
Dr. Rob Radtke: Sermon for January 26, 2020

A sermon by Dr. Rob Radtke Epiphany 3 – Year A

Let the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable to you oh Lord, our rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

Good morning. Thank you very much for inviting me to preach today, Sam. I'm very grateful to the Dean and all of the rest of the clergy staff for welcoming me and welcoming Episcopal Relief & Development here to St. Philip's. It's especially nice to be here in Atlanta, although it's chillier in Atlanta than it was in New York City this morning when I checked my weather app. But it's a delight to be here with you on this Third Sunday after the Epiphany and to be here with such a warm welcome. It means more to me and those we seek to serve around the world than I can possibly express. This congregation has been extremely generous to Episcopal Relief & Development over many, many years, and so I'm pleased to be able to be here in person to say thank you.

In today's reading from Matthew, we meet Jesus at the beginning of his ministry of teaching, preaching, and healing. He's assembling his disciples who will carry out his ministry long after he has gone. As the gospel says, he called them. Immediately, they left the boat and their father and followed him. Here it is quite literally Jesus calling his disciples and their response, immediate, without hesitation, leaving behind family and livelihoods to follow Jesus. This story seems to come to us from a far away and distant time. That call, that clarity of purpose. The disciples hear this call loud and clear. Do we hear Jesus' call loud and clear in today's world? And if we do, do we as modern day disciples do what his disciples did? Answer that call immediately and without hesitation.

I don't know about you, but I'm pretty sure God is going to voicemail a good bit of the time when he calls me, "Please leave a message and I'll get back to you as soon as I can. Press zero to be connected with my assistant." And yet, even though we don't always realize it in the moment, sometimes we do hear that call and answer it. We all do. We do it as individuals and we do it as a church.

Many of you will recall the terrible tsunami that devastated Asia on Boxing Day, December 2004, nearly 16 years ago. After the tsunami, I couldn't watch the television coverage. It was simply too upsetting. Those hundreds of thousands of people left dead. The homeless and the destitute in the wake of that terrible wave. The tragedy was simply too vast for me to comprehend. On the Sunday after the tsunami, before I even became president of Episcopal Relief & Development, I was sitting in my church in New York City and was stunned to discover that my church, our church, the Episcopal Church was answering Jesus' call to follow him and to proclaim the good news by responding to that terrible disaster.

As a church, we were reaching out to answer Jesus' call in Matthew 25. Welcoming the stranger, caring for the sick, the homeless and the lost. This time God didn't go to voicemail. In fact, he may have gotten more than he bargained for. I know I certainly did. Not only did I make my first donation to Episcopal Relief & Development, I ended up becoming its president. It was completely unexpected way for my life to turn both in professional ways and from a faith perspective.

And all of you as friends and supporters of Episcopal Relief & Development, are partners in that ministry. Let me share with you how we are not only answering Jesus' call as individuals and as a church, but helping many, many others to do the same.

At Episcopal Relief & Development, our work with women in the developing world focuses on helping communities promote the rights of women and children and to move toward a vision that everyone deserves a life free from violence in a society where they are treated with dignity and respect. Only then can communities

truly heal and thrive and become the beloved community that God envisions.

Our work with children around the world supports and protects kids under five so that they can reach appropriate health and developmental milestones. This focus on early childhood development is foundational and crucial to helping children achieve their full God given potential as future contributing members of their communities.

Our climate-related work both here in the United States and abroad focuses on how families and communities can work together to adapt to the effects of rapidly changing weather patterns. This work includes preparing for and recovering from climate influenced events such as floods, fires, and hurricanes and other disasters so that all of us can take part in the abundant life that God envisions. How we address each of these priorities involves answering God's call to seek and serve Christ in all people just as we promise in our baptismal covenant.

For many of the women we serve, acknowledging and addressing violence in their communities evoke strong opposition and sometimes danger. Prioritizing the longterm wellbeing of children can mean making difficult sacrifices in the here and now, by perhaps sending that child to preschool rather than putting her to work in the fields to help feed the family. Facing the challenges of natural disasters, fires, droughts and flooding requires courage and resilience. By addressing the needs of women, children, and a changing climate, we are answering God's call just as Peter and Andrew do in today's gospel.

Earlier this year, the Dean and I traveled with a group of fellow pilgrims to the copper belt in northern Zambia. There we visited communities working to address the needs of children five years of age and younger, with special attention to the health and developmental needs of children in their first 1,000 days. We visited a nursery school located outside of Ndola that is part of Episcopal Relief & Development's integrated early childhood development program done in partnership with the local Zambian Anglican Church.

The school there serves approximately 60 children between the ages of three and four. Every single child in that school had lost one parent and many others were what are called double orphans, meaning that both parents had perished, most likely from HIV/AIDS and its complications. And yet the local community had gathered together around the most vulnerable amongst them and is ensuring that all of them can develop to their full God given potential. We then accompanied community health promoters on their home visits to families with vulnerable children under three. There we observed health promoters counseling and coaching caregivers on how to ensure that their children get the proper health and developmental support needed to ensure that their children can thrive.

The first 1,000 days of a child's life are critical. If that child is not supported with good nutrition, vaccines and intellectual stimulation, that child's brain will not develop to its full potential. Moreover, that child can never catch up no matter what happens after the first 1,000 days. Meaning that he or she will never become what God hopes for them to be. That is why answering God's call by focusing on the least of these, our children, is so important.

You at this cathedral have made the abundant life possible for people in places we cannot even imagine and in ways that save and transform lives every single day. Truly, we are working together for lasting change. Thank you.

Whenever I preach in beautiful cathedral such as this, I'm reminded of the story of one of the big cathedrals in England. I think it was probably Coventry, was severely bombed in the World War II. The roof was destroyed, the windows were smashed, and the walls were all very heavily damaged. Miraculously though, the statue of Jesus with his arms outstretched suffered no damage except that the hands were knocked off. When reconstruction got underway, people naturally wanted to replace the hands. "No," the Dean said, "we won't replace the hands. They serve as a wonderful reminder that in this world, Christ has no hands, but ours." Amen.