

Annual Meeting Sunday
OLD SOUTH CHURCH IN BOSTON
March 7, 2021- The Third Sunday in Lent
Dignities & Efficiencies, a sermon by Nancy S. Taylor
Based on Acts 6. 1-4

How are decisions made? Who is in charge? Who *really* calls the shots? How is leadership identified and vetted? How do we organize ourselves, divvy up the work, and choose leadership? In our case, how do we do these things for the express purpose of conveying the good news and, however haltingly, embodying the person of Christ in this time and place?

In the days and months after Jesus' death, the followers of Jesus faced just such questions. In today's story, there is tension, grumbling, and finger pointing. Some of the work isn't getting done, or not to everyone's satisfaction. Moreover, there's an appearance of favoritism. Rifts and factions are forming.

The followers of Jesus do what Christians have been doing ever since: they call a meeting, talk it over, and propose a solution. The division of labor they agree upon is interesting. They divide the responsibilities between those who will preach and those who will feed the hungry. And, there is something of a wall between the two, between the preachers and the cooks. Preachers don't cook and cooks don't preach.

These early Christians divided the duties in the fledgling church somewhat along the lines of those described by English journalist Walter Bagehot. Writing in 1867 about the United Kingdom's Constitution, Bagehot argued it was divided into two parts which he called the Dignified and the Efficient.

In his scheme, the Monarchy, represents the Dignified branch by symbolizing and unifying the state through pomp and ceremony, mystique and pageantry. Parliament, by contrast, represents the Efficient branch through the making of laws and the provision of public services. Put differently, the Monarchy tends to the poetic and Parliament to the prosaic. The Monarchy floats above the fray while Parliament mucks about in the dirty business of law making.

Now, we know better than to believe that the British monarchy is unfailingly dignified. It is not. Nor is Parliament reliably efficient. It is not. Nevertheless, you can't help but appreciate the neatness of Bagehot's argument: separate entities working in parallel, to achieve a sort of fine clock works of dignity and efficiency: the monarchy as the svelte face and case of an elegant clock, while behind the scenes there is a whirl of precise mechanical movements as undertaken by Parliament.

How humans organize ourselves is an everlasting question with as many opinions as there are people. The earliest Christians opted for two branches. Those who preached were, as it were, the Dignified branch. Those who fed the hungry – who purchased the food, peeled potatoes,

washed pots, and mingled with the poorest of the poor – they embody the Efficient branch of the church; getting the work done.

In this, our 352nd year, on this day of our 351st Annual Meeting, our Annual Report is a testimony to how we organize ourselves –how we divvy up the work, make assignments, choose leaders, spend money, get things done – all for the sake of serving as crew to this ship of faith. In turn, the mission of this ship of faith is to carry as our cargo the story of God's Good News and, throughout the voyage, undertake Christian acts of mercy, justice and beauty.

Old South Church has not one, but two governing documents: one prosaic or efficient (our bylaws) and the other poetic or dignified (our Church Covenant). You will be glad to know that our Church Covenant is securely embedded in our bylaws.

In one way of looking at it, you could argue that our Old South Church boards, committees, and task forces, along with the majority of our staff, represent the Efficient branch of our work. By contrast, one could argue, the clergy and musicians – those responsible for ceremony and pageantry – represent the Dignified branch.

But I would like to argue something different. In my view, Old South Church embodies both the Efficient and the Dignified in each and every incarnation of our life. In this view, there is dignity in efficiency and efficiency in dignity. In this view, our pageantry and our potato peeling (and we do plenty of both) are different expressions of the same ministry. In this view, none of us floats above the fray. In this view, the material and the spiritual are inseparable as, too, are our worship life and our works of justice and mercy.

In my experience of this church over the past sixteen years, none of us is beneath potato peeling or pot washing or mingling with the poorest of the poor. Indeed, it is the ease with which the leaders and members of this church glide back and forth between the dignities and the efficiencies that makes this church something very special.

Human organization is endlessly tricky and fraught. As we have seen played out in our nation's life – coming to a head in DC on January 6th – no way of organizing ourselves can be taken for granted. Things can always go sideways. Vigilance is required.

Indeed, the church (by which I mean the church writ large, the church across time and around the world) is no stranger to internecine uprisings, divisions, factions, accusations of favoritism, complaints about leadership, even to the point of violence.

At Old South Church, I would argue that the thing that holds us all together – the elegant clock face and the whirring machinery within – is this: the good will of the people, your good will, your helpfulness, your cheerleading of your leaders, your prayers, your generosity of time and talent, and means. Your faithfulness. Your seriousness about Christianity and this church's responsibilities.

This past year, that terrible and magnificent year, is a good example: you faced and met the challenges and the exhaustion, the heartache and the outrage, with kindness and courage and determination. God bless you.

Crewing this old ship of faith is a mighty undertaking involving all of us. Everyone at an oar, each pulling as we can.

Thus, I declare, in our 352nd year, out upon the high seas, whether pounded by pandemic or bearing up to embrace the winds of racial reckoning, we are all hands on deck, holding the course, steady and firm, guided by our daystar, even Jesus Christ. Let the church say, *Amen!*

Will you join me, on this Sunday of our Annual Meeting in reciting a bit of poetry, our church Covenant:

We pledge to give ourselves to the one whom Jesus called “Abba, Father,” as the God in whose love we are grounded, and to Jesus Christ, God incarnate, who rules our lives. We give ourselves to God the Holy Spirit, the One who sustains, recreates and guides us. We promise to walk in covenant with one another, with the wider church, and with the Old South Church, secure in God’s grace, and prepared in gratitude to live by the promise and serve in the hope of the Gospel.

BENEDICTION

May Christ dwell in your hearts through faith—that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.

And the blessing of that God – Creator, Christ, and Spirit – rest upon you, and upon this old church, today, tomorrow, and every day. And let the whole church say: *Amen!*