



Monthly Archives: September 2015

ALL, SERMONS

SERMON 9/27/15 PENTECOST 18B ST. BONIFACE, SIESTA KEY, FL

SEPTEMBER 28, 2015 | LEAVE A COMMENT



To watch the video of the full worship service and SERMON [click here.](#)

Numbers 11:4-6,10-16,24-29;
James 5:13-20;
Mark 9:38-50

"A priest told his parishioners,'Next

week I plan to preach about the sin of lying. To help you understand my sermon, I want you all to read Mark 17.” The following Sunday, as he prepared to deliver his sermon, the priest asked for a show of hands, “Who all read Mark 17?” Every hand went up. The priest smiled and said, ‘my sisters and brothers, Mark has only sixteen chapters so, I will now proceed with my sermon on the sin of lying.’()*

We heard these words from scripture this morning, “Therefore confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed. The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective.” Two months ago, I stood before you in this spot and said, “I have great hope for this congregation.” I said, “I believe God has in store for St. Boniface, a wonderful future that is unfathomable at this time.” I am more convinced of that fact today, than I was on August 1st, 2015. I believe this congregation again will do mighty works for God’s kingdom. I believe this is true, because I have seen evidence already that a time of healing has begun here, but my sisters and brothers, you cannot rest now, because there is much more work to be done.

You have before you an opportunity to discern God’s vision and dream for new and fresh approaches for mission and ministry in this community, on Siesta Key, and beyond. Please my friends do not forget that restoring broken hearts, mending broken relationships, practicing forgiveness, and entering into a time of reconciliation and rebuilding is your first priority. You will need to do some heavy lifting, as you engage in the ongoing communal cycle of sin, forgiveness, reconciliation, and grace.

Relational estrangement pervades congregational struggles, and if it goes un-repentant and un-forgiven, it has the potential literally, to mutilate the Body of Christ.

In his speech to Congress the other day, Pope Francis quoted Thomas Merton, a well-known Cistercian monk; whose writings have been inspirational to many. Brother Merton in his autobiography wrote, “I came into the world. Free by nature, in the image of God, I was nevertheless the prisoner of my own violence and my own selfishness, in the image of the world into which I was born. That world was the picture of Hell, full of men like myself, loving God, and yet hating him; born to love him, living instead in fear of hopeless self-contradictory hungers”. (1) Merton was talking about one of the issues of church life that we don’t like to talk much about today. Merton was talking about sin.

Sin is a spiritual ailment we progressive and intellectual 21st century Christians often feel we have outgrown. Despite evidence of the reality of sin found in our world, a world experiencing growing violence in our streets, out of control corporate greed, the ever-increasing level of broken family relationships, and the conflict that exists in our social organizations, we seem to think our struggle with sin is an old fashioned, outdated concept.

My favorite theologian Paul Tillich asserts, “Sin is separation. Separation is an aspect of the experience of everyone. To be in the state of sin, is to be in the state of separation.”(2) Over the years, some folks have defined sin as a mere legal transaction, a breaking of laws, or an act of getting caught with our hand in the spiritual cookie jar. I disagree, because I believe as Tillich asserts, sin is about relationships and not merely legal transactions. Sin is human estrangement from God and each other, and it is this separation we experience, when our actions or inactions cause injury to others lives, and the devastation of those relationships.

Unfortunately, our culture has watered down the reality that we human beings have always, and will always, battle with relational brokenness, or the struggles to be the god of our own lives and god of others lives. You may be sitting there saying, “C’mon Father Eric, are you really going to preach to us about sin?” Yes, I am,

because we want sometimes to convince ourselves that this estrangement is not real. Do you want proof? The next time you are in the grocery store or the mall and you see two people arguing viciously, or you overhear two friends gossiping about a third, or you receive an email, Facebook post, or text that tears down the character of a friend or colleague, you can be assured that sin is real. We all battle with sin, because we desire influence, power, and our own agenda. But there is the Good News for all of us, “God does not abandon us, even to our sin.”

Missional distractions become the soil for estrangement that affects our relationships in the community.

If you listened to the Old Testament reading this morning, you heard about one of the many leadership disasters Moses’ experienced while trying to lead a large nation of people from slavery to a new way of being, a new destination, and a new future. While traversing through the harsh environment of the desert, with hunger and thirst around every corner, the people became focused not on their mission, but on their personal needs. Israel lost sight of her mission, and the direction to which, God had set out for them. Despite the hardships and grumbling though, God never abandoned them to their assumed fate.

Just like the people of Israel traveling to the Promised Land, we have to deal with our own mission distractions. Management challenges, organizational issues, capital and budget constraints, deferred maintenance matters, individualized ministry agendas, and now, there is a growing population of people who don’t go to church anymore, all of these distractions challenge all of our churches today. These disruptions to community life, shift our focus from the mission and then, become fertile soil into which, we often plant seeds of anxiety and fear. Fear and anxiety leads to conflict, misguided energy, and eventually estrangement. Like the

Israelites in the desert, when our relational and communal health is dominated by our need for task efficiency and operational effectiveness, we lose sight of our true purpose and mission, which is “to bring all people into unity with God and each other in Christ.”

Moses was overwhelmed by the logistics of the trip to the promise land, but grace abounded even in the midst of the chaos. Despite the hardships and diversions, the people eventually learned that they had to rely on and trust God’s vision of a new community in a new land. You see, God did not then, nor does God now, leave us forever to wander in the deserts of our own distractions and estrangements. God always draws us back to God’s purpose, which is unity and relational health through repentance, forgiveness, reconciliation, and grace.

Repentance is when we turn back to God’s way of being, and when we accept the forgiveness and grace God pours out on each of us.

“The Church is a hospital for sinners, not a museum for saints,” a quote often attributed to Abigail Van Buren, the newspaper columnist Dear Abby, and it offers a simple metaphor for Christian community. Martin Luther once said, “We are all mere beggars, showing other beggars where to find bread.” We are all in need of healing. We all need to be fed. We are all in need of grace. The Body of Christ is not meant to be a community that we enter dressed in our finest, and falsely claim, “I am perfect because all is well with me, and I assume all is well with you.” Each of us, we clergy included, all show up before the throne of grace with our burdens, our sins, our junk, and all of us need transformation in our lives. I know I do. The spiritual healing we all need, begins to emerge and become tangible for us, when we practice confession and repentance.

Because we often reject the reality of separation in our lives, we also reject our need for repentance. Repentance is not merely

acknowledging actions that have led to broken relationships, and then we merely return to our old habits. Repentance is not saying, “God I am sorry for what I did” and then we go back to our sin. In Greek, the word from which we derive the English word “Repentance,” means to change one’s mind for better, to make a change of principle and practice, and to reform. Each week we confess, we pray, we seek forgiveness by saying, “We are truly sorry and we humbly repent.” The prayer of penitence is “confessing our sins and making restitution where possible, with the intention to amend our lives.” (BCP p. 857) Health for a community emerges when we confess our sins to one another, and seek to reconcile estranged relationships, even when the issues are very complex. In his article, “Crafting Communities of Forgiveness,” Gregory Jones writes, “There is no healthy community that is not also aware of the complex psychological dynamics of its members.” (1)

Life is complex and relationships are multifaceted. The church is like a hanging mobile, you cannot move one object on one side of the mobile, and without that movement having an affecting every other piece. There are no decisions, actions, or conversations in the church made in isolation. We are connected in the Spirit of God, but our connection is fragile at times. We must be aware that we have to strive to be unified as much as possible, and we begin to do that, when we acknowledge our need to care for one another. Even when we face complex issues, we must “move forward together, as one, in a renewed spirit of fraternity and solidarity, cooperating generously for the common good.”(1)

Our hope for healing and restoration in the future is in God’s hands, but we must join now in the process of healing.

We cannot do this work of healing and reconciliation alone. We have to rely on God’s grace. “Our worship of the risen Christ sets

the context for us to find new ways of coping with the conflicts and tragedies that all too easily destroy us and others.” (4) “Jesus’ cross is (an) indication (that) real grace *is* costly, hard- earned grace.”(3) Becoming a healthy congregation is costly, and it is hard work, and it requires grace.

In the coming months, it will be of utmost importance for St. Boniface Episcopal Church to reconnect with and become very clear about God’s purpose and mission for this congregation. It will be essential to understand the complicated dynamics of community life, so that you can address conflict when it arises and my friends, conflict and misunderstandings will happen again because honestly, we are merely human. We are people who struggle with an ongoing need for emotional, intellectual, and spiritual healing. We are people who need to practice repentance and to practice forgiveness. We are a people who struggle with the idea that the gift of grace, God’s abundant love which is undeserved, unmerited, and unearned, flows unceasingly upon us and thus, we cannot manipulate grace, purchase grace, or coerce grace. We must merely accept it.

I said it before, and I will say it once again, I have great hope for this community. Your work is ahead of you, and much will be required of you all in the coming months. Health will require you to return to the basics of the faith, to release individual or group agendas for the agenda and mission of God. Health will require you to pray fervently together and often. Health will require you to love one another, I mean really love one another, forgive one another, deal with new conflict directly and compassionately with one another, and finally, in all things St. Boniface must trust God.

Please never forget this fact, this church is Christ’s church and not your own and that being said, Christ will not abandon her. I believe that if you all will seek God’s will, wisdom, and power and seek it in all you do as you move into the future, you will look back a year from now and say, “look how far God has brought us.” You are

already seeing little glimpses of resurrection in this place. I am convinced that you will experience new life. Stay faithful, pray fervently, love each other, and you will re-emerge once again, the community GOD wants you to be, one that brings “all people into unity with God and each other in Christ.”

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SERMON 9/13/15 PENTECOST 16B ST. BONIFACE, SIESTA KEY, FL

SEPTEMBER 13, 2015 | LEAVE A COMMENT



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James 3:1-12; Mark 8:27-38

Jesus question about “Who do you

say I am,” is as relevant for us today, as it was for those early followers in Caesarea Philippi.

This morning I invite you to tap into your creative imaginations and put yourself in today’s story from the Gospel according to Mark. Imagine for a moment that you have been a part of that band of folks that followed the young rabbi Jesus, and tagged along behind him around the Galilean territory and beyond. You have witnessed his healings, heard him preach, and you have seen the miracles. You are hooked and cannot return back to the place you were before, because you are on a new journey. There is something about this guy you just cannot explain; something to which you are deeply drawn, and because of that fact, you would follow him anywhere.

You and your companions now find yourselves deep in Gentile territory in Caesarea Philippi, a city, in which there is a plethora of spiritual practices, a collection of images of various deities, and a

culture of pluralistic religious dogmas. Caesarea Philippi was an ancient Roman city located at the southwestern base of Mount Hermon, adjacent to a spring, grotto, and related shrines dedicated to the Greek god Pan.

It was in this setting, Jesus posed this question to you his followers, “Who do people say that I am.” You look around you and watch your fellow disciples as they answer. One says, “Elijah.” A couple of your clan retort, “John the Baptist.” A few in the group exclaim, “A prophet.” Now, despite your colleague’s boldness to chime in, you are keeping silent, but you are watching Peter, the outspoken one in the group, for you know based on experience, he will have something profound to say, but interestingly, he too is silent.

Next, Jesus looks at each person in your group with great care in his eyes, pauses and asks, “Who do YOU say I am?” Peter can hold back no more, and proclaims abruptly and boldly, “YOU ARE THE MESSIAH.” Surprisingly, Jesus tells you all to keep quiet about what was just said. You and your friends, being good first century Israelites, certainly understand what expectations your culture puts on the one who bears the title “Messiah.” However, is the kind of Messiah whom Jesus’ followers seek, the same kind of Messiah that Jesus truly is?

We often project our own expectations and pre-conceived notions on others, and that projection has lasting implications on our relationship with the other.

I imagine if I took a poll right now here at St. Boniface asking, “Who do say Jesus is,” I would hear a variety of responses. I imagine the Jesus who each of us identify with, and the one we hear about in the Gospels, may sometimes be at odds with each other. Peter the apostle proclaimed boldly to that little group, “You

are the Messiah,” However, upon hearing from Jesus what his Messiah ship really meant, Peter could not accept it and rebuked Jesus. He later denied Jesus three times.

Peter did not want a suffering servant Messiah that Jesus self-described, the one who would be rejected, beaten, and killed. I imagine Peter may have been seeking a Messiah of his own making, maybe one in his own image, a powerful, bold, outspoken Messiah who would overthrow the Roman establishment. Many of us may be just like Peter. Some of us may label Jesus as ‘Good Teacher Jesus,’ a mere ancient sage who gave us some really good direction on how to live. Some of us may label Jesus as “Politically Conservative Jesus” or “Politically Liberal Jesus” either of which, depends on your own political affiliation, because we often pick and choose, which of his words move our own agenda forward.

Some of us may label Jesus, “Vending Machine Jesus,” the Lord we only connect with when we find ourselves in dire straits, or we experience life’s difficulties, or when there is something we want or need. Maybe we label Jesus as “Episcopalian Jesus,” the Lord who never ever breaks the liturgical rubrics, handles every conflict with meekness and humility, and the one who can chant the entire mass with grace and style.

We like Peter, have in our own mind, who it is we want Jesus to be, but often that image is based upon on our own identity, our own agendas, our own desires, and our own priorities. Christopher Henry, in his Christian Century article wrote, “We must be ready to embrace *this* Messiah, the one who will question our deepest allegiances and demand absolute discipleship, the one who requires us to move from selfishness to generosity, from fear to love, from hatred to compassion, from the narrowness of self-righteousness to the wideness of mercy.” (1)

This is the same Messiah who says to us, “Take up your cross and follow me.”

The earliest Christian affirmation was three simple words that meant everything to our ancestors in faith: “Jesus is Lord.” (1) In a society focused on a pursuit of self-actualization, individual gratification, and personal success we are ourselves, the Lord of our own lives. The Kingdom of God though is based on another concept of Lordship. The earliest Christian communities recognized that the master of their lives was the one who “underwent great suffering, and was rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and was killed, and after three days rose again.” The chief orchestrator of their lives was the one who calls his followers to “Deny yourselves, take up your cross and follow me.”

Theologian Christopher Henry explains further, “If we want to follow this Messiah, it’s going to take more than acceptance and assent, more than a moment of decision. It’s going to take change in habits, assumptions and actions.” Each and Every day of our lives, we are confronted by Jesus’ call to follow him, and when the choice is presented, we must either say “Yay” or “Nay” to his Lordship!

Jesus is pretty clear about his expectations of his followers. He tells us to care for the least lost and lonely and says, “when you do this for the least of these, you do it for me.” So, when we encounter a member of our local community who is an outcast, whose dignity as a member of the human family is challenged, when those around us lack the basics of life, when our neighbors experience a level of loneliness and isolation we can only fathom, when our local citizens wrestle with a darkness and depressive hole we have never tread, or when a growing generation of our local residents are living with a spiritual emptiness like never before, how will we respond to Jesus mandate to “love our neighbor as ourselves?”

Denying our selves, taking up our cross means we must be changed so much that we deny our own priorities, and say, “Yes” to Our Lord’s way of self-giving love. “The imperative to deny oneself must, therefore, speak to a corporate understanding of identity; it must have a social or public dimension with real effects on one’s relationships with others.” (3) Our proclamation of Jesus as Lord means, that we should be we willing to die to our old selves, that self that stands in contrast to Jesus’ call, so that new life, new life in Christ might emerge in us for the sake of those around us.

Jesus says, “For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it.”

Over the past three years, I have conducted vestry retreats with several churches in our diocese. During these events, I focus on helping churches identify who their neighbors are around them, where the deepest community needs around them lie, and then, help these leaders explore and discern fresh ways to bring about God’s Kingdom of love, reconciliation and grace to bear on their neighbors. I like to think of this work as helping churches to stop looking inward for their mission statement, and begin to look outside their four walls, outside the priorities of inner church life, in order to rediscover what it is that God is calling them to be and do.

Matthew Skinner in his *Word and World* article wrote, “one who follows Jesus continually enacts self-denial through living without regard for the security and priorities that people naturally cling to and that our society actively promotes as paramount. This enactment is not a matter of private piety but of public testimony, for the refusal of a certain way of living directly impinges upon one’s identity and possibilities.” (3)

You see, self-denial is not merely a private, individualized proposition for we “Jesus followers,” it is something we must do corporately as the Body of Christ. We must get in touch once again with the fact that the church, “this community bears the message of the kingdom in its concrete participation in activities of liberation, restoration, mutuality, forgiveness, and charity—deeds that rightly judge and challenge the powers and persons aligned with this world.” (3)

The mission of the church is to “Bring all people to unity with God and each other in Christ.” (BCP p. 855) To reach the all, we must publicly participate, both individually and communally in deeds that challenge the realities of our culture, which stand in opposition to God’s Kingdom, and we have to do it out there. We must deny our own priorities and agendas of corporate life, so that we can fully participate in the mission of Christ in the world.

I believe all of us desire the experience of profound grace, or new life in Christ, but we must remember, there is a choice we must make for that participation and yes, that is the death of self-consumed community living. The church cannot get to Easter Sunday celebration, without going through Good Friday transformation. We cannot experience resurrection as the Body of Christ, without experiencing death of internal strife, turmoil, and self-focus first.

Maybe that is part of what it means for us to be cross-bearers. In this life, we are constantly dying to who we have been, and we are being raised to new life everyday. The willingness to die to those parts of our nature that conflicts, with the one we call Lord, is the way to experience new life. We experience God’s grace, so we might be raised to new life in Christ, and then we must share that with the world. When even in the midst of the most devastating tragedies, we can be at peace trusting in Christ that even death has lost its sting. The community of faith can face inevitable changes, communal transformation, and yes, an unknown future

without trepidation, but with hope, expectation, and confident anticipation.

“You see, Death, the last enemy, has already been defeated by Jesus’ rising from the dead. That is his victory, and that is how he wins the final, apocalyptic battle over the power of evil. And that event means that death will not be allowed to speak the last word over us either!” (2) Jesus says, “Take up your cross and follow me.” What he is saying to his church is, “Lay down your own priorities, your own sense of yourselves, and your own agendas.” “Be willing to lay down parts of the communal life you hold so dear, let go of who you think you are, get out there and do what I do every day through you. Go out there and change the world of the other people around you and then, you will receive an amazing, grace-filled life, which I offer you as a community each and every day. Jesus is telling us, you will find your true identity as a community, when you get outside yourselves, and you begin to serve those around you. Then, Jesus with great confidence in the community to which he left his mission reminds us that we cannot do it alone, and lovingly asks us, “Are willing to trust me?”

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ALL, SERMONS

SERMON 9-6-15 PENTECOST 15B ST. BONIFACE, SIESTA KEY, FL

SEPTEMBER 6, 2015 | 1 COMMENT



[Click here](#) to watch the service and hear the sermon. (You will be directed to St. Boniface Episcopal Church website.)

Proverbs 22:1-2, 8-9, 22-23; Psalm 125; James 2:1-10, [11-13],14-17; Mark 7:24-37

“Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.” Since we were youngsters, my wife Terri and I have owned and loved Dachshunds, that breed of little dogs with long bodies, short legs, and a temperament that I believe to be somewhere between a Koala bear and a ferocious lion. One year ago, our sweet smooth haired red Doxie, Duchess passed away. As you can imagine, it was a very difficult time for us, but one for which, we had prepared. As signs of Duchess’ decline started to emerge two years ago, we knew for the sake of our other younger male Dachshund (Duke), we needed to introduce a new pup to our family and so, we adopted a handsome two-year-old black and tan male named “Tyson.” Inviting a new pup into your home, especially one who is very different from the others, can upset the balance of your home and create all kinds of challenges.

The established dogs (Duchess and Duke) were very resistant to the newcomer’s exuberance, playfulness, and energy. The old timers (Duke and Duchess) were untrusting of the new boy’s toys, his bed, his smell, his sound, and his actions. The dogs that had been with us for so long, who felt they had some claim of primacy and superiority were not ready to change or accept this newcomer (Tyson) without a fight, nip, pick, growl, chase, screech, and yelp,

which seemed to go on for several weeks after he arrived. Today, through many trials, misunderstandings, and yes, a fight or two, Tyson has taken his place in our home, and although he still likes to strut around like he's the "big dog," Duke our old man of the house, has accepted him as an equal.

We humans in an odd kind of way are similar to house puppies that is, if and when we encounter new folks entering our community. Often new people, who may be very different from us, enter the life of a church with new ideas about church life. They often bring with them new talents, new spiritual gifts, and radical ideas that differ greatly from the established folks in the pews. Churches sometimes struggle with accepting, inviting, embracing, loving, and allowing an outsider to integrate into, and have an impact on the pack, on the community. When new folks enter our circle we sometimes become frightened, threatened, and uncertain of our own place in the system. When the new pup joins the pack, we may try to put them in their place, so we can feel better about our place in the community. The fear of change brought on by a so-called outsider, can cause us to forget one of the key foundations of the Christian community; **radical hospitality**.

The gospel narrative we hear today gives us an example of how throughout the centuries, people have created barriers between each other, barriers that stand in opposition to God's Kingdom, that kingdom where all have a place at God's table. The story is about an encounter Jesus had with a woman whose daughter was possessed by an affliction. The woman was desperate for relief and her plea to the young rabbi for help and his subsequent reply, has become one of the puzzling encounters of Our Lord's ministry. We need some background information in order to understand fully what is going on in this story.

The woman in the story was most likely both Gentile and also Hellenistic. She probably spoke Greek and most likely, she was of a different socio-economic class than Jesus and his disciples. So in

this encounter two very different cultures collided. For example, many of the folks living in first century Palestine cultivated and harvested the food consumed by the aristocratic, Hellenistic class to which this woman perhaps belonged. Most of the people who actually grew the food and worked the land, not unlike today, lived with great scarcity and hardship. There was a distinction, a socio-economic rift, a class division that existed between God's children, and it resulted in an "us versus them" attitude, which pervaded the interactions between these two groups.

Now, the social elites were not the only ones who espoused an ethos of superiority. The Israelite's equally held all Gentiles, all people outside the House of Israel, with great disdain, so much that they referred to Gentiles as "dogs," a disparaging metaphor, and a derogatory term popular at the time. (2) In this culture, people who were considered "less than" were cast aside, people such as lepers, the lame, the blind, and the deaf, all of whom, Jesus reached out to with radical hospitality, and healed them of their affliction. This particular encounter Jesus had with the woman found in Mark's gospel could easily give us the impression that Jesus was no better than other folks of this time who ostracized the Gentiles. Today's story seems to conflict with the person we know Jesus to be.

When this woman asked for Jesus' help, he gave a response, which I imagine, would have been very much like the one his disciples would have used. Jesus said, "Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." Some scholars offer a palatable meaning for Jesus' words such was, "my mission right now is this, but in due time the rest will come into the kingdom," attempting to soften the punch of the word "dog." Some scholars translate the word "dog" as "house puppies," or household pets who were allowed in the house and gathered at the foot of the table and received scraps.

Either way, when we hear Jesus' cutting words, words we have

not heard him utter in any other parts of the gospel, we are utterly shocked, and we are at best uncomfortable that Jesus would have made such an ethnic distinction. Theologian William Loader asserts, “When God’s election of Israel becomes the basis for Jesus’ initial refusal to heal this girl, we cannot avoid feeling indignant.” (4)

“Dog” was a common term of abuse for outcasts in that society. We have those unspoken terms used in our culture today do we not? When I lived in the deep, rural south, I remember hearing abusive labels hurled at folks, labels fueled by hatred and racism. In other contexts and situations, I have also heard terrible words used with vicious intent, with an evil so hurtful that a cutting blade or bashing stick could have done no more injury to the person. Such abuse is an evil perpetuation of injustice, and dignity-robbery. So, when we here Jesus use “dog” to label the woman in this story, we are for a moment, rocked off our pristine Christian heels, but that of course, is not the end of the story. Soon we hear a courageous response that literally reframed the Lord of the Universe’s mission statement.

“Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.” The woman rebuked Jesus and his preoccupation with his ministry to the chosen, and she made it abundantly clear that she too, even though not in the House of Israel was in God’s house, needed to be fed by God’s abundant grace. She was proclaiming that now, “the gentiles are no longer outside in the streets; they are now in the house.” And in the blink of an eye—thanks to this loving mother’s theological proclamation—the dogs “will be at the table,” the place of true fellowship.” (2)

This woman rocked Jesus’ world and just as suddenly as her words were spoken, Jesus’ mission expanded and the focus was no longer just on the insiders. Jesus’ path was widened, and he realized he must invite ALL, not some, to the banquet. This unusual story depicts a pivotal moment in Jesus’ ministry through

which, it became clear to him, that his saving power was going to be inclusive.

The gospel writer in this story, is not diving into the psychology of Jesus, he is being very clear that at the heart of Jesus' ministry was this ongoing crossing the boundary of human divide, and bringing the Kingdom to all ... even those considered to be "dogs." Jesus did not merely wax eloquently about radical hospitality; he acted and made it discernible. "Mark's focus is on what (Jesus) did. Jesus agreed to the woman's request; Jesus crossed the boundary; Jesus exemplified and legitimized what by Mark's time had become the reality, which he celebrated: the community of faith was inclusive of all." (5)

Jesus, I believe was not testing this woman's faith to see if she would stand up to the oppressors. I believe he was actually inspired by her. I believe Jesus actually experienced a change of heart, and a new vision of his ministry. I believe Jesus became clear about who he was, and what he was called to do. I believe Jesus was helping us to become very clear about who we are as the church, and what our mission is to become.

If you were to turn to page 855 of the Book of Common Prayer, you will find in the catechism a definition of the mission of the church, "To bring all people to unity with God and each other in Christ." That statement my friends is our marching orders. Everything we do as a community of faith should be centered on unity with God and each other in Christ, and that begins by embracing, a culture of radical hospitality.

Stephanie Spellers, in her book "Radical Welcome" invites the church to once again embrace a far-reaching form of hospitality that goes well beyond the mere community integration of new people. Stephanie tells us that the community of faith is like a beautiful tapestry, woven with the diverse threads of people's lives; people of different ethnicities, orientations, political

affiliations, and people with new ideas, and new visions of the church. As these new threads are added to the cloth of the community, the practice of radical hospitality will not diminish that diversity by creating some structured conformity.

The church must not be a monochromatic wall hanging that looks the same always, and by which we merely weave folks into classic Episcopalians. The idea that a one-hue version of church that “was good enough for my grandmother and it will be good enough for those so-called ‘spiritual but not religious’ types,” may be an unbreakable barrier to some. The church needs to adapt and as new people arrive, we must recognize that there are more and more people out there, who may have never ever once stepped into a church. We must not only invite them to bring their unique hues to the fabric of our communal life together, we must be willing to allow them to transform us.

WE must adapt to a culture today where nearly 22.8% of our citizens claim no religious affiliation at all. That number was 8% in 1988, 16% in 2008, and 19% just three years ago. It is important now more than ever, for the church to realize, it is not enough to merely offer wonderful liturgy, exquisite music, and intellectual sermons. It is not enough to merely open our doors, in order to effectively share the Good News in the 21st century. The “spiritual but not religious” could become the same folks who may show up at our door and ask, “Where do I fit in, in this God Kingdom you so eloquently preach about?” Maybe they will arrive seeking the mysteries of God and ask, “Can I get a scrap of grace from you?” Maybe they come to our doors, and have some really radical ideas about how following Jesus as Lord, might take the Church into new and innovative ministries in the local community.

The question with which we must wrestle is this, “Can we be as adaptable and willing to change as Our Lord?” Theologian Stephen Fowler in a Christian Century article wrote, “The key to understanding the story of the Syro-Phoenician woman is to

recognize that in this moment of his ministry,” Jesus opened himself up to mission to the whole world, he opened his church to the world. Now we are to open ourselves to the whole world in mission.”(2) We the Church must recognize that when Jesus said, “Love your neighbor,” it was not merely a casual suggestion, a passing thought of “love ‘em if you have time or if you have nothing better to do on your calendar this month.” I believe Jesus meant it.

Two and half years ago, a young, energetic, pup entered mine and Terri’s home. Little did we know how this little “house puppy” would literally shake the foundations of our lives. At first, we tried and tried to help Tyson be like the other two dogs, gentle, unassuming, and docile, but he would have none of it. He demanded our attention, he wanted to be heard, and he wanted to be a part of the family, but just could not be something he was not. The other two dogs and Tyson scrapped and fought, jockeying for the best position on the sofa close to mama’s side. Finally, we realized that Tyson was bringing to our house something we never knew we wanted or needed. That little pup brought energy, excitement, and a new way of being into our home, and his presence changed us all. I could not imagine life now without him.

Friends, the church must be transformed, by welcoming the inevitable makeover others who join us, will bring to the pack. God is at work in this place and is calling us to embrace the change others will inevitably bring and have already brought to this church. Please remember, Jesus is not calling St. Boniface to be a clubhouse where all the members look, act, and do ministry alike. Jesus is calling us to be a lighthouse, which calls ALL to the table, to bring all their differences, quirks, and new ideas where they will find a safety and security of expression in this haven of love. In this day and age, we must adapt in order to thrive, and that means we must love our neighbor with all the quirky differences and new ideas they bring.

I am sure there are folks who are very uncomfortable with new the pups who will join the pack and make changes to the status quo, but I must remind you, even Jesus changed his mind. For you see the “Master of this House” is the one who, as a result of one conversation with a courageous outsider, radically changed his mission. The “Master of this House” is the one who gave of himself freely, and brought reconciliation, grace, love, mercy, life (and life abundant) to the world and all who are in it. The “Master of this House” sits at the head of this table, and all, not just some, are welcome to not only join the feast, but to participate fully in all aspects of the great banquet. We, like Jesus, should be willing to change if necessary, change for the sake of all those who need to experience the same grace, grace that was so freely poured out for each of us.

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