

Epiphany 3 and Annual Meeting
2018
C

The Church of the Future

On my birthday several years ago, my mother sent me a copy of Life Magazine published the month I was born, June, 1951. The ads, especially, are reflective of the concerns of the day. Smiling women wearing pretty dresses are opening refrigerators, loading washing machines, ironing shirts or vacuuming floors. Debonair looking men light and smoke pipes and cigarettes, shave with electric razors and splash on Old Spice aftershave when they're finished. Rigid gender roles, as well as the fact that I could not find one ad featuring a person of color, do not make me nostalgic for that time.

It made me think about the time in which we are living. Six or seven decades from now, what about the world we live in will seem quaint, or outdated; misguided or wrong? In 2080 what will people think about the United States of 2019? What will they think about the church of our day? Of how we practice our faith? It makes me wonder how the church will church look in 2080.

On this day of our Annual Meeting, while we celebrate the life we have shared as a congregation, I want to venture a few guesses with you about what we might look like in 2080.

First, the church of the future will make it a goal **to facilitate genuine, caring relationships within the community.** Human persons are made to be touched and cared for into life. It is one of the truest things about us. The church of the future will be a church in which relationships are formed and valued. It will be a community of friends.

This week, I attended an event at the Hillel Center next door about homelessness. It marked the opening of an art exhibit by a painter, Pat Berger, who decided to go to Skid Row, Los Angeles, and paint many of the residents on the street. If you have a chance, go see her paintings. The poverty she paints so poignantly, is not only the poverty of being without money. It is a poverty of being without relationships. The painting that captured my attention, was of a man stretched out on the sidewalk. He is alone, but accompanied by a small grey terrier standing next to him, looking into his eyes. But for that little dog, the man looked like he didn't have a friend in the world.

I nearly go crazy when I see how all of us, from children to elders, are so bonded to our "screens." You may have seen me give a dirty look to those who are looking at their screens in church. I'm sorry for that, but it offends me. I don't care if you bring a cup of coffee to church, but leave your damn cell phone in the car.

Last summer, my daughter and I were having dinner in one of the most picturesque coastal towns in Italy, Monterossa. The sun was setting, casting a rosy glow in the sky. The waves were gently rolling into the shore. A man and woman were sitting at the table next to us. Barely saying a word to each other, they were glued to their phones, texting. They could

have been making beautiful memories with each other. Instead, they were wrapped up in their own virtual worlds, as disconnected as strangers sitting next to each other on a bus.

Americans, wrote Robert Bellah in Habits of the Heart some two decades ago, are the loneliest people in the world. It has only gotten worse. The church must be a place where we recover the art of conversation, the practice of true hospitality. We all have friends in many different contexts today, but there is something special about having friendships within the church. In our atomized world, they are people who know you well enough to know when you are hurting.

As many of you know, my Dad died this past December. I spent a week with my family in St. Louis, both mourning him and celebrating his life. I arrived back at St. Alban's just in time for our Lessons and Carols service, and as I got out of the car, two of our most wonderful couples, the Magnusons and the Howes, rushed up to me to say how sorry they were, and give me a hug. It meant the world to me as did the cards and letters many of you sent. When you are present each week, people know you. They know what is happening in your life. They can see the pain in your face. We must risk being vulnerable with each other. Because without vulnerability, there can be no honest friendship.

Paul left the group of early Christians in Corinth with one of the most brilliant and enduring images of its life together. It is my favorite image of the church. He writes:

For just as the body is one and has many members, and all of the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in the one Spirit, we were all baptized into one body---Jews or Greeks, slave or free---and we were made to drink of one Spirit.

In this passage, Paul articulates his understanding that though each member of the Body of Christ is an individual, and uniquely blessed with gifts, "if one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it." The members of the church of the future will be even more closely connected than we are today because we will need that intimacy even more.

Secondly, the church must be **bold in proclaiming that our God is a God of justice and righteousness**. What Jesus is doing in today's gospel reading from Luke, is announcing his agenda. He is in his hometown of Nazareth, and goes to the synagogue where he was raised. He stands up to read from the scroll handed to him. It is open to the passage from Isaiah. Jesus reads these words:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.

Those who are attempting to locate themselves in this large mission of Jesus, must not only talk the talk. We must walk the walk. Yes, it is important to evaluate our actions in accordance with the norms of the Ten Commandments. But we are missing the essence of the gospel if we do not evaluate our actions by the agenda of justice that Jesus proclaims.

How we spend our money; how we vote; how we live--- should exemplify the spirit of the Lord that Jesus came to embody. We are his body, his hands and feet in the world around us.

And we must remember what happened to Jesus immediately after he read this passage from Isaiah. He applies the text---as a good preacher does---to his own time and place. He reminds his listeners that God not only cared for the children of Israel. God also cared for the gentiles. Then, Luke says, "When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with rage." They drive him out of the town to a hill to hurl him off a cliff, and he barely escapes with his life.

In following Jesus, we, too, must expect to enter into conflict. Now, I was raised to be nice, to be "good", and conflict is sometimes uncomfortable for me. The preacher Clarence Jordan once said, "If I am following Jesus, why is it so easy for me to get life insurance?" It is a question I ask myself. The confrontations that Jesus had with his kin, his religion and the Roman empire, led directly to the Cross. If nothing I do ever antagonizes the powers aligned against the kingdom Jesus came to establish, I have been fearful, not faithful.

Finally, I think the church of the future needs to be **steeped in spirituality**. We must cultivate our identity as children of God through worship and prayer. Though the world may think that we are the face we so carefully curate for the world to see on social media, we must know who we are in our interior lives, or we risk swimming in the shallow end of the pool. And we must develop and nurture the "still small voice" that is trying to get our attention. That is God's speaking voice, at least it is for me.

When I first became serious about my faith, praying daily was probably my biggest challenge. Was anything happening when I prayed? Was there really some kind of exchange going on, or was I just speaking to myself? Sometimes, I still wonder. But the longer I discipline myself to a regular time of prayer, this I know---prayer changes the pray-er, the one who prays. Pray for an enemy. Try it. And see if, over time, you don't have some insight into why they are the way they are. I have also experienced moments of such gratitude in prayer, that my heart is literally expanded. And I have seen the wonder of answered prayer in my own life, and in the lives of others.

There are so many other ways I see the church of the future evolving. A commitment to saving the environment. A cultivation of beauty. A love of the neighbor who is different from us. Serious study of and immersion in Scripture. Advocacy for children and their nurture. And we will need to place more emphasis than we do on celebration, on ecstasy. Episcopalians are no longer called, "God's frozen chosen." But we can open up to joy more than we do. We are, after all, an Easter people. Even though we live in a Good Friday world, we need the joy that comes with celebration.

Fourteen years ago, I stood before this congregation to give my first sermon. I was honored and grateful to be called as your fourth rector. It's always an exciting time in a pastor's life to look out at the community and wonder what will be the work we do, how our lives will connect, and what we will build together.

It is here---among you---that I believe I have seen the future of the church. Here we have developed a strong and healthy body, with connections that are precious. Here we have acted on the kingdom values of Jesus. And here, we are an oasis of spirituality in the desert of our culture, growing more willing to discern, rather than decide, the way forward.

I won't be able to be a part of what you will become in the next decades. But I know it will be good. For I know that what Ezra said to his people is true of many of you, "the joy of the Lord is your strength."

May it be so. Amen.

.