



**National Bishop Susan C. Johnson's Sermon  
for the Opening Worship Service of the September  
2007 National Church Council Meeting**

**September 27, 2007**

Exodus 4:1-17  
2 Timothy 1:2b-14  
John 13:2b-17

I chose the lessons for tonight for a variety of reasons. The first lesson where we hear the call of Moses reminds me a bit of how I feel about having been elected National Bishop. Perhaps another image to help you understand my current state of being is my favourite scene from the movie *Gone with the Wind*, the scene where the young maid, Prissy, who after many promises and airs about her midwifery skills and who now is finally facing the moment of truth, responds to the situation by running around saying "I don't know nothing about birthing no babies!!!"

I've gone from a world of the known to a world of the unknown, from a world of competence to a world of, well if not incompetence then definitely the not yet competent. It's all a little overwhelming. Actually it's a lot overwhelming. And I imagine that in each of your lives there has been a time where you have felt the same thing. Doubting your abilities, full of excuses and scared to death.

I chose the gospel account of Jesus washing the disciples' feet because it so perfectly describes my understanding of the call each one of us has received through our baptisms to be servants, and for us collectively to be a church in mission for others. Being servants, being in mission for others, is in many ways counter-intuitive. Our human nature, our basic instinct for self-preservation urges us to take care of ourselves. And this is greatly exacerbated by the

culture that surrounds us and that constantly bombards us with messages to look after number one, to amass as much personal wealth and material goods as we are capable of, to constantly strive to keep up with the Joneses, and so on, and so on.

Despite our flawed human nature, in spite of our limitations and weaknesses, Jesus calls us into partnership in ministry, just as he called the disciples. And the call remains the same – to follow him, to be servants in our world. I don't know about you, but the more we hear and reclaim this understanding of our call the more excited I become. This is the church I want to be a part of. And that is why I love the vision statement we are operating under – a church in mission for others. In some ways it seems so ordinary, so common sense. I can't imagine a church ever adopting a vision that is the direct opposite to that – a church in mission for ourselves. Except that we know that sometimes we have been caught in that trap.

The temptation for us all is to work to maintain what we know. To keep our part of the church going whether it is at the congregational, synodical, national or international level. To jealously guard our assets if not to stave off the current demands to shore up against some future bad time. In this kind of circle the wagons mentality the thought of outreach is really low on the totem pole.

But Jesus models for us another way when he rolls up his sleeves, picks up his basin and towel, and serves others. And that is what he calls us to do too.

I chose the lesson from 2 Timothy, partly because it always makes me smile. You see, my mom whose name is Lois never liked it much – she used to get teased and called grandmother Lois when she was young - although now that she actually is a grandmother she has mellowed about it. But really I picked the lesson because it reminded me of you members of NCC and

National Office staff. I thank God for you and I want to remind you of the gift that is within each one of you.

Now we don't all have the same gifts and talents and that is a good thing. We bring different things to the table and our collective wisdom is greater than the sum of our individual parts. For those of you who are new to this council, you may be unsure of your role and contribution, but believe me – you all have great gifts to share. That is why our church has elected you to serve in this way on their behalf.

It's not an easy time to be the church – and probably it's never been an easy time to be the church. Our watch comes at a time when we are faced with many challenges including declining resources of members and finances and increased need in the world around us.

It's also not an easy time to be in leadership. Our culture is increasingly mistrustful of leadership be it in government, business, or just about any segment of society including the church.

So it's really not an easy time to be in leadership in the church!!! And I know it is sometimes hard to be in the target position for critique from others, especially when the others are our colleagues, fellow parishioners and friends. In the face of that, I want to remind us all that God did not give us a spirit of cowardice – in some translations the word is timidity, but rather a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline. I want to remind you and I suppose me too, of our holy calling – not according to our works or worth, but to God's own purpose and grace. As hard as it is for us to sometimes believe and claim, the reality is that God has given us the gifts that we need to face the challenges that are before us.

Thanks be to God for the awesome privilege of working in partnership in ministry, in service and mission for others. Amen.