

A Sermon by the Very Reverend Roger Wm. Smith on the Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost, October 23, 2011 at the Chapel of St. Mark in Port Royal, South Carolina.

The story of St. Mark's

“You yourselves know, brothers and sisters, that our coming to you was not in vain, but though we had already suffered and been shamefully maltreated at Philippi, as you know, we had courage in our God to declare to you the gospel of God in spite of great opposition.” – 1 Thessalonians 2:1-2

This letter that Paul wrote to the Church in Thessalonica is perhaps the earliest written literature in the New Testament. The Apostle had been traveling about the ancient world establishing Christian communities in such places as Thessalonica, Corinth, Philippi, and Ephesus. The gospel he and his associates declared was that we are saved by the grace of God. This salvation cannot be earned by the observance of any laws, but only through faith in Jesus Christ. This, Paul believed, was good news. It was the *god spell*. It was the gospel.

Traditionalist Jews violently opposed Paul's message. They believed that only by the observance of the laws of the Torah could one gain the favor of God. As we have learned in recent years, nothing can cause more severe conflict than religious zeal.

For example when Paul taught that one need not be circumcised or observe the ancient Hebrew dietary laws in order to get it right with God, his detractors not only had him flogged, thrown into prison, and stoned; they conspired to have him put to death. But, as our text says, Paul and his associates prevailed because they had courage in their God to declare the gospel of God in spite of great opposition. (1 Thess 2:2) *In spite of great opposition...*

I mention this verse of Scriptures because this coming Wednesday, the 26th of October will mark the eighth anniversary of the founding of St. Mark's. It began with 5 couples, the Erringtons, the Hodsdons, the Shaffers, the Shinns, and the Smiths. We met for the first time at 5 o'clock on a Sunday afternoon. The year was 2003.

Thus began a mission that met with great opposition. Admittedly no one tried to flog us or stone us, but there were people out there who would have liked to take us out.

I'd like us to spend a few minutes now to reflect on the story of St. Mark's. As we do so, please join me in thanking God for our eight years of proclaiming a gospel that welcomes diversity and differences of opinion; that invites questions—requiring our intelligence as well as our discerning hearts; that is founded on the authority of scripture, tradition, and reason; and that insists upon morality (what is good and loving) and avoids moralism....

Headley and I moved to Newpoint on April 25th (St. Mark's Day), 1994. When we did, Vince Graham, the developer of Newpoint,—an Episcopalian—asked me to consider starting a chapel there. He had an architect draw up plans and he offered to donate the land for it.

In those days there were a growing number of us who believed that the time had come for a second Episcopal congregation to be formed somewhere in Beaufort north of the Broad River. There were already 3 Episcopal Churches in the county south of the Broad.

Fr. Jim Law, a retired priest living in Beaufort agreed that there was such a need. One day early in 1995 he and I went to discuss this with Bishop Salmon. After telling him about Mr. Graham's offer, we discussed a number of issues, such as the importance of having the approval and support of the leadership of St. Helena's Parish. The bishop, quite enthusiastic about our plan, assured us that that would be no problem. He would talk to them, and would get back to us as soon as he had.

He never did get back to us. We soon learned that the leadership of St. Helena's was vigorously opposed to the establishment of another Episcopal church; especially by us. They were in the middle of a five million dollar capital funds drive and they didn't want to risk losing some potential donors. They were also suspicious of those of us who were promoting the project because our version of the gospel seemed different from theirs.

We later learned that suspicions of this kind, (and there were many) were based mostly on hearsay and rumor. As you probably know there never was a greater forum for gossip and rumor mongering than the institutional church.

In the small Midwestern town where I grew up, it was rumored that the rector was making love to one of the members of the altar guild. Wasn't that a hot one! There were murmurs and natterings about it all over town. It was delicious. Until it was proven that it was totally not true, this rumor nearly destroyed our rector's ministry. How many times have we heard of things like that happening in the church?

It was rumored about that I was starting a new church because I was unable to get along with the clergy at St. Helena's, or that I was so frustrated at having nothing to do in my retirement that I had to start a church of my own. The truth is, St. Mark's was started by lay people. It all began one evening, when we were at dinner with the Erringtons and the Hodsdons. They expressed their firm belief that the time had come to start a new mission. They were ready to roll. Later on, I heard the same thing from Jim and Gail Shinn (who have now moved to the west coast), and soon after a similar message came from Scott and Lee Shaffer—especially Lee Shaffer. The message from all of these people was *let's get going*. That is what prompted that first meeting at my house eight years ago. Those four couples, if anyone is, are the true founders of St. Mark's. And from that day to this it has been our firm belief that, rather than the clergy, ours is a mission that is under lay leadership.

We were proud of our mission, so we invited Bishop Salmon to come and see us. We showed him around the region. Despite the fact that he had been our bishop for 7 years he had never before seen Lady's Island—the fastest growing area in his diocese. We told him we'd like to become an official mission in the Diocese of South Carolina.... He told us to wait. We asked him what, in the mean time, we might call ourselves, so he suggested a Chapel. We are not a mission of the Episcopal Church, we are St. Mark's *Chapel*.

I requested the name St. Mark's because I am a firm believer in the communion of the saints. When I noticed that our move to Newport was on his feast day, I asked Saint Mark to pray for our mission. Of the four gospels, I like St. Mark's the best. He is a good saint. I believe that through his prayers St. Mark's Chapel has been remarkably blest in our mission and fellowship. ReMARKably blest—that's the word! Thank you, Blessed Mark.

At first we met in each other's homes at 5 o'clock every other Sunday afternoon. At once our congregation began to grow. We studied the Bible, shared in Holy Communion, and concluded each meeting over wine and snacks.

It was probably the refreshments with wine—or maybe it was the nature of our mission—that attracted an ever increasing number of people. Whatever the reason—the prayers of St. Mark?—we got too big for the houses available to us. So through the generosity of the Trask family, we began to meet in the breakfast room of the Sea Island Motel. That was a great experience. Occasionally guests of the motel would barge in on us. Some stayed; others looked embarrassed and hurried away.

Of course, right after Thanksgiving Day the motel management began decorating for Christmas, so there we were trying to be somber about Advent in a room festooned with red bows, bells, and a fabulous Christmas tree. At first this bothered some of us, but then we remembered that we were St. Mark's people. There was no law forbidding us to decorate for Christmas early. We could do all kinds of wild and crazy things, and God would still love and bless us.

During our days at the Sea Island Motel our greatest blessing was the addition of Bob and Dale Hansel. Bob served as our chaplain for the next three years.

Our next move was to the Masonic lodge on Ribaut Road in Port Royal. Somebody said that it reminded them of the set for a Harry Potter movie. It was dark and mysterious. There are no windows, and the room is filled with the symbols and artifacts of Masonry. But, never mind, the members of the lodge were very hospitable and cordial, and despite that it was beginning to be rumored about that St. Mark's was becoming a secret society, we moved courageously on.

It was at the lodge that we began meeting every Sunday morning, and we started a Christian education program. We were especially blest having Lee Shaffer and Suzie Kearney in our midst to help us with that. They both had served as directors of Christian Education at St. Helena's Parish.

We were becoming more and more like a traditional church, and we continued to increase in numbers.

The real explosion of growth came in the autumn of 2009 when we moved to the historic Union Church on 11th St. in Port Royal. We had found our home at last, and here we are in this perfect setting for the kind of community we have become.

And, what kind of a community is that? Two Sundays ago when we were wishing each other the “Peace of the Lord”, you all had so much fun and were becoming so rowdy that I had to quiet you down and remind you that if the bishop walked in on us he wouldn't think he was in an Episcopal Church.

Which brings to mind one of the principle reasons for our existence. We're not sure our present bishop even wants to be in the Episcopal Church. As many of you know he is under investigation for a series of actions and statements that cause some to believe he has abandoned the Episcopal Church.

Speaking of what he called our “indiscriminate inclusiveness,” the Bishop said, “It would be insufferable to see this great Diocese of South Carolina come under way of the same false gospel that has decked so much of The Episcopal Church with decorative destruction and dreadful decline;” and “this false gospel (is) like kudzu in an old growth forest that has suffocated the mission of the Church and has helped to set the Episcopal Church denominationally on a downward spiral of radically decreasing membership and increasing irrelevance.” (*Bishop's address to the Convention of the Diocese of S.C., October 2010*)

Maybe some of you remember the Sunday when Bob Hansel preached a sermon, noting that the Bishop lamenting the “indiscriminate inclusivity” of the Episcopalians actually pays us a compliment. “In the reading the gospels,” Fr. Hansel noted, “we find that *Jesus* was indiscriminately inclusive. He dined with thieves and tax collectors, hobnobbed with the street walkers, and called everyone, no exceptions, to “come unto me all ye who travail and are heavy laden and I will refresh you,” (Matthew 11:28)

When a gang of self-righteous religious leaders were about to stone a woman caught committing adultery they asked Jesus if it was the right thing to do. He said, “Let any one among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her...” (John 8:7)

“God so loved the world that he gave his only-begotten Son, to the end that *all* that believe in him may not perish, but have everlasting life.” (John 3:16) Is that not being indiscriminately inclusive?

We at St. Mark's, along with a number of others in this Diocese have no interest in leaving the Episcopal Church. We love our Church with its long history of diversity and inclusiveness. We want to continue as members of a community where people can hold varying opinions and where none of us is made to walk in theological lock step. That has been our tradition ever since Queen Elizabeth I, in governing the Church of England said, “We shall not make windows into men's souls.”

That's our story. Join me in telling it to others—dispelling rumors, and bringing to light who and what we truly are. Also join me in thanking God for St. Mark's Chapel. *Amen*