killed in May, 2005, in Iraq. In that letter Cpl. Graham mentioned a book by Louis L'Amour which his father had given him, and wrote that he had tried to live his life by some words he had read in the book. The passage in the book was "You never had to look back to see if he was there. You knew damn well he was." We never have to look back to see if Jesus is there. We know damn well he is. So go now, get out here. Amen.