

Title: A Vision for the Church

Subtitle: Appreciating and Honoring Each Other's Gifts

The Gospel chosen for today deals with Jesus' inaugural sermon in which he sets the agenda for his entire ministry. He declares, ***"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor."***¹ In the Old Testament, the act of **anointing** signified God's blessing, selection, and empowerment for a specific role or task. Our Lord's task was to give a divine proclamation announcing the Good News of God's favor to those who had no favor. They were poor and oppressed, captive and blind. Jesus also proclaimed the acceptable year of the Lord. It was a chance for a new start, a new beginning, a complete "do-over," where all debts would be forgiven, and a fresh start began.

The Spirit that was upon Jesus is also present in the Church, for ever since the Day of Pentecost, believers have been anointed with the Holy Spirit to continue his work in the world.

We are the hands and feet of Christ, empowered to do his work in the world. Furthermore, our Lord has distributed gifts to the Church through each of its members, as our New Testament lesson from Paul's letter to the Corinthians tells us.

Therefore, Paul writes, ***"Now you are the body of Christ, and each of you is a member of it."***² Because the Church is described as "a body," none of its members can say to the other, ***"I don't have need of you."***³

This idea of interdependence and needing others can put us at odds with the predominant values and ways our culture thinks. In philosophical terms, this world's way of thinking is called expressive individualism, which emphasizes the importance of personal expression and the pursuit of authenticity

¹ Luke 4:18a

² I Corinthians 12:27

³ 1 Corinthians 12:21,

in defining one's identity. It is rooted in the belief that every individual has a unique core of feeling and intuition that should unfold or be expressed. Such ideas have some legitimacy, especially in art, literature, and personal development. However, such idealism without the realism of sin's power and the need for redemption leaves a person powerless to achieve their full potential. To find an authentic self-image, we must have relationships with others. And this is where the Church comes in, with its ability to foster spiritual roots and healthy norms. Therefore, God has designed his Church so that each member brings something the others need to the table.

In this regard, I will never forget the awe and wonder I felt when I experienced something of the sacred mystery of being a part of a Church community. It happened when I was called to be the youth minister at Saint James Episcopal Church in Potomac, Maryland. The rector at that time included in my job description the obligation to attend vestry meetings. At first, I could not imagine anything that could be more boring. But to my amazement, I started to see how people from diverse backgrounds, with unique skills and various points of view, could work together for the common good of the Church. Then, amid this diversity, I began to see a manifestation of God's multifaceted wisdom far beyond any one person's possession.

I learned an important lesson from that experience, namely, that I needed the help and support of others who had different gifts from mine if my ministry was to be successful.

Did you realize that to make an arm or leg work as they should, we need muscles pulling in different directions while being coordinated by their connection to the head, which directs each muscle and ligament to do its job?

With this picture of Christ's body in mind, the good of the whole should be the objective of all.

An example of this comes from the life of Bob Dylan, whose life has recently been in the limelight with a biographical movie entitled “A Complete Unknown,” which came out last year. I can’t say that I have seen it, but I certainly will since I have admired his music since the mid-sixties when my oldest brother made it a point to purchase most of his albums.

One documentary on his life describes his personality as introverted, and in his early life, his personality resembled many of the characteristics of expressive individualism mentioned earlier. Unfortunately, this tendency led to multiple conflicts with others, which boiled over when he was on tour in Europe in the mid-sixties. Then, to make a long story short, his attitude and behavior led to unresolved resentments.

Audiences even became so angered by his behavior that fans brought tickets to his concerts just so they could walk out of them in unison with others in protest. He became so depressed and disheartened over the incident that when he came back to America, he wrote a twenty-page journal, which he described as verbal vomit. In it, he expressed his overall disgust with himself and the people around him who were as shallow as he was. It was never meant to be the inspiration for a song, but given time, it happened. Thus, to his utter surprise, the song “Like a Rolling Stone”⁴ was written. He knew how it felt to be “on your own,” so the song repeatedly asks,

“How does it feel to be on your own?

With no direction home?

A complete unknown?

Like a rolling stone?”

This song was not only a hit but a life changer for himself. Soon afterward, he went in search of some roots in his life, which he later found when he dropped out of the touring

⁴ Recorded in 1965 as part of the album Highway 61 Revisited. It was one of Dylan’s most iconic songs.

scene and moved to Woodstock, NY, where he lived near other musicians and built relationships with them. Some of those individuals made a profound impact on his life and creativity. Together, they later organized the Woodstock event, which took place on a dairy farm in Bethel, New York, in August of 1969.

Reflecting on his life, what happened to Dylan was the grace of a “do-over,” a fresh start, and a new beginning, which is what our Lord was anointed to give when he announced ***“the year of the Lord’s favor.”***⁵ Therefore, there are several spiritual principles we can apply from this story to ourselves. This Church may be “a complete unknown” to the outside world. But every member of his Church is named, loved, and protected by the Great Shepherd. The Church is not a rolling stone. It is built on the rock of the ages. Its foundation is sure. It is not on its own; Jesus has promised that ***“(he) will be with us always, even until the end of the age.”***⁶

Therefore, if this Church sees itself as poor due to its small numbers, remember that Christ has come to bring good news to the poor. You have found favor with God. Our Old Testament lesson tells us, ***“Go your way, eat the fat and drink sweet wine and send portions of them to those for whom nothing is prepared. For this Day is holy to our LORD; and do not be grieved, for the joy of the Lord is your strength.”***⁷

Therefore, ***“I am confident of this, that he who has begun good work with you will bring it to completion when Christ Jesus returns.”***⁸ Amen.

⁵ Luke 4:19

⁶ Matthew 28:20b

⁷ Nehemiah 8:9b-10

⁸ Philippians 1:6