

Lent II Year B 2024

Your delegates and clergy just returned from diocesan convention. It was fairly typical. We passed a budget; we heard testimonials as to the work that is being done through our diocesan agencies: Camp Beckwith, Wilmer Hall, Murray House, the Diocesan School for Ministry. The technology was current vintage: teleprompters, video streaming. We were even given a code by the bishop himself by which we could tweet on social media. The diocesan staff were paraded before us. Lots of thanks all around. There was the perennial lament that the numbers of members in mainline churches, including the Episcopal Church, are declining. One of the slides offered by one of the guest presenters depicted the church as an ancient ruin amid a world in ruin. It has forever been thus, I thought. I could hear my inner curmudgeon telling me that all of this was so self-centered, so preoccupied by our own fearful desire for sustainability. My inner curmudgeon continued: The church has become a place of escape from the slings and arrows of the world, in which our own personal well-being is at stake; the proverbial hospital for sinners; a place wherein our guilt for smug indifference is soothed; a place in which we may bide our time until the next life when all manner of thing will be well... an irrelevant institution in a world crying for relevancy and meaning. So I harrumphed my way through the first hours of the convention... but then things changed... as things often do.

Our two guest presenters were professors from Virginia Theological Seminary, and their topic was on reimagining Evangelism. “Great,” the voice chirped. Two academics, come down from the Holy Hill, to tell us how to do our jobs. But to my surprise, or at least to my curmudgeon’s surprise, they were really good... They offered a fresh take on the meaning of the ubiquitous, worn-out, and misunderstood word, Evangelism. They began by condemning the late nineteenth century and early 20th century ideas of evangelism; that being the notion that it is institutional Christianity’s bounden duty to promote its belief system to the unbelievers of the world. They likened it to colonialism, forcing conversion at the head of a spear, as it were; and they noted the arrogant presumption of the church that one outside our ken would or could abdicate their very own cultural and spiritual formation handed down generation after generation.

Rather than evangelism being the promotion of a religion, our presenters offered that evangelism more rightly resembles blessing. One of the presenters gave the example of Patrick of Ireland. Patrick and his missional community perhaps thought they might convert the Celts to Christianity ... but if they did in the beginning, they soon learned different; they learned that evangelism was living with a strange people, sharing shelter and food and commerce for the mutual benefit and the very survival of both the evangelizer and the evangelized... really living together, in all seriousness, depending on the new, emerging

community for sustenance. The point being that evangelism is a two way street. It engenders learning from each other; it nurtures empathy and solidarity. At its heart it is a process of establishing a community of equals.... A stark contrast to first world evangelists going out to save the poor heathen. Evangelism as Blessing means that the so-called poor heathen may have much to teach us. It struck me during this presentation that the Celtic Cross, like the one in our garden here at All Saints, is a symbol of true evangelism. There is a cross representing the crucified and raised Christ; and there is the Sun, a circle affixed upon the crossed staves; the sun, the giver of life and sustenance to the Celts. Two religions in solidarity. A syncretic reality that points to the true means by which religious consciousness has made its way into the human psyche since time immemorial. We discover the truth of things in community. Evangelism is at its heart not about religion. It is about presence.

So I'm reading our passage from Mark today in light of this particular teaching on evangelism... evangelism as blessing. Jesus and his disciples are simply practicing Torah, following the law; they are good Jews. They are going from town to town feeding the hungry, breaking bread with outcasts, healing the sick. They are living with the broken of their world, sharing in mutual dependence. I suspect that it was a two way street, a collaborative mutuality. Jesus taught, but Jesus also learned... Remember the story of the Syro-Phoenician

woman? Jesus refuses healing her daughter because she is ethnically unclean. He refers to her as a dog, a racial slur... I'm speaking of Jesus here... and she reminds him that even the dogs get food from their master's table; and Jesus is converted, and heals her daughter. Transformation is the soul of evangelism... Jesus included.

So far in this Gospel Jesus and his disciples have immersed themselves in the lives of the broken, sharing in their daily lives; sharing their stories. But here in the eighth chapter of Mark there is a crucial change. Jesus tells his disciples to take up their Cross. This is the first reference to the Cross in Mark. And this is an important moment in this Gospel. All things now point to Jerusalem, the seat of power. The cross for Mark represents the brutality of the occupying empire. The Cross, as you know, was the instrument of torture and execution for dissidents challenging the legitimacy of the empire. To take up one's cross is to defy the oppressive power of Rome. So I imagine that Jesus and his followers have been living with the marginalized enough that they have learned that there are causes for poverty and shame and violence, squalor and disenfranchisement. They are alerted to the system. They have heard the life stories of the people, and they have seen what coercive and violent and corrupt power can do. Their ministry now, dare I say, has taken on political implications. It has expanded into activism and advocacy. In following the mandates of scripture, this mere band of Galileans have become a movement that calls out the status quo of elitism and hierarchy as

oppressive, and offers an alternative way of life that values equality and justice.

The goal of evangelism is community; and it is in community that we learn the truth. Their once particular ministry has suddenly become universal. It has blossomed from the temporal to the eternal; from material to metaphysical; from micro to macro. The point is that the grand narrative of the universe, the eternal truth of creation is manifest in the particular, in the mundane, in the mere passing moments of our daily lives.

Mark is of course talking about presence and proximity. He is saying that the mission of the baptized is to live with all due humility with our neighbor; to share in their lives; to share the truth in its discerning; to listen and learn with profound empathy. I promise you that we have much to learn from the men and women who eat breakfast with us every Sunday; some of whom are without shelter. Most broken by the system. When we are present to each other God is in our midst. I'll say it again, perhaps the greatest oxymoron of our culture is the "Gated Community."

Brothers and sisters we are evangelists... people of the blessing, and that's a two way street. There's a common saying among our Black brothers and sisters: "I'm blessed to be a blessing." That is evangelism pure and simple. In our blessing others, we are also blessed. It becomes clearer and clearer to me that at the heart of sacred scripture is the admonition to welcome the stranger... to welcome the

stranger into our lives... We are so admonished because that is where God shows up. That is where the truth is. That is where the joy of life is. Our intentional relationship with the good people of Bethel AME Church is an exercise in evangelism, for us and them. We share in each other's lives; we learn from each other; and in learning from each other by conversation, and just by our simple proximity, we learn about our world, and the way the world works. The way Love works.

At the rally a few months ago, here at All Saints, when bishop William Barber came to Mobile advocating for justice for the family of Jawan Dallas, the man who was tased to death by the Mobile police; As people were leaving the church, I was speaking to a member of Bethel about the event. He said he had hoped a particular friend of his would have come, but that his friend didn't want to come out at night. I asked if his friend had problems with his vision. He said, "Oh no." He just doesn't want to go back to his house after dark... too dangerous, he said. I of course was taken aback. Why did I not know that?... but how could I know? But now I do know because of my friendship with Rob. Now I know.

Good people, the Love of God sets its roots in reconciling community. A community called to live together amid the ruin of the world. The Love of God flourishes in sharing our lives with the other, in particular with the ones we call stranger. The truth of God among us is only as far as our neighbor across town, or

next door, perhaps; and that truth will empower us to take up our cross to challenge the powers which would destroy the people of God. Our ministry, our vocation has wider implications than we can see or know. My inner curmudgeon says that such a life is too much to bear, but Jesus of Nazareth, and the generations of followers say different. To have life in its abundance, we must lose our lives for the other. Shall we choose life?