

*Grace Episcopal Church, Georgetown*

Wednesday, January 20, 2010

Dear friends;

At the celebration of my 25th anniversary of ordination to the priesthood, I quoted two mentors of mine who helped me understand what it means to be a priest.

First, Charles Price, professor of theology and liturgics at Virginia Seminary during my time there: "I once saw a tombstone in England that read, 'Terence Smith: Born a Man, Died a Greengrocer'. Make sure no one is tempted to inscribe your tombstone, 'Born a Human Being, Died a Priest.'"

Second, Grant Gallup, longtime priest of the Diocese of Chicago: soon after my ordination I went to a social event at my church; both Father Gallup and my beloved mentor Father Bateman were in attendance, dressed in clergy attire. I wore an open-necked shirt and slacks. I said, "I guess I don't look much like a priest." Father Gallup, ever quick-witted, said, "You look exactly like a priest. You just don't look like a clergyman."

What were these giants of the church teaching us in these perhaps enigmatic aphorisms? The following, in my view: not much distinguishes personhood from priesthood, or being a good person from being a good priest. A priest has certain special functions to perform, of course, but performing them well requires, more than anything else, the attributes that define basic human decency. And the daily roles that comprise our lives bear more than a passing resemblance to the special functions of the priest: we all take the bread that sustains us, in whatever form it assumes; we ask God's blessing on it, we break and distribute it among those commended to our care.

With these thoughts in mind, my heart fills with gratitude and affection as I remember the December 13 celebration, and the extraordinarily generous gift presented the following Sunday. I know that you intended your gifts, thoughts and prayers, along with the feast we enjoyed on that day (and a feast it was!), as ways to celebrate my own journey in the ordained ministry. I receive them all in that spirit. But surely they also celebrate, lift up and honor our shared ministry, the "priesthood of all believers" that forms such an important part of our Biblical and Reformation heritage, and about which Dr. Price and Father Gallup taught me so pithily. No congregation I'm aware of understands this heritage more deeply than Grace Church. I thank God for sending me here, for all of you, and for the journey we share.

In Christ's redeeming love;

John Graham