

WHAT HAVE WE DONE FOR GOD LATELY?
6 Pentecost, Proper 9, July 8, 2007, Rev. Dr. Patrick R. Close
Grace Episcopal Church, Haddonfield, New Jersey

Sometimes when I'm preparing for sermons, a thought or illustration will come to me. I don't always know if they will work, but they often do. This week some songs came to me. The first one was "Summer time, and the living is easy ..." It seems to fit the time of year doesn't it? It's vacation time, the warm weather makes us relax to the point we might be considered lazy. We get a sense of comfort, ease and familiarity.

In the life of our church, we might well consider that we are in summertime. The problem with this place is that we that we have become so lax that we have stopped being the Church in many ways. We like to fill our pews (when there isn't something better to do) and think we have met our obligation to God. We forget the early church and it's struggles to become a community. We have stopped being what we were originally called to be.

Another song came to me that might help illustrate what I mean. It's a more recent song by Janet Jackson, "What have you done for me lately?" We might ask ourselves what we have done for God lately. Other than sitting in the pews, where have we gone with our faith life? I wasn't sure about the song until I looked at it more carefully. The lyrics speak of a woman whose boyfriend has gotten lax ... there are no signs of love being returned. Could that be us in our relationship with God? In one place, the song says, "you think that you're god, you're not!" Whoa! That seems to be hitting too close to home! We too easily replace God's will and desire with our own!

Have we gotten lax in the Church? Have we forgotten to be a mission Church? We sit back and talk about what's important, and do little or nothing. We have become consumed with bickering over issues and failed to be a Church that reaches out. Summertime and the living is easy ... maybe too easy, and lazy. Have we become lazy in the Church?

What are we Christians to be all about? We are called to be missionaries! It's right there in Luke's Gospel. The work of the church is mission, and it's not just the work of the clergy or the vestry, not just a few ALL! Each of us is called to take up the work of Jesus Christ. I think about the early history of the Anglican Church ... and we were missionaries. 400 years ago the first Anglican service took place on the American shores in a Virginia settlement called Jamestown. There was a time the Episcopal Church traveled to the frontiers of Ohio, Indiana and Wisconsin to take our faith. We had rich history of taking our faith to others. But that seems forgotten now.

In my younger days, I belonged to a Church that used to have "missionary Sunday." This usually was a time when a young couple came to speak about their work overseas. The young man usually had a beard and was bronze from being in the sun. His wife was a pretty young woman who looked just a vigorous. The pastor would pass the plate around for an offering to support the couple in their work. If there wasn't what he considered enough money, the plate got passed around again! We were taught that missionaries were people who worked "out there."

Maybe we need to stop and think was a mission Church is not ... first; it's not our personal pursuit ... no! It's about the Church taking up God's way, Christ's way. It's not about buildings or liturgy ... it's about bringing people to God. It's not just some people going overseas ... it's

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about making disciples right here, right now. It's not all the arguments we have going on today about doctrine, dogma, policy, or power ...it's about growing the Church where we are ... it's our job/task/calling.

It's interesting that I read the average size of Protestant churches in this country is 60! We do a little better in the Episcopal Church when we say our average size is somewhere between 75 and 100. The reality is that many of these churches will not be here in 5-10 years. We have become lazy about church growth and think what we have is just fine. It's interesting to read polls that say 90% of Americans say they believe in God, but only 45% go to worship regularly! We don't have to be thinking about going overseas to do mission, one of the largest groups of unchurched people are right here in our midst!

What I hear too often when we talk about mission is someone saying they want to be the Devil's advocate ...why do we want the devil to be part of us? This becomes just another way to make excuses, to be lazy and do nothing. If we can understand that the Church is not about doctrines, dogma, buildings then we can begin to be a Church that is about bringing people into relationship with God. Here's our focus for mission!

What excuse are we making? Too young, too old, too busy, don't know enough, too shy? Age doesn't matter. You don't need a funny collar or a seminary degree to be a missionary. It's time to stop making excuses and get on with the mission of Church!

The Gospel of Luke gives us the guidelines for being a mission Church. Remember that the author wrote two books, Luke and Acts. One tells us the story of Jesus and the other tells us how the early Church came into being. First Jesus calls the 12 into a community of faith. Then he calls 70 ... Jesus expands the mission of the community! The number 70 (or 72) was the ancient understanding of all nations. It also recalls a story in Numbers. Moses was faced with a growing number of discontented people in the wilderness. He pleads with God for help and God tells Moses to take 70 elders up to the tent for a portion of the Holy Spirit and to expand mission!

Mission is about expanding the faith community. We hear in Luke Jesus saying there are three things to remember on this mission:

- 1) Heal people... offer peace, compassion, help people to become well;
- 2) Proclaim to people ... tell others that God is here and they are invited to belong;
- 3) Trust God ... at the heart of it all is God, place trust there.

Jesus sends out the 70. He tells them not to worry if they aren't received. But he shares with them his spirit and they experience great things! Don't we want to be part of this experience? Wouldn't it be great to have that excitement in our midst as well?

Jesus calls us to return to being a mission Church. It's not that hard to do. Many of you know that Deacon Colleen has been sick and in the hospital and rehab since memorial weekend. Recently, we began talking about the vision of a new ministry that she has embraced. In the midst of her pain and suffering, it has become clear to her that God is calling her to a new way of being the mission Church. Colleen will be confined to a wheel chair probably for the rest of her

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life. She has befriended the staff, the doctors and nurses and the patients at Magee. She's invited them to come and be part of our community! That means we'll have to make this place even more accessible for people in wheelchairs. Missionary work can take place anywhere and in any form. God will use us in the most profound ways. Watch out! Deacon Colleen has shared with me a desire to reach out to people in wheelchairs. That means we will have to make places to park them here in Church, to make access to the parish house easier, and to welcome more people into our midst.

What mission is God calling you to be part of on behalf of Grace Church? One place to start is to grow this Church. We could easily double the size of this congregation. Think about what excitement and spirit would be here if we could do that ... it's very doable! If each member here brings another person to join the church, we will double our parish. All you have to do is share with another why this place is part of your life. The polls tell us that there are lots of prospects out there! It's as simple as trusting God, sharing our story, offering peace and compassion and knowing Jesus is with us.

We too could be part of the excitement that Luke records when the 70 return. It's time for us to become a mission Church once again. Jesus is waiting, God is expecting ... now it's time for us to act? What have we done for God lately? How will we answer that question?