

June 13, 2004

"We Need Help"

John 15:26; 16:12-15

Preached by Rev. Dr. David C. Fisher

Well, this is an awkward moment. It's the first time we're together since I announced my resignation last week.

We're sitting here with a wide range of emotions, thoughts and questions. That makes it difficult to hear - and difficult to speak.

First, thank you. Thank you for nine years of ministry here. Thank you for coming back Sunday after Sunday to listen to me. Thank you for the hours many of you spent leading the congregation, the thousands of hours so many of you volunteered to the ministries of Colonial. Thank you. We pastors cannot do what we do without your help.

Thank you for the cards, phone calls and emails. You are kind and generous people. You invited me to enter your lives and walk around in your souls doing the work of God. None of us are the same.

Nearly nine years ago, my friend, Wayne Stacy, stood in this spot and declared that by God's grace my time among would be "A Labor Not in Vain." How true. Thank you.

This is a sad moment for Gloria and me. You've been our spiritual home and our friends for nine years. I asked the Search Committee that brought me here if they thought Colonial could provide soul care for its pastors. They said they thought so. They were right. Thank you.

Now, we take the risk of a new church, a new place and new challenges.

Let me explain why by expanding on my letter to you. First, I think I've finished the work God brought me here to do. A decade ago, Colonial was a deeply wounded congregation. You brought me here to bring healing. Healing came. It's not over yet. Recovery from deep wounding is never finished. But the initial work of healing is done.

You also brought me here to bring stability to Colonial. The preceding years had been terribly unstable as people left the church and income dropped. Stability did come. Now, if anything, we are too stable!

Colonial also needed to catch a new vision for itself and its ministry. The old vision ran out of gas. It took time and patience, but a new vision emerged, a vision captured in the banners behind me.

All this work was preparatory. All of it points to the next chapter in Colonial life. All signs indicate we are poised at the edge of a great chapter of our life together.

I've known from the beginning that I am a transitional figure. Any pastor who follows a 32 year long pastorate is a transitional figure. I knew whether I was here five, ten or fifteen years, my ministry is a bridge to the future of Colonial. In fact, there's a name for people who follow long term pastors: Unintentional Interim! Another name is also assigned to such successors: Sacrificial Lambs. The fact that I survived nine years is testimony to your graciousness and mercy.

That brings me to the second reason I am leaving. The next chapter in Colonial's life requires a new voice and new leadership. Several large tasks face Colonial. I've looked deep inside myself and discovered I don't have the will or energy to lead them.

For example, large financial challenges face the church. We've been in conversation about a capital campaign to raise \$3-\$5 million to repair this building. That's in addition to the challenge to raise another \$5 million to create an endowment for the perpetual care of the building. The more we've talked the more I've realized I don't have the heart for that kind of leadership. You deserve better leadership than I can provide.

More than anything I don't want to become what I've seen too many times. Too many pastors end their professional careers tired and cynical, holding on until retirement. That's bad for us and bad for the church.

Third, for some time I've wanted to spend the last chapter of my ministry in a smaller congregation where I can be less of CEO and manager and more a pastor and teacher.

When I was a very young pastor, a denominational executive told me I'd likely be successful. "When that time comes," he said, "I want you to consider a challenge. For the last chapter of your ministry, take all you've learned and give it to a smaller congregation. It will be good for you and for them."

I never forgot that challenge. I thought it was a good idea then. I still think it is. So, in August I will become the solo pastor of a congregation one tenth the size of Colonial. Plymouth Church in Brooklyn is a congregation with a grand heritage, great hard assets and too few people. That is a big challenge. I am very conscious that I need help.

I suspect you recognize you need help, too. The next year or two will be a critical time for Colonial. Choosing a new minister is always a very large challenge filled with many unknowns. Furthermore, you're all asking what life will be like during the interim.

Your insecurity is very much like mine. We pastors share a deep sense of inadequacy. It's not a lack of training or experience that makes us feel inadequate. I've plenty of both education and experience. And it's more than fear of failure, though any of us can fail and many do.

Rather, our sense of inadequacy comes from the experience of being entrusted with God's Word, the Sacraments of the church and the lives and souls of God's people. We ministers stand between heaven and earth as mediators of the covenant of God with his people. This work is holy ground.

Or, to repeat a line from Wayne Stacy's installation service, "This work which we do when we do it is not our work. It's God's work."

That's why you feel insecure about now. This is a high stakes venture. Christ's Church is fragile and breaks easily. How, then, do we keep our humanness from marring the face of Christ that is supposed to shine out from our life together? How do we keep first things first when secondary and tertiary matters keep crowding to the front of church life? How do we stop our sheer willfulness from getting in the way of God's will for the church? Can we keep from hurting people for whom Christ died? Can we keep the destructive forces that plague humankind at bay in the church?

And, to borrow from the Apostle Paul, "Who is adequate for these things?" His answer, of course, is "No one!"

Martin Luther put it in his own earthy way, "Lord, use me as an instrument of your service. Only do not forsake me, for if I am left to myself I will certainly bring it all to destruction."

There is no eternal security for churches. Churches rise and fall, grow and decline and some finally disappear. We need help!

I quickly add, however, that Colonial has adequate resources for this stage of the journey. We may not have enough financial resources to do what we want to do but believe me, Colonial Church has a surplus of good lay leaders. I urge you to trust them and respect them. Let them lead you. I know most of you will but there's more. Make sure others do not treat your leaders with disrespect or suspicion. These leaders, your Moderator, Vice Moderator and Church Council are your responsibility. Work to make them successful. Care for them. Make their work a joy.

This pastoral staff has nearly 100 years of pastoral experience in multiple staff congregations. They know what they're doing. Trust them. Respect them. Protect them. Care for them. Make them successful and make their work a joy.

I think we can all agree. We need help!

The Gospel Lesson offers just the right kind of help. The Gospel of John was written to a community face to face with its own humanity. The community had been formed by the witness of the Apostles to Jesus Christ. But the apostles were now long gone – better than a generation had passed.

The heat was on and the Johannine Community was facing increasing pressure, even persecution. They wondered if their church had a future. And if they had a future, what kind of future. The future was a very large unknown – it always is.

The community had few resources. The New Testament was still in the making. All they had was memory. And they remembered something the Apostles said about Jesus. It was something Jesus said before he left them. What Jesus said helped the community earlier. Maybe it would help now? They wrote it down for us. It's in our Gospel lesson.

"I'm going away," Jesus said, "but I'm leaving my Spirit behind. Know this disciples, I'm leaving my Spirit for the community."

Jesus' point was that his Spirit would guide the community on the long journey of faith. Each generation, each congregation needs a fresh application of the story of Jesus for their own journey.

That also means that Jesus' Spirit lives in the community in order to empower us to live the journey with integrity. We can know and recognize the truth because Christ's Spirit is available to help us.

In other words, life together, difficult as it is, can be, should be, ought to be, life in the Spirit. Our Congregational ancestors knew that better than we. They rediscovered the life of the Spirit in the Christian community. They remembered that Jesus' promise, that where two or three gathered in his name, he'd be there. He left us his Spirit.

That means then, that everything necessary for being the church is present in the gathered congregation. Namely, Lord Christ is present in Spirit and in power and, when the Spirit comes, the people of God are equipped with every gift necessary for doing the work of the church.

I don't know the future of Colonial church. I don't know my own future. None of can know for certain what's out there. But I do know this: Colonial Church is poised for greatness. And more importantly, I also know we have a helper, the Lord Christ himself. That means we have hope written large and in bold print. I know who holds the future and I know who holds my hand. Jesus Christ the Lord.