

Homily – A Church of Change

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Global climate change, vitriolic politics, the war with Iran, wildfires, systemic racism, Gaza, and the backlash against LGBTQ folks. Sometimes it can be hard to be an optimist in a world in which the internet and 24-hour news cycle puts so much information in front of us. However, I am still an optimist. I still see God at work in our world. It may be a dance with two steps forward and one step back. Three steps forward and two steps back. I am still an optimist but all of this change all of this dance can be difficult. And all of this change can be especially hard when we don't know where it is going to end up. If we are controlling the change that is one thing, but change that is out of our control just causes us to fret.

And, the more change we have in our world, the more we want stability in our churches. We want to be able to fall back on the timeless rituals and words that we use in our worship. When the ground is shifting on us, we just want to be embraced by an unchanging church. However, the message I want to share with you today, is that Jesus comes to shake things up, and this includes shaking up the way that we do church.

Now, I've shared this joke several times before, but the second Episcopal joke that I learned was a lightbulb joke.

How many Episcopalians does it take to change a light bulb?

Change, we can't have change. Aunt Edna gave us that light bulb. We don't want change.

Episcopalians have a reputation of being averse to change. This is somewhat understandable since, as I said a moment ago, when things are changing all around us in the world, we usually want a place that has less change – a place of stability. We often say that God is unchanging, and we want that changelessness to extend to our churches as well. But change is as true in our churches as it is the culture around us.

Today's Gospel reading is about change, and more specifically it is about change in the institutions of religion. In the first part of our reading, Jesus mocks how the religious leaders of two thousand years ago have used tradition in perverse ways to contravene the will of God. And, if we are paying attention then we know echoes of this exchange are still nearly deafening us in our 21st century church. Today, change is needed.

And, as we heard in today's Gospel reading, Jesus refuses to allow tradition to be used as a holy reason for claiming that God's grace and eternal affection are reserved only for the ritually pure. Jesus teaches about the role tradition should and shouldn't play in a spiritual life. Anyone involved in parish ministry knows of the many church battles that have been fought for God in the name of tradition. And, tradition can mean anything from a worship practice that occurs more than once to a liturgical rite that the church has practiced for generations. Tradition can provide a solid, yet flexible, foundation for faithfulness, but it can also function in the opposite way. Sometimes traditions are used for power and control and to keep away the riff raff.

In today's text, Jesus chastises the official keepers of Jewish tradition for having squeezed the life and liveliness out of their tradition until it has calcified into an irrelevant religious relic. In what ways have we done the same? In what ways do our churches lead people away from God? In what ways do our churches get in the way of healthy relationship with God, others, and self. And, this is not just a question for those other churches, but it is a question that we must ask of ourselves. What things do we do here at St. Barnabas that get in the way of healthy spirituality. What do WE need to do differently?

We are at a crossroads of history, and sometimes God upends our human traditions because they get in the way of God's mercy and truth. I am not saying that God is causing global climate change. I am not saying that God uses wildfires to cause destruction. Instead, I am reminding us that God has created us to be resourceful and to adapt to new ways of being. We can't cling to an old way of being church.

As followers of Jesus who are joined together on a spiritual journey what are we going to do to embrace the new normal? Our mission hasn't changed, but the way we do it has. We are still to share the good news of Jesus. We are to (a) protect the environment, (b) care for the poor (c) forgive often, (d) reject racism, (e) fight for the powerless, (f) share earthy and spiritual resources, (g) embrace diversity, (h) love God, and (i) enjoy this life. We are to mirror the love of God back out into a world that sorely needs it. We are to be the hands and feet and voice of Jesus.

Again, this mission from Jesus has not changed, but the way we fulfill the mission has changed. We are to adapt. We are to become the new normal. We are to let go of an old way of being and embrace the future that God has set before us.

Now, there are two things that I want to share about living into our future. Historically, we have been a church of privilege and power. We have been the church of Presidents. And historically, we have focused most of our passion on our rituals. But there are new things we must do.

First, we must equip ourselves to counteract two trends in Christianity that have nothing to do with Jesus – the prosperity gospel and Christian nationalism. Both of these trends have been around for a while, and they are insidious in the ways they creep into our everyday thinking. With the prosperity gospel there is a mistaken belief that God rewards good people with a Porche and bad people with a car accident. Good followers get riches and bad people are poor and deserve to be poor. With the prosperity gospel we forget that God loves all unconditionally. And with Christian nationalism we mistakenly insist that only our people, tribe, and nation is blessed by God. Our tribe is favored by God above all others, and thus we can do whatever we want since God's favored people could never do any wrong. The prosperity gospel and Christian nationalism both mistakenly forget that God loves all, and not just the people who are already like us.

And there is a second thing we must do to live into the new normal of our future. We don't want to just define ourselves by what we are against – the prosperity Gospel and Christian nationalism. We also want to equip each other to be better followers of Jesus. We want to lead people through a process of spiritual formation that from the beginning anticipates as its end or goal faith expressing itself in love.

And here are some ideas about a new church that come from Brian McLaren's book "Faith After Doubt." These are skills to teach our children, and by extension ourselves, to follow Jesus. To this end, we need to introduce children to skills of deeply caring about right and wrong, truth and falsehood, fairness and injustice, helpful and harmful, selfish and unselfish. But we will also remind them that, even if people do wrong, they are still worthy of love, and that there is no such thing as being truly right, without being truly loving. As they get older, we might teach adolescents that rules about drugs, alcohol, and sex are intended not to keep us from joy, but rather to help us love ourselves and others, by protecting us from addictions, self-harm, and other unhealthy behaviors. We might explain that the rules for recycling, reducing our consumption, and conserving energy are expressions of our love for the Earth. Rules and love, we would help them see, are not enemies. In fact, rules only makes sense in service of love.

And, as our children mature, we can help them master the complex bodies of knowledge and skill sets necessary to survive in our modern world. But we will never let pride, fame, power, or money be the ultimate goal of survival. Instead, we will teach again, and again that we develop our knowledge and skill, so that we have more capacity to receive and give love. Similarly, we could teach our younger people to practice spiritual disciplines or practices, such as lectio divina and meditation, silent contemplation and solitude, soul friendship and spiritual direction, journaling and self-examination. But we should make clear from the start of these lessons, that the purpose of spiritual self-development is not to earn anything or merit anything.

Rather, it equips us for spiritual self-giving as an expression of love for God, others, self, and the rest of non-human creation. And as we mature, even further, we need to make sure we develop critical thinking, honest questioning, doubt, skepticism, and the ability to challenge and critique. With these tools, we can critique and challenge authority figures, and authority structures, without hate, or disrespect, driven instead by love for the truth and love for the common good. And, with this, we must learn a healthy skepticism toward advertising, toward political propaganda, and toward religious communication as well, remembering how business, political, and religious leaders, often distort the truth to achieve their agendas. Love for self, and others requires this kind of critical thinking.

And through all of this, from the beginning, we must always keep in mind the desired outcome, and that is faith expressing itself in love. And to embrace this new normal, we have to start not with children, but with ourselves, their parents and teachers. We will reproduce what we actually are, not simply what we say or wish. Deep personal formation of the next generation depends on close-at-hand mentors and models who authentically embody the way of life we hope the children will catch through imitation. The loving hearts of parents, teachers, and other significant adult models in a child's life are the primary sacred texts, from which the children will learn faith expressing itself in love. This is what Jesus is calling us to do and be even if it means relaxing our grip on some of our rituals and traditions. Some churches get tied up in knots about proper theology, but, in my observation, Episcopalians get ourselves tied up with what we think is the one only way to worship God. And, when we do a self-examination of our church we will find that we don't do many of the aforementioned things that are really needed to be followers of Jesus. But we will. And by the way, on this Sunday in which we bless the back packs and celebrate the return to school, on this Sunday if you want to be a role model and teacher of our kids here at St. Barnabas, then let Pam or Joy know you are available to help teach.

The corrosive nature of national politics is not the end of our story. Global warming is not the end of the story. The persistent systemic racism we have in our culture is also not the end of the story. We must change ourselves even if it means letting go of some of our church traditions. We must adapt and be resilient. In the same way that he confronted the Pharisees of two thousand years ago, I am firmly convicted that Jesus is calling us to let go of the way we have always done church. We must butt up against two trends in Christianity that have nothing to do with Jesus, and we must let go of traditions that have little to do with love. As twenty-first century followers of Jesus, anything and everything we do must be faith expressing itself in love.