

Sermon, Oct. 28 2007, Proper 25 C  
Calvary Episcopal Church, Underhill, VT  
Readings:  
Joel 2:23-32  
Psalm 65  
2 Timothy 4:6-8, 16-18  
Luke 18:9-14

Last Sunday we marked and celebrated the renewal and rekindling of Calvary's presence to our surrounding communities, and the presence of the Holy Spirit in all of our lives. It was a great day in the life of this spirited and historical church, and it was a great day in my life. My selection and arrival as your priest, pastor, servant, and of course friend has now been formally and legitimately recognized, in my installation. I have the document, the Letter of Institution, signed and sealed by Bishop Tom and already framed to prove it.

In a sense, I have reached the pinnacle of *self-justification* of my worthiness to take on my new role here at Calvary, and it wasn't an easy process. There was grace, much grace, in the deliberations and discernment of my coming here, but there were plenty of moments of uncertainty and worry along the journey. For those who were not part of the search and discernment committee or members of the vestry during this process, let me explain how it all happened.

After 3 years of seminary and 4 years of serving 2 isolated Anglican parishes in Newfoundland and Labrador, we began to see signs that it was time for us to return home to the US: we wanted to come home and settle down. Not having an established home waiting for us, in the US, the entire country looked like home. We could go anywhere we wanted, but we narrowed the search for a new community, and set our heart's desire on New England and its rural places and people.

Having lived in New Hampshire and then Cambridge/Boston during my seminary education, we fell in love with New England and had agreed to at least dream, *pray*, that someday we would return. Vermont of course was our first choice, but we were going to have to wait to hear what the Spirit had to say, and, there was "the process" to get through.

After we decided to come home, and I discussed our desire with my bishop in Newfoundland and Labrador, (I needed his best wishes to begin the process), then I could begin the search for a bishop who would “sponsor” me, allowing me to register my profile and availability with the national church deployment office of the Episcopal Church. My bishop gave me his blessing, and thanked me for serving in his diocese. But nothing in the progression toward coming home could begin until I was granted sponsorship from a diocesan bishop in the US, which meant they would be willing to consider me in a discernment process in their diocese. The church canons required this sort of sponsorship.

I first wrote to Bishop Knudsen of Maine, having met her a couple of times at my seminary, The Episcopal Divinity School. She was also a close friend and colleague of many of my seminary professors who could guarantee that I was reasonably sane and real. She said, “yes” to my request of sponsorship. Thank you again, Bishop Knudsen.

Then, I completed the lengthy personal and ministry profile that the church deployment office required. Once it was approved and posted on their website, I started corresponding with the deployment officers in the dioceses of northern New England. There were many emails, posted mail, telephone calls, and finally I was called by the deployment officer here in the diocese of Vermont. He wished to interview me, and afterward he agreed to present my profile, availability, and interest to some of the parishes in Vermont whose need matched my desire.

With those parts of the process complete, folks of parishes in search, deployment officers, bishops, could browse through my credentials and the basics of my personal life, and if they so desired, could be in contact with me to begin a deeper relationship. I was contacted by several parishes, we exchanged much information, (I have quite a file related to the process), and so the process of discernment and justification went from September '06 until January '07.

Canon Thad Bennett, the diocesan officer for Vermont, sent me an email very late in the evening on January 5<sup>th</sup>. Still recovering from an emergency appendectomy I had 2 days after Christmas, I was feeling particularly discouraged. I received his note and brief description of Calvary. He wrote.....and I thought to myself, “perfect!” The Holy Spirit had pointed toward a specific direction. It was then that Calvary and I were connected, but the process had only really just begun. There was more self-justification on the horizon. The discernment committee and I traded volumes of email, we interviewed one another by phone and they were allowed access to all my “justification information.”

Once Calvary began to feel favorable about calling me, I was contacted by the company the diocese contracts to complete a more thorough background check. Theirs was a lengthy and thorough examination of the personal aspects of my life. It was un-nerving and scary even though I understood the need, knew what they were looking for, and felt “reasonably assured” that everything would be all right. This sort of poking around is enough to make the bones of one’s skeletons hanging in the closest shake and clatter. After this bigger background check was complete and after the diocesan staff were satisfied with the company’s findings, the final stages of my call to Calvary, Underhill, took place. So if you include the celebration we had last Sunday, (our renewal of ministry to our communities and my installation), my self-justification process of worthiness to serve the church here took 13 months.

Once the toughest part of the scrutinizing procedures ended, I vowed to steer clear of that sort of thing for as long as I could...its just to scary. I was even afraid to open a local checking account. When the bank offered me a free one I thought, “gee, free checking for life with no background check.” I’ve finally gotten over the fear they will change their mind. And I broke that vow when I put myself in the hot seat of self-justification again by seeking part-time employment with the post office, which required a thorough background check with fingerprinting; and still once again when I applied to substitute teach in the local schools here. I

was required to have, (and said yes to), yet another criminal background check with fingerprinting for an FBI check. I even had to pay for that one.

Nowadays, society has to be persistent and demanding in its proofs and checks on professionals who are involved intimately with people. We have to justify who and what we are in the details of our personal lives before we are trusted with the lives of others. We have to say, “sure, go ahead, snoop around all you like,” and it’s easy to do as long as one is an accomplished person (and I say this in all modesty) and their personal records can stand the challenge. But there’s always the chance that something can be misconstrued, giving folks the wrong idea about someone, and there’s always the persons who feel ministers of the church must be perfect, unblemished, “touched by an angel,” saints. *Right!*

I’ll tell you, these secular and spiritual types of self-justification I experienced made me feel contemptible and vulnerable. I had nothing to hide, and with these kinds of background checks, nothing could be hidden anyway. During a few sleepless nights I wondered if it was all worth it, maybe my sense of call was phony, trumped up by me alone, maybe it would all be ended by one person with the power to say, “he’s not worthy to serve.”

I got through it all by praying about it and being diligent in offering myself to the process with brutal honesty. I eventually began to give thanks that I would have the opportunity to talk about anything that may have sent up a red flag, as we say. I eventually looked forward to that opportunity. Some folks did ask me pointed questions about my life in this world.

So, in a way my self-justifications became very liberating, and beyond that, God knows every aspect of my life, God has forgiven me of all my wrongdoings, and God will come to take me home, away from this “at times” difficult world, God will welcome me back where I belong, without a background check. God’s already familiar with my fingerprints; every line and crease.

God loves us, and just as soon as we can accept that we are accepted by God, we never, ever, for any reason, need to prove our-self. To get to that place Jesus tells us in his parable from Luke today, that we need pray only seven words, the same seven words prayed by the tax

collector as he stood at a distance, daring not to even lift his eyes, beating his chest in sorrow: "God, have mercy on me, a sinner." Perhaps if Jesus thought to give this prayer to his disciples when they asked him to teach them to pray, we would pray these seven words instead of the Lord's Prayer.

Spoken from the heart, with an understanding that unconditional forgiveness is ours, this *is* one of the most important prayers we can offer up to God, and in a very real sense its the only prayer we'll ever need. The tax collector's prayer is the *self-justifying appraisal* of our human condition: we are all miserable when we do wrong. Further, Jesus teaches us that it is the character of God to welcome both the repenting sinner **and** the self-righteous saint, and God requires no paper work, or fingerprinting to justify us.