

Sermon at St. Thomas by Lynn E. Cunningham. August 26, 2007. Proper 16, Year C. Isaiah 28:14-22; Hebrews 12:18-19, 22-29; Luke 13:22-30.

1. Last Sunday I preached the need in Dubois for everyone to shop locally in order to support the local economy, whenever possible. I said, Dubois is an unusual rural town where everyone needs to pull together to support the community or the town may collapse. I noted that the second great commandment, to love one's neighbor as one self, plays out in one way by everyone supporting each other in this community.
2. Today I want to talk along similar lines about the importance of every member of the congregation supporting St. Thomas. The members support the church and the church community in turn supports each member.
3. The lessons today begin with the call by Isaiah to "hear the word of the Lord". Whatever else it may be, church is a place to hear and listen deeply to the word of the Lord. To study, to pray over it, to dialogue with friends about it. The church is the place to "hear the word of the Lord".
4. Church, at its best, provides a stable institution where members can seek constant conversion to Christ. This church of St. Thomas finds itself within an unstable economy with cycles of boom and bust which constantly work to pull members away from Christ. The stability of the church institution is highlighted by the instability of the surrounding economy. When local businesses are struggling, church should stand rock solid, with Christ at the center.
5. Let me go over this definition of church in detail.
6. The first and basic element is constant conversion to Christ by every member. Conversion starts at baptism. At baptism of a little baby in the service in the prayer book, the parents and sponsors are asked to say on behalf of the baby, "Do you renounce satan and all the spiritual forces of wickedness that rebel against God?" The parents and sponsors all answer, I renounce them. All the while the baby is going, AAAAAAAH, or else is asleep. This is absurd, as the Baptist tradition has rightly pointed out, because how can a tiny baby renounce Satan? Nevertheless, in the catholic tradition, every one has to start somewhere, and this renunciation and conversion Christ is a life long journey of the spirit, starting at the very beginning of life.
7. And then the question expressing the need for conversion occurs also right in the baptism, as, "do you turn to Jesus Christ and accept him as your Savior? And again the baby is either asleep or going, AAAAAAAH! But again the parents say yes, and again that seems absurd, except that that baby is going to be trying to turn to Christ, to convert to Christ, throughout the whole length of life. The baby may as well start at the beginning.
8. When the baby has grown into a 95 year old and is lying on his death bed, and is either asleep, or is going AAAAAAAH, the process of renouncing Satan and turning to Jesus Christ as your Savior has been going on for a whole lifetime.
9. This point is recognized and honored in the burial service in these familiar words, "everyone who has life and has committed himself to me in faith shall not die forever."
10. Constant conversion to Christ refers to that daily activity throughout life of examining and re-examining a person's own life, motivations, actions, strivings, in light of Christ. That person is seeking to convert their own unruly human nature to come closer to what Christ is seeking in that person. Constant conversion requires each person to ask every day in every way possible, Lord, what do you require of me in this moment of time? Lord, I am struggling with fear. Lord, I am struggling with disappointment. Lord, I am lusting after that new white Ford pickup truck. Lord, I am struggling with anger and desire for revenge. Lord, shall I build bigger barns for my crops? Lord what shall I do about that sinner over there who has wronged me? Constant conversion requires each person to ask in every way possible, Lord, what do you require of me in this moment of time in this situation with the feelings I am experiencing?
11. As I said, the church at its best provides a stable system for undertaking this difficult and

- challenging task of constant conversion to Christ.
12. What maintains the stability of the church? Above all, constant prayer by the members. Also, Sunday worship together in church. Constant study of the Bible and the Christian tradition. When Isaiah instructs his followers to “Hear the word of the Lord” this is not just a figure of speech, or a shout to get people’s attention. The stability of the church as an institution is maintained by the members seeking always to hear the word of the Lord.
  13. The church has established ways for the members to cooperate in hearing the word of the Lord. One way is to come together in one worship service where everyone is together. This parish is deeply committed to having one service where everyone comes together. Sunday corporate worship is the parish community seeking to listen together for the word of the Lord for each week.
  14. A second way is to provide an open and democratic form of going about the business of the parish.<sup>1</sup> Annual meetings of the congregation. Regular meetings of the vestry. A specific set of rules for conducting the business of the parish. The rules for conducting business of the parish are designed to allow everyone to hear each other better, and to share openly and without fear what the Lord is asking of the members of the congregation. These rules are called in this church the Constitution, canons, and the parish bylaws.
  15. A third way of maintaining the stability of the church is for every member to contribute time and money to the organization. People put time and money into maintaining their cars, and their houses, their families. Maintaining the church organization is just as vital, because no place else in American society guides and supports constant conversion to Christ. No place else is there week in and week out to support each member’s work of listening for the word of the Lord. For over 100 years St. Thomas has provided this support to its members because in each decade, its members have recognized that maintaining the church is as vital as maintaining home, or cars, or family. Old Doc Welty was not converted to Christ by the missionary Father John Roberts, and then everyone went away and said, well, thank goodness all that conversion business is done and over with. In every decade and every year, the forefathers and foremothers of St. Thomas have said, well, we have to keep at it. And now you and I are here today to continue listening for the word of the Lord in our time in this church.
  16. Christ as everyone knows who listens to the Gospels carefully is an unruly and unsettling character in human terms. Isaiah is calling for the overthrow of an unjust, destructive, and faithless government and the establishment of a just society. The letter to Hebrews forecasts the total destruction of an oppressive society and the establishment of the rule of God. Jesus in Luke’s gospel flatly tells his listeners, most of you are never going to make it into heaven, because the door into heaven is narrow, and will be slammed shut in the face of most of those seeking entry. These are unsettling words for anyone to hear.
  17. Conversion to Christ is not a piece of cake. That is one reason why it is best to get started as young as possible childhood and to keep at it to the end of a lifetime.
  18. Conversion to Christ is not taking place within a quiet mountain retreat where all is tranquility and restfulness. Constant conversion to Christ usually seems to take place within societies that are nearly a wreck. Scoffers running the government in Jerusalem in Isaiah’s case, scoffers who are operating under a covenant with death. Sounds like Iraq. Luke is telling the Jesus story in the context of an Israel ruled by a brutal and socially chaotic Roman empire. Dubois’ boom and bust economy seems like a piece of cake in comparison to what the Biblical writers were facing. Christ demands a response to such social chaos.
  19. The people of this parish have responded to hearing the word of the Lord in hard times

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<sup>1</sup> Most American denominations accept this approach.

- with a series of ministries. These ministries themselves are, guess what, another means by which Christ is constantly seeking to convert members to himself.
20. St. Thomas has several ministries. In fact, the parish has about twelve ministries: pastoral care, the summer square dance, the community garden, the food bank, the farmer's market, the youth program, Christian education, the outreach ministry, community participation, such what some are doing with the Dubois Assisted Living, prayer, regular worship, and the Opportunity Shop.
  21. Every one of these ministries can be said to be challenging and difficult as well as rewarding. In every one of these ministries, I can think of serious issues and challenges. A better way to talk about them is to ask, how do they work to support constant conversion to Christ for their participants. What word is heard in these ministries that constantly calls participants back to faithfulness in Christ?
  22. I began by pointing out that the church, at its best, provides a stable institution where members can seek constant conversion to Christ. This church of St. Thomas finds itself within an unstable economy with cycles of boom and bust which constantly work to pull members away from Christ. Let St. Thomas be for you that solid rock upon which to rest conversion.
  23. And I will leave you all to contemplate the paradox that lies in the ongoing tension between stability and conversion.
  24. In Jesus name, Amen.