

St. Giles' Episcopal Church
November 14, 2010 – 25 Pentecost
Isaiah 65:17-25
The Rev. Dr. Susan Kraus

As you know, my first professional training was as a psychologist. Part of my course of study was research design – how to formulate experiments to test psychological theories. We were warned about common errors in research. One of them was very neatly put: “failure to seek disconfirming evidence.” In other words, to adequately test a theory we must try to find evidence to disprove the theory.

Many of us have learned, over the course of our years in church, a simple distinction between the Old Testament and the New Testament. This has to do with God, and it goes something like: “the God of the Old Testament is a God of wrath and anger, but the God of the New Testament is a God of love.” This morning’s Old Testament reading from Isaiah – this exquisite vision of what God will create for human beings to enjoy – is evidence that clearly disconfirms the “theory” that the God of the Old Testament is a God of wrath and anger and not of love.

The prophet wrote this text after the Jewish people had been in exile in Babylon for fifty years, when Cyrus of Persia had allowed them to return to their land. As we might imagine, hopes regarding what life would be like after the return from exile had been high. Reality failed to meet the expectations of the people. There were obstacles of many kinds thwarting their plans for new life in their restored homeland. God had fulfilled the promise of return from exile, but nevertheless the people were disappointed.

Isaiah is addressing the theological problem of the situation: what will God do about the shortcomings of life in the world as it is? This question is just as important to us now as it was to the Jews 2,500 years ago. Isaiah’s answer: God will, in the future,

create a new heaven and a new earth rich with blessings, peace, and harmony. In this new creation we will not even remember the evils of the old world. Life will be full of rejoicing. People will have long lives and enjoy the fruits of their labor. Their children will be blessed. God will hear and answer those who speak to God immediately. Natural enemies will live together in harmony, and the predator will cease to kill. God's peace. Shalom.

I would like to consider how this morning's reading from Isaiah might apply to the church and to how we live together in community at St. Giles'.

The church affirms Isaiah's vision of the future. We believe that God's rule will become the only rule, that God's kingdom will finally be established. In the words of the Nicene Creed, we believe that Jesus Christ "will come again in glory ... and his kingdom will have no end." We also believe that in the church we experience a foretaste of God's kingdom, as the Holy Spirit works through us and among us.

In the church we have a vision of God's kingdom, but we cannot mistake the church for the kingdom of God. I am sure that anyone who expects the church to be the kingdom of God on earth will be disappointed. The church is a human institution, beset by the problems that institutions have. The church is made up of human beings who are, at best, working out their salvation, in fear and trembling, small step by small step, with failures along the way. As Martin Luther put it, Christians are simultaneously saints and sinners.

You have called me to be your next priest in charge, and I am thinking about how I can live out my responsibilities to God and to you in that leadership position. So let me speak about my vision for this church, with a focus on the words from Isaiah: "They

shall not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain, says the Lord.” This will be true in the kingdom of God and not entirely true in the church on earth. But I see these words as pointing us in a direction, helping us on our way to God, and guiding how we live together at St. Giles’.

When people are hurt in the church, the hurt goes deep because the church is meant to convey God’s love. Sometimes a person is hurt so badly that he or she rejects not only the church, but God. When people outside the church see people inside the church hurt one another, they are likely to hold all believers, and even God, in contempt and scorn.

We do not want anyone hurt at St. Giles’ Church. We want people to feel and be safe. That is one reason we are asking people who are in leadership and ministry positions of various kinds to go to the Safe Church training offered by the Diocese. I have taken Safe Church three times. This program educates us about how to prevent bad situations and what to do if we see that something is wrong. It is a good program and well worth the time it takes.

As we live our Christian lives together, I would ask us to be mindful of some behaviors that hurt people and that always trouble the church, as you can learn from the New Testament, especially the letters of St. Paul. If you have a problem with someone or with something someone has done, speak to the person about your concern. Don’t grumble and gossip, but see if you can come to an understanding. I am asking you especially to do this with me. If I do or say something that you don’t like, tell me, please! Let’s talk and pray and seek a solution, or at least mutual understanding.

Another one of my concerns is this. All through scripture the vision we are given of society under God's rule is one in which no one is exploited and all people receive what they need. Unfortunately, the church itself often exploits its members and fails to give them what they need. I have been in parishes in which I was asked to do many tasks without any ongoing support from parish leaders, including clergy. I know that some of you have been in similar situations in other parishes. When our spirits are battered instead of nurtured in church, we often burn out and make the painful decision to leave. Our relationships with God suffer.

I want to do what I can to make sure that no one here is feeling exploited and that you receive from St. Giles' the spiritual nourishment you need. I need your help in this. Each of you is the expert. You know if what you do is nurturing your soul. You know if the sacrifices you make for this church are an offering to God. This isn't the same as saying that you enjoy everything you do for the church. You may enjoy some things, and some things may be a trial, but still an offering made to God that builds up your spirit in the larger picture of your Christian life.

But if you are burning out from stress, feeling exploited, and resenting the time you spend doing things for St. Giles', then let's talk. Let's think about how you might do something else and about who else might do the tasks that are too much for you. In order to protect and nurture our members, we may need to give up doing some of the activities that are a usual part of our calendar. We may have to decide to do less until there are more of us. We may decide to do other things that are more helpful to our spiritual growth.

I want to offer what I can to help you grow spiritually at St. Giles'. Again, I need your help. Please tell me what you think would help you. Quiet days? A prayer group? Healing services? Spiritual direction opportunities? Changes or enhancements to our Sunday liturgy? Those are only a few of the possibilities. I want to know what you want and need.

My call as a priest is to preach the gospel and to build up the body of Christ. I want to be faithful to that call at St. Giles'. And I want to help you to go deeper, to grow in your relationship to Jesus Christ. The knowledge and wisdom and spirit that God has given me are at your service in this work.

“They shall not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain, says the Lord.” Amen.