Salvation is a person.

December 25, 2014

A long time ago there was an Anglican priest in England, Father Kelly, known for his holiness and wisdom. One day he received a call from a bishop. The Bishop told him, "I'm not happy with the priests my seminary is producing. They all pass the General Ordination Exams but when they serve in the parishes it is obvious they are missing something. Would you come here, observe the seminary and give me some advice?" So Father Kelly went. He met with the students and the faculty. He sat in on classes and chapel services and walked the halls. After a while he met with the bishop and said this: "When it comes to faith, these young men know the words but they don't know the music."

Christmas Eve is all about the music. Not just the music the choir will lead us in – as outstanding as that choir is here at our Cathedral – but the "feel" of this night, the light in the darkness, the deep down sense in our soul that in a troubled world God is here with us, no matter what.

So I am going to ramble on for ten minutes about the significance of tonight's Gospel. But don't worry – the really crucial part of this liturgy will be here soon – when we hold candles and sing “Silent Night.”

Let's look at the significance of the name Jesus was given. Someone who understood the power of a name was Nelson Mandela, the great social activist who spent so many years in prison for his stand against apartheid. For the first thirteen years in prison, he was not allowed to see any member of his family. Finally, they let him see his daughter – a young girl when he was arrested and now an adult. He hugged her and in the midst of many tears she told him he is a grandfather. She brought to him her first child. It is the custom in South Africa that the maternal grandfather names the child. So he did. He named her “Hope.”

Mandela was kept in prison for another fourteen years. During that time he constantly thought of Hope. Hope was not just an idea. For him it was a person. Hope was alive. So long as Hope was alive, Mandela could keep on going. He never gave up and ultimately created a whole new social and political system in South Africa.

Let's look at the name of the child born this night. In Matthew’s gospel we are told an angel appeared to Joseph in a dream and gave him two names for the baby – Jesus and Emmanuel. Emmanuel means “God with us.” In Luke’s Gospel, Mary is told by the angel Gabriel to name him Jesus. No Emmanuel. I’m imagining Joseph and Mary having the baby name discussion parents have and ultimately they chose “Jesus” because that had two angels’ votes and only one for Emmanuel.

The name Jesus means “God saves us” or some theologians say simply “Save.” The outstanding biblical scholar, Walter Brueggemann writes “The baby is named Save and Jesus saves us from all that kills and is flat and sad. Joseph names the baby God is with us, and we are not alone. Notice the story does not ask us to do anything. But I believe it invites us to be dazzled. It invites us to ponder that, while our world feels unsaveable, here is the baby named Save. Our world and our lives often feel abandoned, and here is the baby named God with us. We may rest our lives upon this new promise from the angel and we may be safe and we may be whole and made generous because Christmas is coming soon.”

See, our salvation is not just an idea. Salvation is a person. Salvation is alive in this world. Don’t we need to know that now, perhaps more than ever before? I find it fascinating that at Christmas in 2012 in Newtown, Connecticut, right after the horrific tragedy of the shootings at Sandy Hook Elementary School, all the churches still held their Christmas Pageants. Even though some of the children who would have performed in those Pageants had been killed. They needed the Christmas story. They needed to believe that the baby named Save is still among us.

This story has been part of my life for six decades now. This year I noticed something for the first time. An angel visits the shepherds and announces “I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior.” “To you.” Doesn’t that usually mean just the family? “To the Smith family is born…” “To Joseph and Mary is born…”

No, the angel is clear. Jesus is born to you poor shepherds. The one who offers mercy and compassion and hope is born to you. Although I did not notice that until this year, thank God the people who have changed the world for the better noticed it. One example, Rosa Parks. You know the story. On December first, 1955 Rosa was coming home from work in Montgomery Alabama on a public bus. In that time and place they had a law that buses have a section for people of color and a section for whites. If the white section was filled, people of color were expected to give their seat away to the white person. On this bus the white section was full and a white man was standing. The bus driver told Rosa to give up her seat.
She refused. She was arrested, and the black community of Montgomery, led by a 27-year-old preacher named Martin Luther King Jr., staged a boycott of the bus system. The civil rights movement began in earnest.

That's the part of the story we know, but there is a little known and crucial backstory. In the months before December first, Rosa Parks was part of a bible study at her church. As they studied the bible they recognized the dignity of all God's children. And they understood the non-violent actions for change taken by Jesus of Nazareth. They started talking about a boycott of the bus system.

Could it be that Rosa's bible study group read the angel's words "to you is born this day a Savior"? And she heard the music of those words and took them into her soul? What would happen to the lives of you and me, of our troubled society, if we took those words into our souls? Our faith is not an abstraction. There is a person named “Save” and he is alive among us.

Ok, we are getting closer to the candles and singing “Silent Night.” Just one more underappreciated bible fact and one more image.

The angels tell the shepherds to look for a “child wrapped in bands of cloth.” We will hear about cloth again in Luke's gospel... when Jesus dies. The mission has been a failure. Mercy, compassion and hope have come into this world and the powers of this world killed it. But when the women go to anoint the body of the dead Jesus, he is not there. What is in the tomb? “Peter ran to the tomb; stooping and looking in, he saw the linen cloths by themselves; then he went home, amazed at what had happened.” God never gives up. In God there is abundant life that never dies. And that is not all. Luke tells us after several meetings with the Risen Jesus, as Jesus leaves he says “you will be clothed with power from on high.” The God who is with and in Jesus is here and with us and in us.

Let’s end by going back to the baby. Have you ever noticed what a baby does when you put your finger in his hand? He holds on very tight and won’t let go. Tonight we see a baby named “Save” who is holding on with all his might to God with one hand. And with the other hand that baby, born to us, is holding on to you and me, to all humanity. And he won't let go, no matter what. God is with us. God is saving us. Hope is alive in the world, on this night and always. Amen.

+Doug
Thomas Merton: Our Struggles are in God

December 10, 2014

Thomas Merton, monk, contemplative, writer, prophet of social justice. In another one of these video reflections I told you he is on my personal Mount Rushmore. This pectoral cross, given to me two years ago at my consecration, is modeled on a cross Merton drew in one of his notebooks.

In the Episcopal Church we honor Thomas Merton on December 10, the day he died while visiting Buddhist monks in Thailand. It was 27 years to the day that he entered the Trappist Monastery in Gethsemane, Kentucky. In those 27 years Merton wrote over seventy books, and even more essays and reviews. But Merton knew he could never exhaust the Mystery that is God because as he said “with God we are necessarily in over our head.”

Merton’s earliest books were filled with intense introspection. But that introspection broadened out to look at the world around us. Merton’s life of prayer led him to passionate involvement in the civil rights movement, the protest of the Vietnam War and calling for an end to the insanity of the nuclear arms race. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was scheduled to make a retreat with Merton after his trip to Memphis – where he was assassinated on April 4, 1968.

Out of all those thousands of published pages, ranging in topics from the issues of the day to the insights that Zen has for Christians, there is one paragraph that I hear quoted over and over again in sermons and retreat talks. It seems to be a favorite prayer of so many:

“My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end. Nor do I really know myself. And the fact that I think I am following Your will, does not mean that I am actually doing so. But I believe that the desire to please You does in fact please You. And I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire. And I know that if I do this, You will lead me by the right road, though I may know nothing about it. Therefore I will trust You always, though I may be lost and in the shadow of death. I will not fear, for You are ever with me, And You will never leave me to face my struggles alone. Amen.”

Why is that quote so popular? Because we all struggle sometimes. We have all said at some time, “I have no idea where I am going.” But Merton does not merely describe human experience, he places it in a greater reality. With the God who is “ever with me.” Merton took to heart the insights of Theresa of Avila who said the summit of life is to “find God in ourselves and ourselves in God.” Our struggles are not apart from God. They are in God.

That prayer has been important to me often. But it is not my favorite Merton quote. It won’t surprise you who know me as the bishop who is walking the diocese, inviting us to take our faith to the street, that my favorite Merton writing is his description of a mystical vision that overtakes him, not in the monastery chapel, but on a street corner on March 19, 1958.

“In Louisville, at the corner of Fourth and Walnut, in the center of the shopping district, I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I loved all these people, that they were mine and I theirs, that we could not be alien to one another even though we
were total strangers. It was like waking from a dream of separateness. The illusion that by taking monastic vows we became a different species of being, ‘pseudo angels’.

“I have the immense joy of being a man, a member of the race in which God became incarnate. Then it was as if I suddenly saw the beauty of their hearts, the depths of their hearts where neither sin nor desire nor self-knowledge can reach. The core of their reality, the person each one is in God’s eyes. If only they could see themselves as they really are. If only we could see each other that way all the time. There would be no more war, no more hatred, no more cruelty, no more greed.”

The key spiritual moment in the complex and multi-faceted life of Thomas Merton happened on the corner of Fourth and Walnut. May we all have such an experience and find our God who already lives in us.

Let’s end with the prayer the Church gives us for this day. “Gracious God, you called your monk Thomas Merton to proclaim your justice out of silence. Keep us, like him, steadfast in the knowledge and love of Jesus Christ; who lives and reigns, one God, forever and ever. Amen.”
“Hey, that’s the guy from Channel Three.” That’s what some elderly gentlemen gathered in a corner at Dunkin’ Donuts® said when they saw me. I guess carrying a shepherd’s staff (from a shepherd of real sheep) gave me away as the subject of a news report the night before: “Bishop Walks Worcester County.”

The pilgrimage received a lot of attention from the media and they got most of the facts right – although, Betsy and I were both very surprised to read in Worcester Magazine that we have three grandchildren. Who knew? (We feel badly we missed so many birthdays.) There were great pictures on our diocesan Facebook page of the people I met along the way and the prayer services we held in the streets. And, there were affirming and funny comments on those pictures – e.g., my sister-in-law, commenting on a prayer service in which we are all standing in a parking lot, “Do you have to pray standing up? Can’t you ever let him sit down?”

After all that attention on what we were doing for those four days, let’s reflect on what it all means. Here are a few of my thoughts:

The Spirit is at work in our work. The pilgrimage gave me the rare opportunity to visit our church members where they work, instead of where I work. Doctors, nurses, medical staff, the sheriff, addiction counselors, social workers, librarians, farmers, college teachers and students showed me what they do and how God is alive in that work. Church is not the place where we find God. Church is the place where we celebrate that “aliveness” of God’s dynamic Spirit which is around us all the time.

God is found in conversation. Walking and talking does not seem very profound, but the gospel writer Luke tells us something life changing happened as three people walked seven miles to Emmaus. Engaging each other in meaningful dialogue is an experience of the Holy. That might be why the words “conversation” and “conversion” have the same root. And it is why the Church needs to listen as much as it needs to proclaim. My walk was not a preaching tour but a listening tour.

There is great hope in public witness. A moment that will always stand out for me was gathering with members of St. Matthew’s Church in Worcester, many of whom are Liberian, on the street in front of the church. My friend, the Rev. Nancy Strong, hijacked the name of the pilgrimage and on the church’s message board called it “The Bishop’s Ebola Walk.” In that prayer on the street, with cars slowly driving by in city traffic, we lifted up the names of friends and relatives who died...
from the disease, we asked for God’s healing power and for God’s protection. We asked for an end to the stigma being attached to West Africans in this country. And we asked it while holding one another’s hands.

God calls us to reinvent ourselves (religious word: transformation). From the start of the pilgrimage at Trinity Milford (our most eastern parish) to the ending at Christ Church, Fitchburg, I kept seeing evidence of reinvention (transformation). Milford was once a prosperous factory town because most of the looms bought throughout the world were made there. The Draper family ran that business and surrounded the factory with very nice homes for the thousands of workers. (The Drapers came from the Utopian movement popular in the mid 1800’s and had a strong sense of social obligation.) The factory has long since closed but is still there and it is huge. Larger than many of the closed factories I have seen in Massachusetts. Here is the good news. Milford has come back from that loss. It is once again a vibrant community. Why? They reinvented themselves. And there is much evidence of a reinvented, transformed city of Worcester.

I went to the Community Harvest Project which supplies fresh food for so many in need. They told me of the many changes they made there to what they do and how they do it. More stories of reinvention in health care at UMass Memorial Hospital and Medical School. Ascentria (formerly, Lutheran Social Services,) is in the midst major change in how they do mission. I heard numerous personal stories of transformation at Dismas House, at Clark University, and at the Worcester County House of Corrections. At that jail, there is an innovative and life-changing program for incarcerated people suffering from addiction. In conversation with staff members who run the program, they told me of the many times they made big changes in the program to better serve the real needs of the participants. Transformation seems to be God’s way in the world. Will we let it be God’s way in the Church?

God’s creation in New England is awesomely beautiful. Even though it was far past “peak” foliage season when I walked, the many lakes, streams and forests we are blessed to enjoy here are God’s gift to us. In prayer I felt united with all our churches that engaged our “Creation Season” and with all who passionately work to stop climate change.

When the House of Bishops met last in Taiwan, we were encouraged to “expand our apostolic imagination” and we were shown how by our Asian brothers and sisters. In this four-day pilgrimage my “apostolic imagination” was expanded by the faithful people and ever-changing landscape of our Worcester corridor.

I am already looking forward to the next two pilgrimages – Pioneer Valley and the Berkshires. I look forward to hearing about our church: “hey, that’s the Church that celebrates God’s aliveness in the world.”

+Doug
I’m walking the diocese. Join me!

October 24, 2014

We have an ancient Jewish/Christian tradition of pilgrimage – walking and praying and talking with other pilgrims on the way to a sacred place. I think Western Massachusetts is a sacred place. So I have decided, with the enthusiastic support of my staff, to walk the diocese.

We are calling this adventure “Walking Together on Sacred Ground.” The “together” is anyone who wants to walk with me for any part of the journey. I want to hear the stories of our church members and those who have no church at all. We will stop along the way and have prayer services in parking lots and street corners. I’ll visit prisons and colleges and farms. And I will pray as I walk, lifted up by the beauty of God’s creation in this blessed region and one with all our churches who are taking part in the Creation Season.

The plan is to walk this one “corridor” at a time, each one 60-70 miles. The first one will be the Worcester corridor beginning at our most eastern church – Trinity, Milford – and ending up at Christ Church, Fitchburg. We start on Tuesday October 28 and end on Halloween. The walk through the Pioneer Valley Corridor will be the week after Easter and before Momentum Sunday. The Berkshires leg will be sometime in late May or early June. I am enormously indebted to my whole staff, and most especially Vicki Ix, Cozette Haggerty, Pam Mott and Rich Simpson who are handling a million details.

I’ll walk with a shepherd’s staff that Bishop Wissemann gave me this summer – just a few weeks before his death. It is genuine shepherd’s staff. Bishops carry staffs (croziers) to symbolize the Good Shepherd of us all and there is another reason. In the early church the bishop used a walking stick because the bishop was supposed to be on the move as the living embodiment of the connection between churches. I’ll walk with the shepherd’s staff as a reminder that silo ministry (one church working on its own in isolation) is over and we live in a new/old age of collaboration between churches.

And I walk because we are called to take the faith out of the churches and into the streets, where Jesus’ mission of mercy, compassion and hope is transforming the world.

I’m excited for this great adventure. If you are near my pilgrimage come walk with me. [The itinerary and routes can be found on our diocesan website.] Look for news of my journey on our diocesan Facebook page and Instagram. And, for the first time, I will be “tweeting” my experience @dfisher_WMA. If you are not engaged on these social platforms, please join me in prayer for this sacred land of Western Massachusetts. For wherever we are, we are walking together on sacred ground.

+Doug
Tom Shaw, recently retired Bishop of Massachusetts, has passed into the larger life of Resurrection. I have only known Tom for two years, but was blessed to be with him at many church gatherings, actions for social justice and meals in which we shared our common vision of following Jesus and his revolutionary message.

I will always remember being with Tom at the prayer service in Boston, attended by President Obama, a few days after the Marathon bombing. In the moments before the service, with emotions running high in the church for a city in shock and grief, the Boston media all gathered around Tom, looking for a quote from the church leader they knew for so long. They did not know me – I had only been bishop of WMA for a few months. Tom said, “You don’t want to talk to me. You should be interviewing Bishop Fisher.” He introduced me to them and left. Talk about being thrown into the deep end of the pool! But I also realized what a humble and empowering gesture this was on Tom’s part and a vote of confidence in a new, inexperienced bishop.

Tom was a man of action in a church that sometimes chats itself to death. Tom got things done. From inner city programs that transform lives to prophetic actions concerning gun violence, immigration, marriage equality and climate change to raising the money for a retreat center that serves us all in New England, Tom did not stay still. He was a monk in motion and we are blessed by that.

At the House of Bishops meetings that take place every March and September, one evening is set-aside for “class dinners.” It is a time when everyone ordained in a particular year (that is your class) gathers for dinner. I’m with everyone consecrated in 2012. Tom has been a bishop so long; there was no one still active from his class of 1994. So I asked him to be an honorary member of our class. He was grateful and went to dinner with us. The blessing was ours.

Tom is at the Divine Banquet right now. He is in the Kingdom of God. And I think he is asking when that Kingdom will be on earth as it is in heaven. And he is developing an action plan.

May Tom rest in peace and rise in glory.
+Doug
Expanding the Apostolic Imagination

September 22, 2014

I had my mind and heart opened to a new way of understanding God during a presentation at the House of Bishops gathering here in Taiwan. The speaker was a British theologian who now teaches at the seminary in Hong Kong. He described doing a bible study a few years ago among seminarians in Africa. The text was Genesis and the story starts after Adam and Eve ate from the forbidden tree. They hide from God in the Garden of Eden “in the cool of the evening” because they fear God. And God says “where are you?” (Genesis 3:9)

For many readers, this is a morality tale. This is the big break between God and humanity – Original Sin. But for the professor’s African students, they interpreted God’s question as one of longing, of desire to be with humanity. “Where are you? I created you because I want someone to love. Where are you?” And then that same desire gets played out in another Garden – the Garden of Gethsemane where Jesus longs for God’s presence. And that longing gets repeated on the cross by Jesus with the psalmist’s words “My God, my God, why have you deserted me?” It is a cry for relationship, a longing to be together with the source of all that is. And that longing comes from both “sides” of the relationship, which is all One.

For a moment, think about how that insight got to me. A theologian from England learns from students in Africa, goes to Hong Kong to teach and makes a presentation in Taipei to a gathering of bishops that includes an American from Western Massachusetts. The imagination that is grace, God’s revelation to us, knows no boundaries. It is never limited and it is always multidimensional.

I’m telling you that story because it may help to illustrate the theme of this gathering of the House of Bishops: Expanding the Apostolic Imagination. We have gone halfway around the world to gain a better understanding of our God who can never be contained in one culture or one context – or in one dimension. In a brilliant sermon at the opening Eucharist, our Presiding Bishop, Katherine Jefferts – Schori, preached about Hildegard of Bingen, a 12th century mystic and scholar who discovered God in creation and in science and who dared to take on the political leaders of her time. She wrote a liturgical drama “Ordo Virtutum” in which the personified virtues sing their parts. But the devil can only speak for he is condemned to live without music. He lives in only one dimension and without imagination, without newness.

Our time together in Taipei has featured a lot of “newness.” We have heard from church leaders in Taiwan, Hong Kong and Pakistan. We will hear from speakers representing Japan, Korea and the Philippines. Their context gives them insights we need to hear.

We have also spent time visiting cultural landmarks and churches. Betsy and I joined groups that went to St. James in the city of Taichung and Good Shepherd in Taipei. In a country that is less than four per cent Christian, these churches are growing. Not only do their little faith communities grow, but as they do, they start other faith communities. St. James, started in 1971 with a donation from the Diocese of Upper South Carolina, has started or renewed eight churches in the Philippines. They are not huddling together, trying to figure out how to survive. They are going “out” with the good news. I believe there is an insight here and spiritual energy for the church in our culture.

These speakers and these trips are expanding my “apostolic imagination.” Betsy and I are blessed to have this opportunity. And I had my “civic imagination” expanded as well. When we visited St. James in Taichung, we went by “high speed rail.” The train attained speeds of 180 miles per hour. We made the 130 mile trip from Taipei (the biggest city in Taiwan) to...
Taichung (the third biggest city) in 55 minutes.

What would happen if we had a high speed train going to and from Boston (the biggest city in Massachusetts) to Springfield (the third biggest city)? It has been proposed and not acted upon by political leaders in the past. What would that do for the challenged city of Springfield? It could create new possibilities that will never happen with the dead end idea of casinos. The technology is available. Could we have our civic imagination expanded – by Taiwan?

Thank God we have a God that is always creative, always offering new possibilities, and always longing to be with us in the relationship that gives life.

+Doug
Taiwan, Climate Change and Derek Jeter

September 9, 2014

Why is the House of Bishops meeting in Taiwan? Why didn’t we choose a city in the United States? Worcester or Springfield would be ideal. To understand why Betsy and I are getting on a plane on Sunday and travelling halfway around the world to meet with bishops who are mostly from North and Latin America, read on.

Episcopalians commonly think of themselves as being part of a “national Church” – meaning the United States. But the fact is that The Episcopal Church includes far more than the United States. You might be thinking “Oh, you mean the world-wide Anglican Communion.” But that is different. The Anglican Communion comprises 38 self-governing Member Churches or Provinces that share much in common including doctrine, ways of worshipping, mission and a focus of unity in the Archbishop of Canterbury. The Episcopal Church is “in” the Anglican Communion. The churches that are “in” The Episcopal Church (TEC) include Haiti (which is the biggest diocese in TEC, with 80,000 members), the Dominican Republic, El Salvador and about twenty others. They are in TEC because Episcopal missionaries from the USA helped to found them. The Episcopal Diocese of Taiwan was established by Chinese Anglicans escaping mainland China, and since much of the early Anglican leadership in Taiwan was provided by American military chaplains, Taiwan became linked to the worldwide Anglican Communion through the Episcopal Church.

The House of Bishops (HOB) meets twice a year – in March and September. The bishops from all those dioceses in The Episcopal Church outside the United States join us. A few years ago, the HOB made the decision that we would meet outside the USA once every three years. In 2011, the HOB met in Ecuador. The Bishop of Taiwan, David Jung-Hsin Lai, a wonderfully warm and wise gentleman who has come to 27 gatherings of the HOB, invited us for this year and we said yes.

I’m happy we are making this trip. As an international Church, we should not expect everyone to come to us every time. This is a right and good and joyful thing. And it is meaningful for at least two other reasons.

When I was at a Spanish “intensive” in Texas a few months ago, the leaders stressed that more important than being bilingual is being “multicultural.” That is the ability to understand, appreciate and celebrate other cultures. Our time as bishops in Taiwan should broaden our viewpoints and give us new ways of thinking. Perhaps even new ways of praying.

This will be the first time the House of Bishops has met in a country where the majority religion is NOT Christianity. Taiwan is very diverse in religious practice. Government statistics show that 35% are Buddhists and 33% practice Taoism. Christians are less than 2% of the population. I’m sure this experience of belonging to a minority will have something to teach me.

I joyfully embrace this trip but I am disappointed to miss out on two big events here. September 21 is the People’s Climate March in New York City. It promises to be the biggest demonstration ever calling for a fair, just
and vigorous response to climate change. There are busloads of people coming from Western Massachusetts. This is history making and I’m sorry to miss it. But I will be there in prayer.

And I will miss watching on television Derek Jeter’s last game. It will be in Boston on September 28, so be kind to him, Sox fans. He played the game the right way for twenty years.

When Mariano Rivera pitched his last game, I wrote a blog that garnered more replies than any of my other blogs. I won’t have time to write one about Jeter this year, but humor me for one brief story. On Mother’s Day, 1998 I took our family to Yankee Stadium (because what better gift to give the mother of our children than a baseball game?). We drove to the Cathedral of Baseball right after church. I was at Holy Innocents (Highland Falls/West Point) at the time and everyone understood when I skipped coffee hour. I think I might have made the sermon a little shorter, too. Even so, we were late, entering the Stadium in the bottom of the first inning with Derek Jeter at the plate. I said to Betsy and the kids, “Stop here. We can go to our seats after Jeter hits. This kid is special.” On the next pitch he hit a home run just a few feet away from us in the left field seats. My children became Jeter fans from that moment on. My prediction was right. Derek Jeter was special. And I’m confident in this prediction- the House of Bishops in Taiwan will be special.

I’ll write a blog from Taiwan, telling you how the Holy Spirit is working among this gathering of church leaders and what is being revealed to us on this adventure into another part of God’s world.

+Doug
Take heart. God lives. Do not be afraid.
August 15, 2014

Sermon given at Good Shepherd, West Springfield on August 8, 2014

Text: Matthew 14:22-33

In this compelling story, Matthew uses the word “immediately” three times in just twelve verses. “Immediately Jesus made the disciples get into the boat…” When the disciples cried out in fear “immediately Jesus spoke to them…” When Peter starts to sink, “Jesus immediately reached out his hand…” We are tempted to say “Matthew, with all due respect, get yourself a thesaurus.” But Matthew is a brilliant writer and he has a reason for all those “immediatelys.” With them and with Peter’s question: “Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water,” Matthew is telling us who Jesus is and who we are called to be as followers of Jesus.

The significance of the first “immediately.” Remember what has happened to Jesus before this story. His beloved cousin John is executed by Herod. Jesus goes away to a deserted place to mourn. But 5000 people follow him there and because of his great compassion, he spends the day healing and feeding them. The grieving of Jesus is interrupted. But he needs to mourn and mourning is hard work. When Jesus dismisses the crowds he immediately goes up the mountain to do this necessary and difficult remembering and soul-searching. He can’t wait any longer.

He goes not only to mourn, but to pray. Here is one reason why prayer was vitally important to Jesus and to us as his followers. I’ll get there by way of a basketball story. (Don’t you think God showed God’s sense of humor by calling me to a diocese where the Basketball Hall of Fame is mere blocks away from my office?) One evening many years ago back at our home/church in Millbrook New York, our daughter Caragh was taking her daily 200 foul shots at our basketball hoop in the parking lot. It was getting dark and it was starting to rain but Caragh kept on shooting. Betsy said “why is she still out there in the dark and the rain, taking the same shot over and over again?” I knew the answer to that question. “She is developing her muscle memory. She keeps repeating the same shot because if there is two minutes left in a close game, and she is exhausted, and the crowd is going wild, she needs her muscle memory to take over and sink those shots.”

Jesus goes to the mountain to pray to develop his “soul memory.” John has suffered an unjust death. Jesus knows his fate will be similar. He prays in the quiet of the mountain so his soul memory will take over in the midst of the chaos of his last days. And that is one reason why we gather in this church, week after week, and experience the God who loves us no matter what, the God who has embraced our lives and will not let go. We do this over and over and over again, because when the road gets tough, as it always will, we will have a soul memory to draw upon. When life is hard, we will have a memory of prayers, psalms, and images to give us courage and hope.

The second “immediately.” Jesus walks toward the disciples on the water. They are terrified because they think it is a ghost. “Immediately Jesus spoke to them and said ‘Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid’.” Some biblical scholars say this is not the most accurate translation. Instead of “it is I”, Matthew wrote “I am.” “Take heart. I am. Do not be afraid.”

This is important because “I am” is God’s definition of God’s self in the Hebrew Scriptures. “I Am Who Am” God said to Moses. Now as a definition this seems pretty disappointing. Moses and you and I might be hoping for more. “I Am Who Am.” Actually, it says everything about God. It means God is being itself. All that is, is in God. God is not separate from us. God is and we live in God. As today’s collect says “we cannot exist without you.” Therefore, because God lives we live. And always will. That is why there is Eternal Life – because God lives.
Jesus is clearly identifying his life as God’s life. Because of that we are called to “take heart” and stop letting fear rule our lives. After all, God is here – how can we be afraid? That is going to be demonstrated in Peter’s question to Jesus.

“Lord, if it is you…” What comes next tells us who Jesus is and what it means to be a follower of Jesus. “Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.” Notice, Peter did not say “Lord, if it is you, tell me to stay here in the boat, where everything is safe.” If he said that, it would not be Jesus because Jesus is the one who invites us to New Life, not clinging to the old life. And Peter did not say, “Lord, if it is you, tell me to admire what you are doing, out there walking on the water.” Peter did not ask that because that would not be Jesus. Jesus is not looking for admirers. Jesus invites us to do what he does.

M. Scott Peck, the renowned author of one of the most popular books of all time, The Road Less Traveled, spoke about being at a conference with 400 Christian psychiatrists – counselors who spoke about faith with their clients. Peck read the story of the time Jesus was teaching and the house was so filled with people that no one else could get in. Four friends of a paralyzed man desperately wanted Jesus to heal him. They climbed up on the roof and lowered the paralyzed man on a cot in front of Jesus. Jesus healed him.

Peck asked the crowd of counselors to think about who they were in the story. Did they identify with the paralyzed man? Or his four friends willing to do anything to get him help? Or Jesus? By a show of hands, many identified with the paralyzed man. Many identified with his friends. No one identified with Jesus.

Now that might be out of humility, but these counselors were in the business of healing. Don’t you think someone would say “I am called to heal as Jesus healed.” Peter knew that. Lord do what you always do. Call me out of my safety zone and call me to do what you do.

The last “immediately.” Peter gets out of the boat and starts to walk on water. When he notices the strong wind, he becomes scared and starts to sink. (Think back to the “muscle memory/soul memory” story from a few minutes ago.) As Peter starts to go under, “Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him.”

Of course Jesus reached out immediately to save a person going under. And if it is the Lord, he is asking us to do the same. Who in your life is starting to sink? Who are you called to reach out and catch? Let’s all think about that. Let’s expand the image. Due to climate change, our earth is going under. The time to do something about it is “immediately.” 30,000 people in the United States are dying due to gun violence, and another 100,000 are injured. Those who follow Jesus need to reach out “immediately.” One in five children in our country is sinking into a life of poverty and food insecurity. Children are drowning in a sea of poverty and violence in Central America. Jesus reaches out “immediately.” When should we act?

Barbara Brown Taylor, the powerful Episcopal preacher who was on the cover of TIME magazine a few months ago, says this “It is time to reject a ‘put-off’ life and lead a ‘caught-up life.’ Get ready for the Jesus who is continually coming into the world by living today. Write that letter, reconcile that relationship, get the help you need and do it now. Refuse to keep living yesterday over and over and over again. Today is the day to be generous. Today is the day to be a new creation.”

I will end this sermon with an invitation. I invite any who wish to, to come forward and I will anoint your head with oil and say these words: “Take heart. God lives. Do not be afraid.” That is the truth. And I will do it immediately. Amen.

+Doug
US Refugee Crisis: From a Parent’s Perspective
August 1, 2014

"I contain multitudes" Walt Whitman famously said. For me, I am a follower of Jesus, a husband, a parent, a son, a brother, an uncle, a bishop (although Betsy has declared our home a bishop-free zone), an American, and a fan of a certain baseball team and the E-Street Band.

When I consider the refugee crisis going on in Texas right now – an estimated 52,000 children being detained- I do it through the lens of a parent. And I believe I’m on sound theological footing when I do that because Jesus consistently addressed God as his parent and our parent. So it is a good lens to use.

Tom Callard, our Missioner for Hispanic Ministry, recently urged us all to read an article called God Doesn’t Live Here Anymore: A Year in the Murder Capital of the World. It is about life in Honduras and can be found here. It is one of many stories coming out of Central America describing the horror of gang violence and dire poverty. As a parent, I would move heaven and earth to get my children to safety. Wouldn’t we all?

Let me use another lens – that of an American. I recently had a brief exchange with Archbishop Desmond Tutu – we are Facebook “friends.” I think he has 125,000 Facebook friends but he actually replied to my request for prayers for the children detained at our border. He readily agreed to pray and added that there are dire refugee situations around the world. Under international law, the host countries must take them in. According to “Arch”, if the United States does not take in these refugees (and they should be designated refugees because they are fleeing violence), what message will we send to the rest of the world? As a citizen in a country that wants to be a beacon of freedom and peace in the world, it is clear to me what we need to do.

Two weeks ago, Governor Deval Patrick gave a passionate speech saying he was looking for ways to host these immigrant children in our Commonwealth. He said, "My inclination is to remember what happened when a ship of Jewish children tried to come to the United States in 1939 and the United States turned them away, and many of them went to their deaths in Nazi concentration camps. I think we are a bigger-hearted people than that as Americans, and certainly as residents of Massachusetts."

My hope is that we have the opportunity to host these children in our Commonwealth and in our Diocese. I hope that as a parent, as an American and as a follower of the one who said “Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it. How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings.”

+Doug
A couple of weeks ago Betsy and I had the enjoyable experience of watching the World Cup final in a pub in Ireland with rabid soccer fans. It led me to remember our oldest daughter’s first soccer game. (Don’t worry. This is leading somewhere.)

When Caragh was very little, we would kick a soccer ball back and forth to one another. When we signed her up for the league for five year olds, she loved it. The practices again had children lining up opposite one another and kicking the ball back and forth. But now there were drills too, like spreading out across the field and kicking the ball from one player to another down the field until the one closest to the goal would shoot. But no one played defense.

Now the day of the first game arrived. All the players went to their positions. Then the whistle blew and almost everyone (certainly all the boys in this co-ed league) converged on the ball, all trying to kick it in a jumble of bodies. This was not what Caragh was expecting. She came off the field, walked right up to Betsy and me, and with her hands on her hips she said, “Children are kicking out there. Someone could get hurt. And that someone could be ME. Do something about this!” (Caragh later become a fierce competitor and an outstanding basketball player known for playing with reckless abandon.)

Ok, now for the point. It is so important that we pray for God’s creation, for the poor, for refugees, for peace in a violent world. It is vital that we pray often (“always” recommends Jesus) and fervently. Prayer shapes who we are. But sometimes that can feel like gently kicking the ball back and forth in the safety of our own backyard. People of faith also need to act – to get out and get into the game. Jesus got into a “game” in which someone could get hurt and that someone was him. He gave his life for the life of the world – he took on the emptiness of death and filled it with life. He took on the cruelty of the world and offered a new possibility of compassion – a possibility that could not be killed because the Holy Spirit would not let it.

Earlier this summer, the Social Justice Commission of our diocese put out a study document titled “Not Only With Our Lips, But In Our Lives: The Church and Social Justice”. It can be found here. I invite you to read it. It is a foundational document as to why we must engage the issues of our time.

And I invite you to consider these opportunities for action, among many, to witness to God’s saving mission in this world. On Sunday September 21 there will be the People’s Climate March in New York City. This will be a hugely significant, history-making event. Join with our Missioner for Creation Care, Margaret Bullitt-Jonas, and march behind a diocesan banner that reads: “Love God, Love your neighbor: Stop Climate Change.” Details can be found here.

As you know, casinos are on the ballot in Massachusetts in November. There will be a lot of discussion (and kicking) about this for the next three months. Our document A Theology of Casino Gambling has been used in dioceses throughout the country. You can find it here. Jesus came to bring good news to the poor. Casinos are bad news for the poor. We follow Jesus.

Activists and church leaders are gathering to address the issue of violence in the city of Springfield. I will get you more information as it becomes available. Consider joining Episcopalians Against Gun Violence. They have a Facebook page.
you can visit for more information.

Governor Deval Patrick gave a passionate speech the other day calling for Massachusetts to help in the housing of the refugee children now in Texas. We are involved in a dialogue about this and will get you more information when plans become finalized.

And finally, thank you to everyone “out on the field” – to all who work for Jesus’ mission of mercy, compassion and hope. You are witnesses to the dream God has for this world.

+Doug
Trinity Sunday

June 15, 2014

Sermon given at St. Andrew’s, Longmeadow on June 15, 2014

What a great blessing it is for me to be at St. Andrew’s on Trinity Sunday and what an honor it is to baptize Derek’s and Jaimie’s baby – the beautiful Mari.

There is an old Episcopal Church in Kentucky that has this listing in its baptismal registry: Willard Jones partially baptized.

Here is what happened. As an adult Willard went to the church and asked to be baptized. Even though it was an Episcopal Church, Willard wanted to be baptized the way other churches did it – full immersion in the river. The priest consented and on the day of the baptism the congregation gathered at the river. It was cold that day and the priest and Willard were both shivering as they stood in the water. The priest dunked Willard once, holding him under the water saying “I baptize you in the name of the Father” and then bringing him back up. Willard is really shaking now. The priest puts him under the water again saying, “and of the Son.” Willard pops up and he is terribly cold now. He runs out of the river saying, “I have had enough!”

Willard Jones, “partially baptized.”

We are not going to immerse Mari but we are going to fully baptize her in the Trinity on this Trinity Sunday because God as Triune is crucial to our faith. Now I am going to ramble on for another ten minutes about this. If you take away anything from this time, let it be this: **We speak of God as Trinity because we are always grappling with a God who goes beyond one dimension. We are involved with God who is always more.** God is Creator (Father). Yes, but God is more than that. We meet God in Jesus (Son). Yes, but God is more. God is still with us (Spirit). And even then we don’t have the fullness of God. **The Trinity is not an explanation of God. It is a description of our experience of God.** A good one, the best we could come up with. But even this is inadequate. There is always more to God.

St. Augustine wrote 15 books about the Trinity. 15! And he did that while writing many other books and being the bishop with thousands of people in his care. Now here is my question: when did he have time for golf? Augustine could have written 12 books on the Trinity and it would have been good enough for us. But he was still grappling with the God experience and how to describe it.

Here is the simplest way to understand the Trinity. For a couple of hundred years the church struggled with the more of God. Finally someone had a profound insight while watching a Greek play. When the Greeks performed plays, the actors would wear masks. Often one actor played more than one part, so he would go back stage and come out with a different mask on. The Greek word for “mask” is “persona.” One actor might have several personas. Early church leaders wisely decided this is a good way to describe God. One God, three “personas” (which we inadequately translated as “persons.”) One God coming to us in three ways.

God is more and God is more than we are. We are not peers with God. Thomas Merton, a great spiritual writer of the last century, wrote “When we deal with God, we are necessarily in over our heads.” God is always more. God must be deep and complex – even more than we are.

Theologian John Shea tells this story. Three people arrived at the door of a spiritual teacher hoping he would take them in as students. He asked all of them the same question: “did you come to me because others sent you or because of yourself?” The first answered he had been sent by others. The spiritual teacher dismissed him. The second answered that he came on his own accord. He was also dismissed. The third stammered that he had heard of the teacher from others and yet he came on his own- partially out of curiosity, partially out of frustration, partially because he was addicted to searching, and probably out of a host of other motives of which he was not aware. The spiritual teacher said, “You’ll do.” The multi-layered mind was accepted.

Yes, we are complicated and multi-dimensional. Of course, God will be – gloriously so. It is true of Jesus. The early church was not satisfied with one gospel. One gospel can’t tell the whole story of Jesus. The genius of the early church was to preserve four different accounts and hold that multiple reality together.
Our description of God as Trinity is not an abstraction. Right there in today’s text from Matthew, the Trinity is connected to mission. The disciples are to go forth and baptize all nations in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Some translate “all nations” as “the ends of the earth.” Actually, scholars of the Greek language tell us the word used here in Greek just means “other.” Go to the other and baptize…

To go to the other, to go to the ends of the earth, means going to specific places to bring the more of God. Here is an example and it comes from the ministry of Michael Curry, the Bishop of North Carolina. Back in the 1980’s he served as a priest in a church in Baltimore. That was the era of the crack epidemic with all the gang warfare that went with it. Baltimore had the highest homicide rate of any city in America and the area where Curry’s church was located had the highest homicide rate in the city.

The son of one of Curry’s parishioners was killed in a gang warfare drive-by shooting. On the day of the funeral, the congregation gathered was not like the typical Episcopal congregation that prayed together on Sunday. Gang members from throughout the city were entering the church. The ushers came back into the sacristy and said, “Father, these people are not sitting where we tell them to sit.” Michael said “Let them sit wherever they want.”

The church was overflowing. Michael came out and began the service but quickly realized the traditional service was meaning nothing to this crowd. He ditched his prepared sermon and tried another approach. He invited the crowd to shout out the names of all those who had been killed in gang violence. Name after name was shouted out. Then Michael said, “All that killing. You know what? Those people are not heroes. They died because of stupidity and greed. You all want to be The Man. Let me tell you who The Man is!” He went on to talk about Jesus, the Man who used his power for healing. The Man who rejected violence and had tremendous courage. Jesus who showed us that a real man, a real woman, trusts in God.

Curry ended the sermon with these words: “I’m going back to that altar to pray and in a few minutes we are going to have an altar call. You are going to come to this altar rail and you are going to kneel down and you are going to open your mouth like a little bird and I am going to pour Jesus into you. And you will never be the same.”

That is bringing the gospel to the ends of the earth. That is bringing the more of God to “the other.”

It might not be so dramatic for you and me. But the mission is still ours. Who is “the other” in your life who needs the transforming power of God? Where are “the ends of the earth” for you? It might be a troubled teenager. Or a person in the nursing home. Or someone at work.

Or maybe it is you. Maybe you feel like you are at the ends of the earth. Maybe you need to remember God’s saving power for you. The saving grace that will never run out because there is always more.

At Morning Prayer and Evening Prayer we say “God whose power, working in us, can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine.” Not “God, working once in a while out there, can do a little bit now and again.” No! It is “God whose power, working in us, can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine.”

Let’s go baptize Mari into a Church who believes that. Amen.

+Doug
June 13, 2014

Gun violence is a public health crisis in our country. 30,000 Americans die every year from gun violence and another 100,000 are injured. We who follow Jesus in his mission of mercy, compassion and hope must respond.

Right now, in Massachusetts, we have a great opportunity. House Speaker Robert DeLeo authored a comprehensive gun violence bill that is going before the House very soon. The bill would expand background checks for private gun sales, establish standard requirements for licenses for handguns and long guns, and prohibit a felon from getting a gun license. It would also bring the state into compliance with the federal background check database. You can read more about this bill here.

I have been corresponding with Julia MacMahon – Lead Organizer for B-Peace for Jorge Campaign of the Episcopal Diocese of Massachusetts. She says for this bill to pass, it must have support from Representatives in Western Massachusetts. She urges us to email or call our State Representatives. Phone calls are more effective than email. The suggested message to leave is: “I am calling on behalf of the Massachusetts Coalition to Prevent Gun Violence to strongly urge Rep.______ to vote ‘YES’ on Speaker DeLeo’s gun violence prevention bill. Thank you.” Click here to search for your Representatives by zip code.

You can read more about the issue of gun violence in this paper I wrote on the anniversary of the tragedy at Sandy Hook here.

Jesus: “Blessed are the peacemakers.”

+Doug
Our youngest child, Grace, just celebrated her 21st birthday. Where did those years go? I remember when she was little and when she would eat something she liked a lot, she would throw open her arms and exclaim, “mmmm… peace be with you!” That's what happens when both your parents are priests, I guess.

As we celebrate Pentecost today, the lectionary gives us two different accounts of the coming of the Holy Spirit – because one account would not do it justice. In John’s Gospel, Jesus enters the upper room on Easter night and says, “Peace be with you. Receive the Holy Spirit.” I can imagine him saying “peace be with you” with the same enthusiasm Gracie did. What I am giving you now is something great! It is the power of the Holy Spirit. It is the power to change your life and you have that power now.

I’m going to spend the rest of this sermon on the way St. Luke describes the coming of the Holy Spirit in the Acts of the Apostles because the special effects are just too good to pass up. The violent wind from heaven. The tongues of fire. Speaking in other languages. Let’s look at each of those special effects. But before we do, let’s remember what is most important is not the special effects, but what that wind and fire and intense language immersion brought about to those that experienced it. I can’t say it any better than Episcopal preacher Barbara Brown Taylor – recently on the cover of TIME magazine – so I won’t try. Here are Taylor’s words:

“Before the day was over, the church had grown from 120 to more than 3000. Shy people had become bold, scared people became gutsy, and lost people had found a sure sense of direction. Disciples who had not believed themselves capable of tying their own sandals without Jesus discovered abilities within themselves that they never knew they had. When they opened their mouths to speak, they sounded like Jesus. When they laid their hands on the sick, it was as if Jesus himself had touched them. In short order they were doing things they had never seen anyone but him do, and there was no explanation for it, except that they had dared to inhale on the day of Pentecost. They had sucked in God's own breath and they had been transformed by it.”

Back to the special effects. First comes the “violent wind.” In other passages of scripture we hear that God speaks in strong winds. Only at Pentecost is it described as violent. But there is another passage in the Bible that contradicts this. It is in the First Book of Kings and we hear that the prophet Elijah is told to wait outside his cave for the word of God. He stands there and suddenly a “terrible wind” arrives. But God is not in the wind. Then there was an earthquake. But God was not in the earthquake. Then there was fire. But God was not in the fire. And then there was silence. All was still. And God was in the silence.

Ok, so what is it? Is God in the wind or in the silence? The answer is not either/or. Because God's Spirit is wild and free, we know the answer is both/and. God is in the violent wind and the silence. And here is why that is important for you and me – God is going to be in everything between the violent wind and the silence, including our noisy and messy lives. So don’t be afraid.

Next special effect – fire. But it wasn’t really fire. It was “divided tongues, as of fire.” Now we have created a whole church culture around this “as of fire” and the associated color of red. Red doors, red vestments. So it must be important. Let’s get to its importance by way of a story about Phillips Brooks, like Barbara Brown Taylor, another great Episcopal preacher. Brooks was the bishop of Massachusetts in the 1890's when the diocese was the entire Commonwealth. I don’t know if he ever made it here to Pittsfield. He was only bishop for two years before his death and many blamed it on the extensive travel he did. When the next bishop only lived two years, that is when they decided to divide the one diocese into two. I appreciate that decision.

Before becoming bishop, Brooks was a priest in Boston. One time a Harvard professor, troubled by some recent events in his life, was in the congregation. Hearing Brooks preach, he decided to go and see him and get some advice for his troubles. He made an appointment and, after a one-hour meeting with Brooks, he came out a changed man. But he later wrote that he realized in that hour he had forgotten to tell Brooks about the specifics of his “issues” and what he should do about them. The Harvard professor wrote: “I did not care. I had found out what I needed was not the solution of a specific problem, but the contagion of a triumphant spirit on fire.”

“The contagion of a triumphant spirit on fire.” St. Theresa of Avila said the same thing four hundred years earlier: “If you become what you should be, the world will be set afire.” Those who designed the red doors and the red vestments knew what they were doing – giving us reminders of what we are called to be in Christ.

Last special effect. “All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages.” And yet, when they did that they were accused of being drunk at 9 am. Why would anyone call a person drunk for speaking another language?
I call people who speak more than one language “smart.” Why this accusation of being filled with new wine?

The best explanation my study has revealed is this. The disciples were taking the language of the Temple and bringing it out into the streets where people could hear it in their own context. Think of it this way. We are so comfortable here in this beautiful church saying “The Lord be with you.” What would happen if you said that outside of this building, in the streets of Pittsfield. “The Lord be with you.” The response probably would not be “and also with you” but rather “are you drunk?”

And yet that is exactly what we are called to do. Bring Jesus’ mission of mercy and compassion and hope to the streets where we live and in a language people can understand.

Betsy and I went to London last year to visit the aforementioned Gracie as she studied abroad. Whenever we were in the subway (the “tube”) and the train would stop at the platform and the doors would open, a voice from the loudspeaker would remind us to “mind the gap.”

Perhaps we could use that language of London in union with the intensely religious language of our church services and give this prophetic language to our society. Mind the gap between the kingdom of peace that Jesus wants and the gun violence that is running rampant in our country. Maybe we could remind us all to mind the gap between the creation God wants us to live in and the climate changed creation our children and grandchildren will inherit if we don’t do something about it. Maybe we could mind the increasingly huge gap between the wealthy and everyone else in our society. The list goes on. But the Spirit given at Pentecost compels us to speak Jesus’ vision of a world of mercy and compassion and hope to every corner of this earth – the place where the kingdom of heaven is coming.

On Pentecost the disciples breathed in the breath of God. Let’s end this sermon with an experiment. I’m going to invite everyone in this congregation to breathe in and, if you dare, say in your mind “Come Holy Spirit.” Are you ready? On the count of three. One, two, three. Breathe in…now exhale.

Do you know the word “conspire” means to “breathe together?” That means you are now part of a conspiracy. God’s conspiracy to “fill the hearts of the faithful, enkindle in them a fire of your love, and renew the face of the earth.” It’s a big plan but we have a big God. Amen.

+Doug
Hay un solo Cuerpo y un solo Espíritu

May 30, 2014

Last Sunday at 7am I flew out of Logan Airport with four of my clergy colleagues to attend the Spanish Language and Hispanic Ministry Intensive at the Seminary of the Southwest in Austin Texas. My goal was to improve my “liturgical Spanish” since I often have the holy opportunity to celebrate “La Missa” in Spanish at the Cathedral. And I am hoping to have that opportunity in many of our other churches in the years to come.

The first two days were very productive and I think my pronunciation improved. Maybe my children will no longer kid me that I speak Spanish like former New York City mayor, Mike Bloomberg. (Trust me. That was not a compliment.) But then I had to leave Austin and return home because our daughter Grace was hospitalized with a kidney infection. She is much improved now due to intravenous antibiotics. Betsy and I thank all those who prayed for us.

Pam Mott, Rich Simpson, Meredyth Ward, and Barbara Thrall stayed for the rest of the week-long experience and they gained many key insights beyond language proficiency that will help us in Western Massachusetts. They all described to me the presentation by The Rev. Al Rodriguez as eye-opening. He presented these facts:

– only 9.3 % of Latinos are “new arrivals” (that was the population I was blessed to work with at Grace Church, Millbrook, NY).
– 10.5% are long time immigrants and here to stay.
– 16% are “dreamers” – children who came as immigrants, educated in US schools and are really second generation. In worship they prefer English with some Spanish included.

-40% are the “bridge generation”. They were born here. Speak English and Spanish and are thoroughly bi-cultural.

-23.8% are 3rd generation and above. They go by “American Latino.”

What this means is that the key to reaching out to our Latino brothers and sisters is not knowledge of Spanish, although that helps. What we need to learn is how to be multi-cultural. Pam wrote: “Rodriguez says we must change from focusing on Spanish speaking recent immigrants only to focus on multi-cultural, bi-lingual persons. Rodriguez put up an image of an iceberg, two-thirds of which is underwater. The Episcopal Church is like a boat going around the iceberg. We must become submarines and address more of the landscape.”

I agree but I would also push back a bit. Recent immigrants experience the most prejudice, and the most fear and isolation of any group. Matthew 25 (when I was a stranger…) demands we put resources here. Matthew 28 (make disciples of all nations…) calls us to the whole picture. It is a both/and.

Rodriguez has another analogy that the WMA participants found compelling. He says clergy often approach their work like bankers. We wait for people to come through our doors and then we take care of them. That works for banks but it does not work for the church – a missionary church that is called to go out to all the world (Mark 16). Rich writes more about the presentation from The Rev. Al Rodriguez and the one by The Rev. Jesus Escamilla, a former U.S. Marine and Mexican-American in which he talks about the generational differences among “Latin@s”. (That is not a typo. It is an inclusive way of writing Latino/Latina as Latin@ according to Rich.) That blog can be found here. Rich also writes about his experience of reading the Pentecost story in Spanish here.

Multi-cultural competency will include many dimensions of life. One is the religious symbols our Latino brothers and sisters already have. A cherished symbol for some Hispanic cultures is that of the Virgin of Guadalupe. I know some Episcopalians have been resistant to devotion to her but I have always loved that story, possibly because of my Roman Catholic roots. And because I am inspired by her revolutionary stand with the poor. At the conference, numerous artistic images of the Virgin of Guadalupe were shown. Meredyth tells me the one that stood out for her was the Virgin portrayed with a brown hand and with a white hand. She bridges cultures.

Here is another dimension of multi-cultural understanding. Barbara sent me this email: “One of the offerings this week was Salsa dancing lessons. Once we got past the expected awkwardness of moving in union with a stranger, of our perceived lack of rhythm or coordination, of the stiffness of older bones, it has actually been a wonderfully fun and freeing time. It takes a different mindset to learn a new dance. You can’t think about other things. You have to listen to the music and take it in. You involve your whole body in doing something you are not used to doing. It takes a different kind of learning, and with heavy doses of laughter and applause, makes for a great opportunity to sense the Spirit’s presence.”
I’m going to keep on trying to improve my liturgical Spanish. But more importantly, I’m going to get to know my neighbors and their culture for the sake of the Gospel we all share, a Gospel that comforts and challenges us. I invite you to do the same. Knowing, in Barbara’s words “it takes a different kind of learning, and with heavy doses of laughter and applause, makes for a great opportunity to sense the Spirit’s presence.” The opportunity and the Spirit are right here in Western Massachusetts.

+Doug
Young Adult Episcopalians Making a Difference

May 16, 2014


Young Episcopalians, that’s who. 30 young adults (ages 18-25) gathered together with 14 bishops from all over the country in Washington D.C. to challenge domestic poverty through advocacy. I was with this group (brought together by Bishops Working for a Just World) for three days as we studied the issues, were taught how to lobby and then met with our elected Representatives in the House and with our Senators.

It was a holy experience for me. I never heard Matthew 25 (“When I was hungry…”) quoted so many times. You could tell these young people have made this passage part of their souls. They are all involved in their churches and give their understanding of faith in Christ as their motivation for service. And they are deeply interested in the underlying systemic causes of poverty and injustice. It seems like they all read The New Jim Crowe by Michelle Alexander – a book that asks why so many African American men spend time in prison.

On Tuesday morning each participant gave a brief biographical statement. Every person there had some experience (and sometimes a lot of experience) working for a social cause and/or serving those in need. They did not come to Washington to “check out” something new – taking the side of the poor is already a big part of their lives. They wanted to move from charity and service to advocacy.

For some in this gathering, poverty is a reality in their own lives. That experience included, but was not limited to, those from Navajoland. These young Navajo leaders moved the whole group with stories of hunger and deprivation. And they inspired us with their courageous hope and their willingness to engage the political process.

So often in our Church we ask “where are the young people?” Here they are, caring passionately for the common good and for the world the Creator has given us. I believe this is where we will connect with young people – by sharing with them Jesus’ call for a kingdom of mercy, compassion and hope. This generation wants to make a difference. They are full of hope in a cynical world that says “it is what it is.” Jesus calls us all to transformation, personally and as a society. In this “20 something” generation, we will find many disciples for the Christ who calls us to a new heaven and a new earth.

I was blessed to spend these days with our representatives from the diocese – Sarah Dunn and Graham Simpson. They are engaging, funny, knowledgeable and Spirit-filled. Sarah has been “tweeting” all week and supplying our Facebook page with images. Graham was interviewed by the Episcopal News Service about his experience teaching in a prison. That video is available here. Both Graham and Sarah will be writing about their experience in DC for the next issue of “Abundant Times.”

+Doug
Last week 15 leaders from our diocese, representing parishes in Pittsfield, East Longmeadow, Westfield, Webster, and Southbridge, went to the conference “Buildings for a New Tomorrow” sponsored by the Episcopal Church Building Fund. As the title indicates, the conference was all about using our buildings for the mission God has given us (called mercy, compassion and hope in WMA). We engage in this reflection understanding that in some locations we need to get rid of our buildings if the cost of maintaining the building is getting in the way of mission. We worship God – we do not worship buildings. Rich Simpson, Canon to the Ordinary, has written a powerful reflection on mission and buildings in his blog, “Rich’s Ruminations.” I urge you to read it. http://rmsimpson.blogspot.com/2014/05/buildings-and-ministry-part-i.html

Reflecting on how our churches need to discover new ways to use our buildings led me to think about the rectory the Fisher family was blessed to live in for twelve years at Grace Church in Millbrook, NY. Back in the early 1950’s, Eleanor Roosevelt used to stay occasionally in the guest room of the rectory. It was the era of McCarthyism and the rector of Grace was speaking out against it but was getting some pushback from parishioners. Eleanor, an Episcopalian, would arrive on Saturday night and go to church on Sunday to support him.

That was in the 1950’s. Make the leap to the year 2000 and the Fishers move in. The guest room was no longer the guest room. It was now to be the bedroom of eleven year old Geoff Fisher, a room he would keep for twelve years, all the way through his teen years. He decorated the room with posters of hip-hop stars, athletes, and one of Albert Einstein with some rebellious saying inscribed.

It was exactly right that the room was a guest room housing the former First Lady in the 1950’s. It was exactly right that it was home to a teenage boy in the 21st Century. The church adapted. How are our churches adapting buildings to what we need to do now? We don’t need to do what we always did. The Holy Spirit is dynamic and creative and ever on the move.

The keynote speaker at “Buildings for a New Tomorrow” was Ron Finley. Ron lives in South Central Los Angeles – a tough place. Outside his house there is a small strip of grass between the sidewalk and the street – called “parkways” in LA. Usually this area is covered with beer cans and garbage. Ron had a revelation and felt called to plant crops there in a neighborhood that was a “food desert.” He planted vegetables all up and down the street. And other streets. And in vacant lots. He became known as the “Gangsta Gardener.” Finley invited us to do the same with our church properties. Grow food and give it away. My wife Betsy’s church in New York is already doing this. It shows the neighborhood that our church is alive and vibrant. And giving food away is directly connected to the Gospel (see numerous sermons given by me through the years on the Feeding of the 5000).

I titled this blog “Ministry and Buildings and More Ministry” because a couple of nights before we left for the buildings conference I was at the “Moral Injury” event in Northampton (and I was joined by Canon Pam Mott, and members of St. John’s Northampton, St. Luke’s Lanesboro and Christ Church Cathedral). “Moral Injury” was about all that veterans of our wars go though in “coming home.” Our own Cathedral Dean, Jim Munroe (a Marine in Vietnam), told a compelling story that moved everyone in the standing room only crowd. I’m writing about this now because after a year of planning we are about to roll out a veterans ministry in five locations in our Diocese this September. More information will be available soon.
Ministry and Buildings and More Ministry. The buildings are a generous gift from our ancestors. But they are only important in how they empower us to live into Jesus’ Mission of Mercy, Compassion and Hope now and into the future. “Glory to God whose power, working in us, can do infinitely more than we can ask or image: Glory to him from generation to generation in the Church, and in Christ Jesus forever and ever. Amen.”

+Doug
The Easter egg hunt is a wonderful tradition. In my family's version of this tradition, plastic eggs are hidden around the house and each egg has a scripture verse in it… or money. Some eggs have a penny, some have dollars and a couple have $20 bills. Whatever you find, you keep. We have been doing this ever since the children were very little. I tried to end this tradition a few years ago, when our oldest child, Caragh, became 21. I told her maybe our children were aging out of the search for Easter eggs. But Caragh said, “Oh no, daddy. I need that Easter egg hunt more than ever!” So the tradition continues.

Maybe you feel something similar. This year we need Easter more than ever. Not just because it was a long and hard winter. The world is a mess and it seems like there is bad news everywhere. We really need Easter. Thank God it is here. One time coming out of the Cathedral in London, the Queen Mother was asked was asked why she goes to church. She said “I like to get some good news on Sunday morning, don’t you?” Let’s look at the good news of Easter.

One part of the good news is that the Resurrection of Jesus gives us hope that we too will have life eternal. A comedian once said “I don’t want the kind of immortality where I live on in my children or the kind of immortality where I live on in my work. I want the kind of immortality where I live on in me.” Well, the good news of Easter tells us that is possible. The tomb is empty. Death has been defeated. One of the Founders of our country, Benjamin Franklin, was not a particularly religious man but even he believed in the power of the Resurrection. He wanted this to be engraved on his tombstone: “The body of B. Franklin, printer, like the cover of an old book, its contents torn out and stripped of its lettering and gilding, lies here, food for worms, but the work shall not be wholly lost. For it will, as believed, appear once more in a new and more perfect edition, corrected and amended by the author.” And someone who was far more religious than our Ben Franklin, the author C.S.Lewis, writes “in light of the Resurrection, there are no ordinary people. You will never again talk to a mere mortal…but with immortals we will joke, work, marry, love, bury, care, heal. The one who is your neighbor, the stranger, the poor, the different, that person is the holiest object you will ever encounter.”

But that is not the only good news of this day. There’s more. And this good news I discovered by noticing a small detail in today’s gospel for the first time just a few years ago – after having read this story hundreds of times. It just shows why we need to keep studying our faith long beyond Sunday School. When Jesus greets the women as they leave the tomb, he says “do not be afraid, go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee.” What is new to me is the realization that Jesus never called the disciples “brothers” before. He always called them “disciples.” Why call them “brothers” now? To find out, I did exactly what the women leaving the tomb, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary, probably did when they got home. I googled “go and tell my brothers.” And that research tells me there is only one other time in the whole, entire Bible where someone says “go and tell my brothers.” It is in the book of Genesis, in the story of Joseph and the coat of many colors. Or ‘the techno-colored dream coat” as it is known on Broadway. You know the story. Joseph is the youngest son in his family, much loved by his father but obnoxious to his brothers. Out of jealousy they beat him up, throw him in a ditch and when some travelers come by, they sold him into slavery. Joseph winds up in Egypt as a slave but because he has a special skill of interpreting dreams he was given a big promotion onto the staff of the Pharaoh. The Pharaoh listened to his wisdom and made some good policy choices – like storing up grain when the harvests were good. When a drought came, the Egyptians still had food because they had saved it for just such a time. Joseph’s family was starving in their country and some of them came to Egypt begging for food to bring home. They were shocked to see Joseph alive and prospering. He ultimately gives them an abundance of food and sends them off with these words, “Go and tell my brothers, what they had intended for evil, God intended for good.”

Back to the Resurrection of Jesus. Jesus is telling Mary Magdalene and the other Mary what Pontius Pilate and Herod and Caiaphas intended for evil – his death upon a cross- God intended for good. Because God is always, always, always
looking to bring good out of evil. Life out of suffering. Hope out of despair. Healing out of brokenness. It is what the God who is love does. It is what God is doing in the lives of you and me. “What they intended for evil, God intended for good.” As the 23rd Psalm says so eloquently and adamantly “your goodness and mercy is pursuing me, chasing me down all the days of my life.”

And there is more good news. Aren’t you glad you came to the Cathedral today? This good news is earlier in this gospel story when the angel appears. Did you notice that when the angel appears there is an earthquake? Angels appear throughout the Bible but they never do it with an earthquake. They just appear. But not this time. Boom! An earthquake. Why? God wants to make a point. Jesus had spoken of a new heaven and a new earth. A kingdom of mercy and compassion and hope. A kingdom where love conquers fear. A kingdom where the stranger is embraced and the poor raised up. There is no violence in this kingdom. The earthquake means the new earth is starting now. The ground is literally shifting beneath our feet. Oh, I know it doesn’t always seem that way. But the revolution has begun. As the holy man Gandhi once said in the midst of his quest to liberate the people of India from the oppression of an empire with tactics of non-violence: “First they laugh at you. Then they fight you. Then you win.” The world may laugh at the message and mission of Jesus, it may fight the message and mission of Jesus, but ultimately the kingdom of mercy and compassion and hope will win. It has begun.

A very popular movie of the last few weeks is Noah. Has anyone here seen it? I have not. Is it any good? Back in 1953 the big religious movie of the time was The Robe. In it a young nobleman is visiting Jerusalem shortly after the death of Jesus. He writes to his fiancé in Rome. “The most incredible thing has happened. A man beloved by the people was executed. And now people say he is alive! Some have seen him! And this community is forming of people who truly care about one another in his name.” The fiancé writes back: “Dear, that is such a wonderful story. But darling we don’t have to do anything about it, do we?”

Oh yes we do. With Christ and through Christ and in Christ we need to roll away the stones that keep us and our world from the aliveness that God intends for us. Roll away the stone from the tomb where we have buried our compassion for the poor. Roll away the stone from the tomb where we have buried our hope in favor of cynicism. Roll away the stone from the tomb where we have buried our forgiveness of others and of ourselves. Roll away the stone from the tomb where we have buried Jesus’ clear invitation to non-violence. Roll away the stone from the tomb where we have buried the great Psalm “The earth belongs to the Lord and all that is in it.” The good news is, through the gift of the Holy Spirit, we have the power to do this. We have the power to roll away those stones and become a blessed people living in a world of blessing.

There is so much good news today – too much to express in one day. In this Easter Season, keep coming back to this holy place. Listen to the great stories of what Jesus did and said after the resurrection. Stories about the Upper Room and the deep faith of Thomas- my favorite apostle. Stories about the amazing journey from Jerusalem to Emmaus and back again. You will hear fabulous sermons from Jim and Tom. The music from our choir will be inspirational. You will receive the very life of Jesus in Holy Communion. And you will be a much needed and much appreciated person in a faith community that practices radical hospitality for all and advocacy for those in need.

What a gift it is to be alive in Christ. Amen.

+Doug
Each year the clergy of the Diocese gather during Holy Week to renew their vows in the context of the Eucharist. Below is Bishop Fisher’s sermon given this morning at Christ Church Cathedral.

Gospel: John 12:20-36

I love Holy Tuesday and the opportunity to renew our vows. It is a time to reflect deeply from the soul about our relationship with the Crucified/Risen Christ and the mission he has given us. Thank you, Brother Curtis, for leading us with such insight in that reflection this morning.

And, it is a time to meet new clergy who have arrived among us. One Holy Tuesday back in New York, I introduced myself to a new priest in the Diocese as we were lining up to process into the liturgy. In the course of the conversation, I told him I could predict what the last words of the sermon would be. He asked if I had received a copy of it from the Bishop. I told him “no, I just know with a preacher’s sixth sense.” He doubted me so I made him a friendly bet (this was before I became the anti-casino bishop.) I said the sermon would end with the words “unto the ages of ages. Amen.”

I won the bet. If you want to bet with your neighbor in the pew as to the last words of this sermon, the anti-casino bishop invites you to do that now. You will have the answer in ten minutes.

And, here is another answer we will get to in ten minutes: how do we reconcile Jesus’ encouragement to “hate our life in this world” with the words of the Prophet Bruce – “it ain’t no sin to be glad you are alive?”

Today’s gospel gives us another Philip and Andrew story. Andrew, the second most popular saint in the Diocese of Western Massachusetts, has four churches named after him. They announce to Jesus that the Greeks want to see him. This is a great opportunity to restore the steep decline that has occurred among the followers of Jesus. That decline in followers had begun in chapter six of John’s gospel where we read, “many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him.” The timing is odd because it happens right after the Feeding of the 5000 and one would think that would have begun the Great Awakening, not ended it. Mark and Luke also mention this decline in “average Sunday attendance” after the Feeding of the 5000. They tell us about the feeding of the 4000 – a twenty per cent decrease in church attendance in just a few days.

Now, here is the chance. The Greeks have arrived (and they probably have young families.) Jesus can make up for the followers who have left, restock the Sunday School and have a sparkling parochial report to hand in at the end of the year. He can tell the Greeks about the new youth group that has just started, the pot luck suppers, the way we are “just like family” in this church. But no, not Jesus. He talks about death – his death. And, he talks about our death – about losing the life we love. He even tells them to “hate their life in this world” without explaining to them that this is rabbinic overstatement. John tells us he lost even more followers.

Somehow, by God’s grace, you and I are still here. We have not turned back and we want to continue to “go about with him.” Or, as the great hymn says, “there’s no turning back, there’s no turning back.” What will that mean? The answer to that question has many dimensions, and in this gathering of believers, I know you have insights I do not have. But I will just offer you two possibilities for what it means to “lose the life we love” and “go to where Jesus is.”

The first involves losing the love we have for our agenda – the way we have predetermined how our life should be. There is a story I have told in several of our churches – not because I am a lazy preacher but because it gets so many heads nodding “yes,” opening the listeners to the ever surprising, eternal and yet ever new, wisdom of Jesus. It is the story of Ann, a young woman who signs up to run a five-mile race in her town for charity. She works out every day, getting ready for the race. She goes to the town square with other runners, the gun goes off and Ann runs. Every mile there is a marker – one mile, two miles, three miles. Ann begins to think, “This is odd. The race is five miles and we have not turned back yet.” Four miles. Ann can’t figure this out so she catches up to another runner and says, taking deep and weary breaths, “when are we going to turn around?” The runner gives her an odd look and says “what do you mean ‘turn around’?” Ann says, “Well, this is a five-mile race and we are already past four miles.” The runner replies “Five mile race? This isn’t the five-mile race. That started in a different section of town. This is the marathon – 26.2 miles!”

Ann could not believe it. This was not the race she signed up for. This was not the race she trained for. This was not the race she was prepared for. She decided she would just quit right there and then. But then she thought “This is not the race
I signed up for. It is not the race I trained for. It is not the race I’m prepared for. But, it is the race I am in.” Ann embraced that race. She kept running. She didn’t set any records but she finished the race. She ran the race she was in.

Have any of you ever felt like Ann? Has your ministry ever felt like that? This is not what I signed up for. It is not what I am prepared for. It did for Philip, the apostle who is so prominent in today’s gospel. In the Acts of the Apostles, we are told Philip went on a very successful preaching and healing tour in Samaria. “The crowds with one accord listened eagerly to what was said by Philip, hearing and seeing the signs that he did.” Unclean spirits come out of the possessed. The lame are cured. “There was great joy in that city.”

Philip puts his name into the Transitional Ministry Office and with that great win in Samaria on his resume; Philip is expecting a plumb of a parish. The angel from the Transitional Ministry Office comes to him and tells Philip “get up and go toward the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza. The wilderness road.” The road that is in the middle of nowhere. That’s where your new ministry will be. Philip goes but you can tell he is discouraged. The great crowds of Samaria are gone. Now he has a church of two – an Ethiopian eunuch who is a court official and himself. The Ethiopian is reading Isaiah and with disdain Philip asks him “do you even know what you are reading?” The Ethiopian admits his ignorance, asks Philip to explain it to him. Philip does and the result is his first baptism in his new church in the middle of nowhere.

“To lose the life we love…and go to where Jesus is.” It might mean letting go of our well researched, tightly held agenda. The one where we pray “Your will be done…but in case you are interested God, here is what my will is.”

Here is a second dimension of “To lose the life we love…and go where Jesus is”. And it might be harder than the first one. This dimension means following a dynamic, passionate Jesus who is constantly on the move and who does not consider our personal religious experiences as important as the kingdom of God coming on earth as it is in heaven.

I invite us to consider the sermon Mary Glasspool, suffragan bishop of Los Angeles, gave at the House of Bishops recently and reported on in my blog. Her text was the Road to Emmaus story from Luke. You know the story. After the death of Jesus and reports of his resurrection, two disciples walk dejectedly away from Jerusalem to Emmaus. The Risen Jesus, whom they do not recognize, walks beside them. They talk to him about what transpired in the last few days. Jesus explains the scriptures to them. They ask Jesus (whom they still don’t recognize) to stop and have dinner. When he does, Jesus takes bread, blesses it, breaks it and gives it away. When he does that gesture he did so many times before, they recognize him.

Then Mary, a great preacher, really gets into it. She proclaims “That’s not the end of the story! No sooner do they recognize the Risen Christ…then Jesus vanishes. We may have some problems with the biology of that statement but let’s not let that blind us to the theology of it. What the Evangelist, Luke, is telling us here is that once the moment of insight has been received around the table, the action is no longer around the table. The action is somewhere else. ‘That same hour they got up and returned to Jerusalem.’ They left the safety and familiarity and nourishment and comfort of their table fellowship in Emmaus; and returned to the riskiness and complexity and even barrenness and challenge of Jerusalem. The disciples couldn’t stay in Emmaus, lifting their glasses and saying to each other, ‘Wow! Have we ever had a profound religious experience!’ No! The experience required they risk themselves in sharing it with others; that they go back to Jerusalem not just to tell the truth, but to do the truth – not just to share their experience of the Risen Jesus; but to continue his mission and ministry in the world with those whom the world cares least about: the poor, the oppressed, the sick, the friendless and the needy.”

Jesus, who is constantly on the move, has told us where he will be next. He makes it so clear in Matthew 25. I don’t need to read it. It is already in your soul. “When I was hungry…” “When I was in prison...”

Jesus, who appears as the Risen Christ more often in John’s Gospel than any other, tells us in that Gospel that the apostle, Thomas, the one who doubts a spiritual experience that does not include the wounded of this earth, is right. Jesus is taking his wounds and all the wounded of this earth with him. To go where Jesus is means losing a life we love and embracing the life of a wounded world. That is a whole new love. It is God’s love for us and for our neighbor.

Perhaps, that is how we can come to an understanding of what “hate your life in this world means.” Maybe, Jesus did mean it literally. Think about some of the life of this world. It is described in such raw honesty in the Litany of Penitence on Ash Wednesday.

We confess to you Lord “our exploitation of other people.” Don’t we hate that?

“Our blindness to human need and suffering, and indifference to injustice and cruelty.” Don’t we hate that?

“Our waste and pollution of your creation, and our lack of concern for those who come after us.” Don’t we hate that?

Yes, we do and “it ain’t no sin to be glad we are alive” – alive in Christ who is letting the “whole world know that things which were cast down are being raised up, and things which had grown old are being made new.”
At the end of this service, we will continue the long-standing tradition – that we started last year – of completing the journey we began on Ash Wednesday. The journey that began with a great truth “Remember you are dust and to dust you shall return.” We will be anointed ("Christed") with the other half of that truth. “Remember love is always stronger than death, and unto that love you have now returned.”

And, that love will do nothing less than bring about a kingdom of mercy, compassion and hope. Amen.

+Doug
I’m writing this blog from Oklahoma City where 230 of us (including 33 of my brother and sister bishops) have gathered to bring an awareness to the epidemic of violence in our society. That sounds so shallow – “bring an awareness.” But Jesus himself reminds us that awareness is powerful. In the gospels, we hear Jesus say “look”, “be alert”, “stay awake” far more than he says “love.” (And he says “love” a lot.) We have become immune to violence. 30,000 people in the United States die every year of gun violence. Another estimated 100,000 are shot every year, many of whom will carry permanent injuries and others suffer from different types of violence. We paid attention for a little while after the massacre at Sandy Hook, but then our immunity set in again. This humble conference could be a new beginning of awareness and action. The Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby, said this morning: “I think this conference has a sense of birthing about it, of an impulse of the Spirit.”

There have been Spirit-filled presentations that have raised my awareness. Eugene Sutton, Bishop of Maryland, started his talk by singing “Come by here, my Lord, come by here. Someone’s dying Lord, come by here.” He told us the purpose of this conference: “The Episcopal Church aims to model at this gathering a civil and respectful conversation about violence in general and gun violence in particular – a dialogue that our society has not been able to accomplish.” Sutton took apart the “mythology of violence.” He traced its roots to “the unchecked human need for control that arises out of fear of a chaotic and unsafe world.” He reminded us that “the agenda of God is not to control but to love.” Sutton stressed the power of “soul force” that was evoked by Dr. Martin Luther King – a “soul force” that changed our country. Read the full text of Bishop’s Sutton’s inspiring address here: http://episcopaldigitalnetwork.com/ens/2014/04/10/maryland-bishop-eugene-sutton-challenging-the-mythology-of-violence/.

I thought Archbishop Justin Welby was simply coming by to “bring greetings” as visiting dignitaries often do. I was wrong. Welby gave an in-depth theological presentation about the nature of humanity and of God, the addiction of violence, what forgiveness and redemption actually mean. It could have been an entire seminary course on “theological anthropology.”

Welby is no flower child. He is not a pacifist (and I believe we need the witness of pacifists). He travels throughout the world and he has seen the horrible things human beings can do to one another. According to Welby, “Violence is intrinsic to being human, and I have to say in particular to being human and male, or human and powerful, over against minorities of all kinds.” He spoke about the addiction of violence and how we become hardened by it, referring to a nation at war who said “at first we fought like humans, then we fought like animals and finally we fought like demons.” Welby asked “what is all this violence doing to our soul?” Welby finds hope in a “redeemed humanity” - saved by Jesus who takes up the Cross and walks with the poor, “preferring their cry to that of the powerful.” Read the Archbishop’s speech here: http://www.archbishopofcanterbury.org/articles.php/5295/archbishop-justins-speech-at-the-reclaiming-the-gospel-of-peace-conference-oklahoma-usa. It is long but worth your time.

The bishops had lunch with the Archbishop in a closed session. That means what was discussed there is confidential. Without breaking that confidentiality, I can say that next to him and discussed soccer instead of baseball. And I can say he reminded us that we are not only the bishops of our dioceses (as important as that work is) but we are also bishops of the Church throughout the world. We bring our local experience to the world and the experience of the world to our local dioceses. It is one of the ministries of a bishop to be that link. My inclination is to focus on what I am called to do locally in Western Massachusetts but I hope I am growing in my understanding of what it means to be a bishop for the whole Church.

There are many presenters and workshops. Addressing violence is multi-dimensional. One of those groups is BPeace – a ministry sponsored by our sister diocese in Massachusetts that is collaborating with other organizations to create jobs for young people (violence goes up dramatically among unemployed urban teens in the summer), addressing on the ground community issues and advocating for better laws. We have a lot to learn from them in our part of the Commonwealth.

The tone of this gathering is the solemn reality of the world of violence in which we live. And there is an energized, Spirited hope for the world God wants for us, already given to us in the non-violent faithfulness of Jesus. In our souls and in our Church, we hold both together.

+Doug
NOTE: Bishop Fisher is grateful to all who have made use of the “comments” function of this blog. This function has been disabled to enable a larger conversation on our diocesan Facebook “page” and in our Facebook “group.” We hope you will continue to share your responses and reflections there.
Reflections on Holy Week
April 7, 2014

I don’t want to rush the holy season of Lent to a close, but I am writing about Holy Week in this blog, a week early, because in the last days of Lent I will be in Oklahoma City for the conference RECLAIMING THE GOSPEL OF PEACE: An Episcopal Gathering to Challenge the Epidemic of Violence. I will write a blog from there about the conference. Although I think the main themes and theology of Holy Week will be in abundance at Reclaiming the Gospel of Peace, I want to devote a special blog to this very special week.

On Ash Wednesday we told one another a great truth: “Remember you are dust and to dust you shall return.” It is a great truth but not the whole truth. At the Cathedral on Holy Tuesday the clergy will renew our vows in a service open to all. We will anoint one another with oil on the forehead where the ashes were imposed and say “Love is always stronger than death, and unto that love you have now returned.” It is the other half of the great truth.

Throughout Holy Week, I invite you to see the awesome strength of that love unfold in the life of Jesus. A love that is stronger than the violence and the powers of this world. A love that is stronger than death. A love that includes and does not exclude. A love that reconciles and heals. A love that changes the lives of you and me. Notice too, during this week, how Jesus’ sacrifice is not intended to change God’s mind about humanity. It is about changing humanity’s mind about God.

Here are the briefest of reflections on the days of Holy Week. The blessed preachers of Western Massachusetts will have a lot more to say and with much more depth – as will the Holy Spirit speaking in the soul of each of you.

**Palm Sunday** — On this day, as Jesus enters Jerusalem humbly on a donkey, Pontius Pilate enters in grand style with his horses and heavily armed troops. Pilate is there to “keep the peace” at a time when the city is overflowing with those who are gathering for the Passover. He will keep that peace by crucifying anyone who might oppose the Roman Empire. Two parades. One offers a new way of living and creating a world of mercy, compassion and hope. Another parade celebrating power for some and oppression for most.

**Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday** — In these days Jesus teaches in the Temple. Perhaps the whole key to the drama of Holy Week and why Jesus becomes so dangerous to the Roman authorities and the Temple leadership lies in the “riot in the Temple.” Many theologians have written insightfully about this event. One book I recommend highly is Rabbi Jesus by Bruce Chilton. The moneychangers had replaced the area of the Temple where the Gentiles could worship. That is why Jesus screams “My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations, but you have made it a den of robbers!” On an even deeper level, Jesus was challenging the whole “sacrificial system” of the Temple which was intended to appease a God who did not need appeasing. And it avoided the divine calls of their own prophets down through the centuries who proclaimed “Is this not the fast I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke?”

**Maundy Thursday** — Here is a theology of the Last Supper that I have not read anywhere else. So don’t tell the bishop. Could it be at the Last Supper, as Jesus gave away his Body and his Blood, he was bringing about a great escape? Oh yes, Jesus really died the next day. But before Pilate and his executioners killed him, he had already given himself away. Jesus had given himself to us- in every way- Body and Blood. His mission would continue to live even as he died because now we are the Body of Christ; we are the ones who are to do what he did. Pilate could not kill the mission of Jesus.

**Good Friday** — The theologies of the Cross have many dimensions. One dimension I heard in a sermon by The Rev. John Osgood several years ago. He said “the reason we spend hours and hours praying before the Cross, is to instill in us that when we see the Cross we see suffering. That means when we see suffering, we will see the Cross.” In other words, in the suffering of this world, we will see Christ present. We will see Christ; the one who did not run from the cross but embraced it so there will be no place that is ever God-forsaken.
Easter — Here is the life changing reality that with God nothing is impossible. As our Presiding Bishop has said “The Resurrection of Jesus Christ is about the eternity of hope.” It is the eternal “Yes!” of God to all that is and will be. Love is stronger than death.

Remember Easter is not a day but a whole season. I encourage you to transform “Low Sunday” into “Momentum Sunday.” Bring the choir back. Keep the liturgy highly spirited. Consider having an adult education class on Sunday morning about the basics of prayer and the varieties of prayer for those who might have come to church on Easter for the first time in a long time. Have ministry tables in the church hall to provide information about the many things your church does. Don’t slow down when the Resurrection invites us all to New Life in Christ.

Our Book of Common Prayer provides a very helpful instruction for what to do during Lent. But there is no such instruction for the holy season of Easter. Here is one I wrote a few years ago. Use it if it is helpful.

“Dear People of God: In the weeks after the Resurrection of Jesus, the apostles overcame their fears, and experienced forgiveness, peace, joy, amazement, and hope. Their hearts burned within them as they understood the scriptures in a whole new way. They ran from place to place, telling the Good News. They were filled with New Life.

“I invite you, therefore, in the name of the Church, to a Holy Easter Season. Take into your souls the words of the angels: ‘do not be afraid.’ Face your fears. Forgive someone – perhaps even yourself. Allow yourself to be amazed at what God is doing. Read the scriptures and find a God of love. Go on an adventure. Try new things. Get creative. Use your imagination. Expand your horizons. Be joyful – God has a hold on you and will never let go. Tell others the Good News. Practice mercy, compassion and hope. Praise God. Amen.”

+Doug
Some reflections from the House of Bishops…

March 24, 2014

The House of Bishops 2014

Camp Allen
AWAKEN YOUR SPIRIT IN THE PINEY WOODS

I'm writing this blog from the House of Bishops meeting in Camp Allen, Texas (an hour from Houston). The HOB meets for a week every March and every September. Although I always leave our diocese reluctantly with many things “left undone”, I am always grateful once I arrive to be in a supportive community of leaders who care passionately about the Gospel and the church. There is a lot of experience, wisdom, vision, courage and prayer in this House. I am blessed to be part of it.

The March gathering is more of a retreat than the September meeting. Each day starts with Morning Prayer and then a 30 minute reflection by one of the bishops. That reflection leads into a morning of silent prayer. After lunch there are presentations and discussions about key issues facing our society and our church. Those discussions continue after the Eucharist and dinner. In addition to the times the whole House is in session, there are meetings of particular groups that happen at meal time or during the few free times. I have been at meetings with the bishops from Province One, my ordination class, Bishops for a Just World (our group that is taking young adults to Washington to teach them how to lobby for issues around domestic poverty), and Bishops Against Gun Violence – to name just a few of the groups I belong to. And we all have lists of clergy from other dioceses who are seeking new calls and we seek out the bishops of those clergy and ask about them to see if they might be called to particular churches in our diocese.

Now that you have a glimpse as to what this week is like, I’ll share a few random reflections about moments that spoke to me so far.

Mary Glasspool, suffragan bishop of Los Angeles, gave a compelling sermon on the Road to Emmaus story. I can’t do this justice in a summary, but here is the direction Mary took with the text. You know the story. After the death of Jesus and reports of his resurrection, two disciples walk dejectedly away from Jerusalem. The Risen Jesus, whom they do not recognize, walks beside them. They talk to him about what transpired in the last few days. Jesus explains the scriptures to them. They ask Jesus (whom they still don’t recognize) to stop and have dinner. When he does, Jesus takes bread, blesses it, breaks it and gives it away. When he does that gesture he did so many times before, they recognize him.

Then Mary, a great preacher, really gets into it. She proclaims “That’s not the end of the story! No sooner do they recognize the Risen Christ…then Jesus vanishes. We may have some problems with the biology of that statement but let’s not let that blind us to the theology of it. What the Evangelist Luke is telling us here is that once the moment of insight has been received around the table, the action is no longer around the table. The action is somewhere else. ‘That same hour they got up and returned to Jerusalem.’ They left the safety and familiarity and nourishment and comfort of their table fellowship in Emmaus; and returned to the riskiness and complexity and even barrenness and challenge of Jerusalem. The disciples couldn’t stay in Emmaus, lifting their glasses and saying to each other, ‘Wow! Have we ever had a profound religious experience!’ No! The experience required they risk themselves in sharing it with others; that they go back to Jerusalem not just to tell the truth, but to do the truth. Not just to share their experience of the Risen Jesus; but to continue his mission and ministry in the world with those whom the world cares least about: the poor, the oppressed, the sick, the friendless and the needy.”

I will remember this sermon for a long time.

Today we used Eucharistic Prayer “C” at the liturgy. You know the one that starts with profound praise for creation. As much as I love this prayer, I was always disturbed by the line “You (God) made us rulers of creation.” I never thought humans ruled creation, but I was never imaginative enough to figure out another way to say it. Our presider today, Bishop Chilton Knudsen, prayed “You made us the servants of creation.” That works.

Speaking of creation, Bishop Scott Baker told a story of being with cattle ranchers in his diocese of Nebraska last summer during that terrible drought. They were gathered for an outdoor meal after a liturgy – a liturgy in which they once again prayed fervently for rain. At the meal all the talk was about what harm the drought was causing to their herds. Then
suddenly a few drops of rain started to fall. Then, more and more. Finally, a deluge. Scott stood up to bring his dinner inside but he noticed no one was moving. They just sat there, soaking in the answer to their prayers. They were being drenched but they did not care about that. They needed to take in this moment. So the Bishop sat back down with them.

One last random reflection. I was in a discussion with a small group of bishops, including Rob Wright of Atlanta and he was talking about his recent clergy retreat in which the director was Martin Smith, the acclaimed author of spirituality books. He described how Martin Smith told everyone at the event that we Christians are often good at doing crisis counseling. When someone is hurting, we have no fear at talking about God’s presence and seeking out God’s wisdom. But what about having spirituality conversations when there is no crisis? In the midst of everyday life? To use the words of John Wesley, do we ever say “how goes it with your soul?”

I encourage us to have those conversations. Ask someone “how goes it with your soul?” We are invited into a depth of living. And in that depth, I believe we find a dynamic God who is leading us into a kingdom of mercy, compassion and hope.

Back to the House of Bishops…

+Doug
ASH WEDNESDAY – March 5, 2014

Lent is a Christian invention. It is not mentioned in the Bible. But it is ancient – going back about 1900 years, when the early Church used these forty days to prepare people for baptism. As Christian as this day is, I think a powerful way to start Lent is with a prayer from The Reform Jewish Prayerbook. It is about the Sabbath Day but it could be about the Christian Ash Wednesday. When I say, “Adonai” in the prayer, that is a name for God.

“Disturb us, Adonai, ruffle us from our complacency. Make us dissatisfied. Dissatisfied with the peace of ignorance, the quietude which arises from shunning the horror, the defeat, the bitterness and the poverty, physical and spiritual, of humans.

“Shock us, Adonai, deny to us the false Shabbat which gives us the delusions of satisfaction amid a world of war and hatred.

“Wake us, O God, and shake us from the sweet and sad poignancies rendered by half-forgotten melodies and rubric prayers of yesteryears. Make us know that the border of the sanctuary is not the border of living and the walls of Your temples are not shelters from the winds of truth, justice and reality.

“Disturb us, O God, and vex us. Let not Your Shabbat be a day of torpor and slumber. Let it be a time to be stirred and spurred to action.”

What could be more shocking, more disturbing, than having ashes smudged into your forehead and hearing the words “Remember you are dust and to dust you shall return”? This is not an ordinary day. This is not an ordinary liturgy – if any of them ever are. This is a wakeup call.

But how? How does it wake us up? I think Anna Quindlen, a gifted and wise author of our time, knows the answer. She tells us about her freshman year in college. She was having a fine time as freshmen often do. Then she was notified that her mother was ill with a fatal disease. Anna took a year off from college to be with her. Her mother died and Anna went back to school but she had changed. She saw with new eyes. She saw classmates who were bored, people who felt nothing was important. She saw kids who drank and took drugs to put some excitement into a dull life. Anna wanted to scream at them: “How can you be bored? Don’t you know every minute of life is precious? Don’t you know how terribly important life is? Don’t you know how blessed you are? Don’t you know life is a gift? Don’t waste the gift!”

No sooner do we get the wake-up call of “Remember you are dust and to dust you will return” then we get another one. We get the Litany of Penitence. Our Book of Common Prayer is so flexible, so user friendly. We have prayers in that book that are “suitable for various occasions” or “for optional use, when desired.” Not true for the Litany of Penitence. The words in this litany are so strong, so shocking, that we only say it once a year. It is all we can handle.

Let’s look at some of this litany. It is on page 267 of the Prayer Book. Go to it if you dare.

“We have not loved you with our whole heart, and mind, and strength.” You told us to, but we did not do it. These prayers are so honest. They are not what I call “Pete Rose” apologies. You remember Pete Rose – he had more hits than anyone in the history of baseball. But they won’t let him in the Hall of Fame because he bet on baseball games. He has admitted to it but like this: “I’m sorry if my betting on baseball games offended you.” The Litany just says it. Lord, this is what we have done. This is what we have not done even though you, Lord, could not have been clearer.

The list goes on. We have not forgiven others. We have been proud, hypocritical and impatient. If proud and hypocritical does not get us, impatience surely will.

There is a lot here. Let your spirit go to where it is drawn. But here are the ones that get me every time. “For our blindness to human need and suffering, and our indifference to injustice and cruelty.” And “our waste and pollution of your creation, and lack of concern for those who come after us.”

On December 1, 2012, in front of all of you at the Mass Mutual Center, I was asked by a panel of the bishops who would ordain me: “Will you be merciful to all, show compassion to the poor and strangers, and defend those who have no helper?” And I said, with all the Spirit within me: “I will, for the sake of Jesus Christ.”

There is not a day that goes by that I do not think about that vow. And, every once in a while, I do more than think about it. That is why I’m drawn to these particular prayers in the Litany.
Let’s line up a fact next to each of those two prayers in the shocking Litany of Penitence.

“For our blindness to human need and suffering, and our indifference to injustice.” One in five children in Western Massachusetts is “food insecure” – which means they do not always know where to find their next meal. We got to that number because “food insecure” households have doubled in the last five years.

“Our waste and pollution of your creation, and the lack of concern for those who come after us.” We make this confession at a time when Southern California is drying up, England is flooding and the Midwest is in a record setting deep freeze. Our President has said “climate change is a fact.”

Those facts do shake us up. And they might shake us into action. And as it does, let's go back to the words that started this shake up: “Remember you are dust and to dust you will return.”

It is important to remember that but there are other things God wants us to remember. On the last night of his life, Jesus told us to remember, to do something in his memory. Gather together and take and eat the bread that is his Body and drink the wine that is his Blood. Jesus is giving us his very life. He is holding nothing back. He is giving us the life of God. With God, all things become possible.

And there is another “remember.” In Matthew’s Gospel, the very last words are from Jesus ascending saying “Remember I am with you always.” On those days when life’s challenges, big and small, seem like too much we can remember that promise.

And the last “remember” comes from a sermon I gave here last Ash Wednesday. Remember what God can do with dust. In the great mythic story of Genesis we read: “Then the Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being.” Dust is not a problem for God. Dust is the opportunity for new life. God does great things with dust.

Karl Rahner, a great theologian in the last century reflected on our beginning in dust and our return to dust and concluded: “In these words we are told everything we are: nothingness that is filled with eternity, death that teems with life, futility that redeems, dust that is God’s life forever.”

May this day shake us up. And at the same time may it fill us with hope by reminding us of our unity with God who is always with us, always leading us into New Life. Amen.

+Doug
Psalm 22/23 and Lent/Easter

February 27, 2014

Lent is late this year but coming soon. People get ready! It can be a powerful season in our journey with the Living God. But what would happen if we did not treat Lent as an isolated season of self-examination and repentance, followed by the gift of New Life that is Easter? Forty days in the wilderness and then the Promised Land. No sugar for six weeks and then chocolate. What would happen if we looked at the seasons as a continuum? We could call it Lent/Easter.

Let me provide an example of this more holistic approach. It is a way to read two psalms that seem very different and are most often prayed in isolation. That is Psalm 22 and Psalm 23. When was the last time you heard those psalms read together?

Psalm 22 is written by a person in extreme distress. “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” This prayer will later come to Jesus as he suffers on the cross. The psalmist feels like he is “encircled by bulls,” and then later “by evil doers.” Those evil doers “gloat” over him and take his clothes and “cast lots” for them. He feels the distress in his body. His “bones are out of joint” and “my mouth is dried up like a potsherd, and my tongue sticks to my jaws, you lay me in the dust of death.”

But the psalmist continues to trust in God despite all dire circumstances. He keeps praising God. He keeps looking for deliverance.

I think Psalm 23 is the response to Psalm 22. It is the other side of the totality that is God and is life in God. The God that is far away in verse one of Psalm 22 is as present as a shepherd to his flock. “The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want.” The one who was “in the dust of death” is now lying “down in green pastures.” The one who experienced gloating from evildoers, now has a “table “prepared “in the presence of my enemies.” The one with the dry mouth has a cup that “overflows.”

Psalm 22 and Psalm 23 express the totality that is life. What holds them together is the faithfulness of God. God is present even when God seems absent to us. There is a reality deeper and stronger than the painful experiences of Psalm 22. Having lived it all, the pain of life and the joy of life, the Psalmist emerges with a confidence that goodness and mercy shall follow him forever because now he knows he is in God’s house. The secret is he always was.

I saw Psalm 22/23 lived out a few years ago in a news report from Haiti. It was one week after the earthquake that killed tens of thousands and destroyed so much of the country. Workers shifting through the rubble of a collapsed building found a woman still alive. She had a broken leg and she was so dehydrated that she could not speak. But as her rescuers carried her out on a stretcher, they saw she was mouthing the words of a hymn of praise to God. They knew the hymn so they started singing it aloud with her. It was a moment of Resurrection.

But was God only there in that moment? In that Psalm 23 moment? Or was God also with her in those seven days when she lay buried in rubble, screaming herself hoarse pleading for help? In that Psalm 22 moment?

Our faith tells us that God was there throughout. In the pain and the joy. In what felt like death and in the rescue.

Something tells me that if we can hold Lent and Easter together, we will gain greater insight into this reality and into the transforming relationship we have with the Living God. It is worth exploring. And I will in another blog.

My prayers for you this Lent/Easter.

+Doug
February 19, 2014

Sermon preached at Christ Church Cathedral, Springfield, MA February 9, 2014

It has been a long, tough winter. But I bring good news: baseball’s spring training starts this week!

It is good to be at the Cathedral. I’m so grateful to the choir who came out on the coldest night of the year a few weeks ago to sing at the Christian Unity service. And it is a joy to work with the Cathedral staff and Jim and Tom.

The Episcopal Church has this wonderful book: *Holy Women, Holy Men: Celebrating the Saints*. Each saint gets his or her own day. A couple of days ago it was “The Martyrs of Japan” and the next day it was “Cornelius the Centurion.” But we come to today, February 9, and it is blank. There is no saint for today. God is giving us an opportunity here. I say we make February 9 the feastday for a new saint—your dean, Jim Munroe. What do you think? (loud applause). Ok, I’m at the House of Bishops next month and will make that happen.

In today’s gospel we hear Jesus say, “You are the light of the world! A city built on a hill cannot be hid.” Christ Church Cathedral – this is *your* gospel passage. Up here on Chestnut Street, with the city laid out before us, you offer the city a whole new way of being. A revolutionary way of being. The way that is Jesus’ way.

Jesus invites us to a life that is meaningful and whole, a life of passion and hope. Let’s attempt to understand this by way of a contrast. Johann Wolfgang Von Goethe wrote a famous play called *Faust*. In that play the devil describes himself as the “spirit that says NO. And that correctly: for all things that are, come to an end and better there should never have been anything. I am the spirit that says NO to all possibility. Is there anything good? NO. Anything true? NO. Any ground of hope? NO. Any possibility of love? NO. Any possibility of forgiveness? NO. Any value to anything that exists? NO. To me? NO. To you? NO. It’s all garbage and therefore better that it never should have existed.”

Jesus says come to me and I will show you a different way of being. He lays out that way in *The Sermon on the Mount*, a sermon that takes up all of chapters five, six and seven in Matthew’s Gospel. Matthew writes it as if it is one sermon but it probably wasn’t. We know that because Jesus was “full of compassion.” He would have known that people don’t like long sermons. Matthew probably gathered up many statements by Jesus and put them all in one place.

Let’s look at parts of three sections of *The Sermon on the Mount* right now.

The Sermon begins with the Beatitudes. One of those Beatitudes is “blessed are the poor.” How odd. How can the poor be blessed? Many scholars say that the word Jesus uses throughout the Beatitudes for blessed is really “honored.” That is even more confusing. How can the poor be “honored”?

The societies of those days were “honor/shame” societies. “Honored” meant you were in the community. “Shame” meant you were considered to be “outside” the community, even if you were living right there. Despite the outcry of the Prophets through the centuries – particularly Isaiah and Jeremiah and Amos—the poor were considered “outside” the community. Jesus reverses this. He says, “No, the poor are honored—they belong to us. Their problems are our problems.” Jesus is being consistent with his cousin John the Baptist who said, “If you have two coats, give one to the person who has none.” In other words, get the “two-coat people” into the same room with the “no-coat people.”

In the United States of America right now, the gap between the rich and the poor is greater than any time in history. And politicians never talk about the poor. But at the Cathedral we do. This is a place where “two-coat people” meet “no-coat people.” This is a place where the poor are honored – where they belong.

“Blessed are they that mourn, for they will be comforted.” Notice Jesus does not say those that mourn will be comfortable. Mourning, grieving is hard work. It is not comfortable. The word comfort comes from the word “fortify.” Those who mourn will be fortified. They will be given resources. By who? By us. By the Jesus community that says, “You belong to us. We will fortify you.”

“Blessed are the meek for they will inherit the earth.” When we think of “meek” don’t we also think of “mild”? Meek and mild. That’s a nice alliteration but those words don’t go together. “Meek” appears in another place in the Bible—in the Book of Numbers when Moses is described as meek. Let’s try an experiment. Close your eyes for a moment and think of Moses…Got an image? How many of you thought of Charlton Heston from the movie *The Ten Commandments*?

Meek is not mild. Meek is “power under control.” It is using power for the common good and not for personal gain. Not for ego. Not for privilege. Meek is power used for others. The followers of Jesus are called to be a force for good in this world.

And notice the meek do not possess the earth. They “inherit” it. To inherit something is to receive it as a gift, to be blessed by it. We do not own the earth. God does. We belong to it, not the other way around.
That's the way Jesus starts the Sermon on the Mount. Let's look at another part of this really long sermon.

Jesus gives a series of exhortations. One of them is: “If anyone forces you to go one mile, go two.” We commonly rephrase that to “go the extra mile.” Try even harder to help someone who needs us. And that is a good thing. But it misses the revolutionary, new way; that is the way of Jesus.

Notice the words: “if anyone forces you to go one mile.” Some translations say: “if you are pressed into service.” Let's look at the context. In those days, Israel was occupied by the Roman army. Roman soldiers would walk through the city and the villages. But they had all this heavy stuff with them: armor, helmets, swords, shields. And the weather in Israel is hot. Soldiers would often force the Jewish peasants to carry their equipment. They could just pull someone off the street and command them to carry their things. It did not matter if you were going home to your family or off to work, you had to stop what you were doing and go with the soldiers.

The Romans were known for their cruelty – think of the Roman invention of crucifixion—but even they put limits on the behavior of the soldiers. They could make peasants carry their stuff but only for one mile. By law, they had to let the peasant go after one mile.

Now picture the scene. The peasant is laboring under the weight of the equipment, walking along with the soldier. They get to one mile and the Roman says, “Ok, put the equipment down and get out of here.” But the peasant keeps going. The soldier shouts, “Hey, put the stuff down now!” But the peasant continues. Now the Roman realizes he could be in trouble for breaking the law. So now he starts pleading with the peasant: “Please, please put the stuff down! I’m going to get in trouble. Please!”

The Roman had all the power. But now the peasant has the power. Jesus has caused a great reversal. It is revolutionary. It is what we call in the Baptismal Covenant “the dignity of every human being.”

Ok, last part of the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus gives us a series of sayings that start, “You have heard it said…” And concludes with “but I say to you...” Each time Jesus gives us another dimension, a deeper way of seeing life.

Let's do a 2014 version of “you have heard it said…but I say to you...”

You have heard it said “it is what it is.” But I say to you Jesus transforms everything. Nothing is what it is. Bread and wine become Body and Blood. Sinners become forgiven. Outcasts become welcome. Strangers become friends. Scarcity becomes abundance. The fearful become courageous. Those who have, give away. The oblivious become aware. The broken become whole. The dead live.

You have heard it said: “The Episcopal Church is in decline.” But I say to you, “We are just getting warmed up.”

That is your message. That is what this city on the hill, this Cathedral, represents and embodies.

I will leave you with one last story. It is from Carl Jung, the great psychotherapist. After counseling a man for a long time, Dr. Jung said to him, “There is no more I can do for you. What you really need in your life is God.” The man said, “Dr. Jung, where do I find God?” To which Jung replied, “I’m not sure. But if you find people that are passionate about God, and spend some time with them, perhaps you will find God there.”

You, the people of Christ Church Cathedral, are passionate about God. May others find God here. Amen.

+Doug
Proclaim the Word Boldly and Creatively

January 31, 2014

Saint Augustine described preaching as “Mystery speaking to Mystery about Mystery.” It is the mystery of the preacher speaking to the mystery of the listener about the Mystery of God. What happens in all that is up to the Holy Spirit.

This blog is about preaching. But it is not just for preachers. It is also for all of you who listen to sermons. Because the mystery that is you is one third of Augustine’s communication cycle. As a community being formed by the Word, let’s reflect on these thoughts about preaching from someone who has been doing this for 34 years and is still a beginner.

One day my son Geoff told me with delight something he had read from his favorite author, Kurt Vonnegut. He said “Dad, according to Kurt Vonnegut people don’t go to church for the sermon. You know why they go?” I braced myself for this answer. “They go to daydream about God.”

Put together Saint Augustine and Kurt Vonnegut and we have a plan for successful preaching. The preacher, guided by the Holy Spirit and a lot of Scripture study, needs to provide a launching pad where the congregation (in all their rich variety) can daydream about God. I received that advice in 1980 from a wise Irish priest whom I served with at St. James Seaford on Long Island. Fresh from seminary, where I was told to make one point in a sermon, stay with it all the way to the end and don’t distract the congregation with too many themes, and trying to find my voice as a 25-year-old priest, Diarmuid McGann said to me “Doug, you need to create lots of places in the sermon where people can jump off and pray. If you say something in the first minute that leads someone to go into his soul and pray, and he doesn’t hear another word of the sermon, God used you to good purpose. Preaching is not about what you want to accomplish, it is about what God wants to do.” I remember that every time I prepare a sermon and every time I preach it.

With that in mind, I'll offer several reflections about preaching with the hope you will jump off at any time and daydream about God.

I love this description about preaching from Walter Brueggemann in his recent book Disruptive Grace: “We preachers are summoned to get up and utter a sub-version of reality, an alternative vision of reality that says another way of life in this world is not only possible but is peculiarly mandated and peculiarly valid… (This subversion intends) to empower a community of sub-versives who are determined to practice their lives according to a different way of imagining.”

When Brueggemann writes of “subversion” and “a community of subversives,” he is not calling for a 1960s type anarchy. What he means is an alternative to what is. A common phrase of our time is “it is what it is.” For followers of Jesus, nothing is what it is. In the presence of God, bread and wine become body and blood, scarcity becomes abundance, brokenness becomes wholeness, sin becomes forgiven, the poor are lifted up, the meek get everything, the hopeless become hopeful, the dead live. Preaching offers these alternatives. We don’t have to make decisions based on fear – we can subvert that by making decisions based on faith. We don’t have to make decisions based on cynicism, we can make decisions based on hope. That is true for our personal lives and for our life as a society. (We make all kinds of decisions as a society based on cynicism and fear. E.g. The only hope for a city like Springfield is casinos because we can’t possibly imagine another economic solution. The only interpretation of the Second Amendment possible is unlimited access to all the guns anyone could ever want. There is no other possibility.) Preaching is offering another possibility to a community that embraces those possibilities.

I try to engage the congregation (and keep them awake) by offering a variety of interpretations of a Bible passage. A hundred years ago when I was in seminary, one of my Bible profs used to teach by saying “a majority of theologians say this about this passage…but a strong minority say this…and another interpretation which is way out there….” My approach is to offer it all and let the Holy Spirit lead where it will. Give the listener permission to decide “this is where I see God working.”

Rabbis have a wonderfully creative way of approaching scripture. It is called midrash. It is their way of expounding and expanding the text. It is similar to what happens in our staff meetings when Canon to the Ordinary Pam Mott says “I wonder…” Here is an example. We all know the story of the parting of the Red Sea. Charlton Heston (whoops – I mean Moses) lifts his arms and the sea parts and the Hebrews run to safety. But midrash speculates that maybe Moses lifted his arms and nothing happened. But one fearful but faithful Hebrew stepped into the water and it parted a little bit. And then he or she took another step and it parted a little more. On and on until everyone got to the other side and freedom. It was not all at once. It was one step at a time. Doesn't that sound closer to real life? Perhaps in a sermon we could play with the possibilities.

Jesus taught with stories. Good sermons often include good stories. But they need to connect to the scripture passage. Sometimes I have told stories in a sermon because they were powerful stories that inspired me. But the other dimension of the mystery – the listeners – would tell me they loved the story but “how did it connect to the scriptures of the day?” Sometimes the connection happens in my mind but not in the communication. Or I am using a story that does not fit.
Last week I was preaching at St. Paul’s in Stockbridge and it was their feastday so I preached about St. Paul. I picked a few key passages from his many writings of wisdom. One was Romans chapter 8 “what can separate us from the love of God?” The answer is nothing. But how to illustrate that? I chose a story that I hope fit the moment. Here it is: When Bobby Fischer, the great chess champion, was a young boy his mother took him to an art museum. At one point in their tour they came upon a painting called “Checkmate.” It showed the Devil playing chess with an elderly man. The Devil is looking gleeful and self-satisfied. The elderly man is worn out and despondent. Clearly, the Devil has him in “checkmate” – the game is over.

Young Bobby stared and stared at the painting. Finally, his mother gave up and continued her tour. Half an hour later she came back and Bobby was still looking at the chessboard. He said “Mom, the old man still has one more move left!”

Nothing can separate us from the love of God. Nothing. There is always one more move left.

I hope that story worked. That’s all up to The Mystery.

Just like sermons, blogs should not be too long. So I will end this even though I have a lot more to say about sermons after having proclaimed thousands of them, some good and some not, depending on how the mystery of the listener and the Mystery that is God went to work on them, far beyond my control and plans and intentions.

You know what the definition of an optimist is? Someone who hears the preacher say “in conclusion” and believes him. Here is one more reflection.

The personality of the preacher is part of the embodiment of the message. I have many favorite preachers. One of them is Michael Curry, bishop of North Carolina. If you have never heard Bishop Curry preach, search for him on line and listen. You will be inspired. I wish I could preach like Michael Curry. But I can’t. I don’t have his personality. And for sure I cannot break out into song in the midst of a sermon without emptying the room. All I can do is work and pray hard on the art and discipline of preaching the Gospel and let the Holy Spirit do what the Holy Spirit does. And the mystery that is me will speak to the mystery that is you about the Mystery that is God and incredible things can happen.

That is my prayer for all preachers and for all who sit there and listen and for all that God does in that interaction. May we all hear a sub-version of reality that creates a community of sub-verse that builds a kingdom of mercy, compassion and hope.

These are just a few thoughts from my perspective. What do you need from a sermon?

+Doug
We Shall Overcome

January 29, 2014

Yesterday I was in Boston at a meeting that brought together church leaders with environmental activists who are working for creation care and against the forces that drive climate change. It was a great meeting. There was a lot of Spirit and an appreciation by all that just as the civil rights movement could not have happened without the churches, climate revival cannot happen without church involvement.

A brief piece of that discussion concerned the priority of climate work. Some felt that of all the social justice issues of our time, this is the most important because our future depends on it. But others (myself included) see all these issues as linked. We did not have the time in that meeting to discuss how they are linked. And I’m not sure how well I would do at articulating that position.

Today Pete Seeger died. And it dawned on me that he represents the link. For all his life Pete Seeger cared about a litany of causes. Over and over again he took the side of the working poor and farmworkers. He kept holding up to us a vision of world peace. Although he did not write We Shall Overcome, his version became the anthem of the civil rights movement. (He sang it to Dr. Martin Luther King Jr, and the next day Dr. King told him “that song really has a way of staying in your head, doesn’t it?”) For many years now, Seeger has embraced the environmental cause in spirit and in practice. His Hudson River Sloop Clearwater has educated thousands about creation and has been a major force in cleaning up the Hudson River. (A river I grew to love as I watched it flow by from West Point.) Why so many causes all held so passionately? Perhaps it was because Pete embraced life and that meant any diminishment of life for anyone anywhere grabbed his attention and his hope. This seems to reflect his approach to God. Although not a church goer, Pete described seeing God everywhere. (Pete did say he came from an “enormously Christian family.”)

I was blessed to meet Pete Seeger a few years ago when he was a speaker at the New York Diocese clergy retreat. What impressed me was how joyful he was. He radiated it. I have known many social justice activists in my life and like the rest of humanity they come in all varieties. Some engage causes with a sense of anger, perhaps because of an injustice they or a family member experienced. Some have a sense of despair as they don’t see any progress. Pete Seeger was all about joy – experienced in his own life, in his communities, in God’s creation. In his old age, Pete said he was never more optimistic.

When he led that retreat, of course he sang and led us in song. Pete unapologetically admitted that at this point in his life he sometimes would forget the words to songs. This happened once in a while when he was leading us. But many at that gathering knew the words, so when he would go silent, we would keep on singing. And Pete would smile that great Seeger smile.

Pete Seeger has died at a time when we need him more than ever. A time when income inequality is an enormous drain on our society. A time when the quality of life for the working poor is on the decline. A time when God’s creation needs our care more than urgently.

Now that Pete Seeger is silent, maybe it is our time to keep singing the songs of justice and hope. Joyfully.

+Doug
CHRISTIAN UNITY, VESTRIES and BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN

January 10, 2014

You might think by this title that I am going to try and connect Christian Unity and Vestries and Bruce Springsteen. And you might be intrigued by how that could happen. Sorry to disappoint but I’m going to write about each separately. The only connection lies in that they are all upcoming events you may want to put on your calendar.

CHRISTIAN UNITY. After the Second Vatican Council in the 1960s, there was great energy around ecumenism and “Christian unity.” Around 1980, however, much of this fervor had ended and an era began that some theologians have called “the ecumenical winter.” With some notable exceptions (e.g. Called to Common Mission—the Episcopal/Lutheran Concordat, several in-depth ecumenical dialogs, co-operation between churches on the local level, the wonderful work of the Massachusetts Council of Churches) there has been apathy around Christian Unity. I believe the ecumenical winter is thawing and giving way to a new season. Many of us are talking again and actively seeking ways to work together. One way to express this is by coming together in prayer during The Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. I hope some of you are having common celebrations of what our many traditions bring to the expression of Christ’s multi-dimensional ongoing life in the Spirit in this world. I invite you to two diocesan level gatherings. One is at our Christ Church Cathedral in Springfield on Wednesday, January 22 at 7pm. The Cathedral Choir and perhaps several other choirs will be there. Jim Hazelwood, ELCA bishop, will preach. Another gathering will be hosted by Assumption College in Worcester on Friday, January 24, also at 7 pm.

You are invited. And perhaps you could call friends from other churches and invite them, too. Maybe even drive to these liturgies together. Who knows what the Holy Spirit might do in those conversations.

VESTRIES. When I came to Western Massachusetts I was told Warden's and Vestry Day was a very big deal. Experiencing it for the first time last spring, I realized that was certainly true. A huge crowd of church leaders came together to learn from workshop presenters and one another. As always, the diocesan staff is working to make that day productive, inspiring and fun. Please mark your calendars for Saturday March 15 at the American International College. And tell newly elected wardens and treasurers that they are invited to a day for them on April 5. As a parish priest I had a deep appreciation for lay leadership. From where I am now, I can see how that leadership makes all the difference in how a church thrives, or doesn’t. We want our vestries to have all the resources they need to lead churches as Christ-centered communities of hope.

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN. During Lent it is traditional to have “Quiet Days.” You are invited to a Lenten Un-Quiet Day: Exploring the Vision and Inspiration of Bruce Springsteen on Saturday March 8th from 10 am – 2:30 pm at St. Mark’s Church in East Longmeadow. Our retreat leaders will be Springsteen fans Rich Simpson, Laura Everett (Executive Director of the Mass. Council of Churches and “Jersey Girl”) and myself.

In sermons I have often referred to “the prophet Bruce.” Certainly his rock and roll music is entertaining but it is also inspirational and deeply concerned with social justice. Sometimes his music is explicitly religious. Jesus Was an Only Son is all about Mary walking the way of the Cross with Jesus. My City of Ruins expresses the prayer: “Now with these hands I pray Lord. With these hands I pray for the strength Lord. With these hands I pray for the faith Lord.” And ends with the Resurrection proclamation: “Come on rise up! Come on rise up!”

My City of Ruins is on the album, The Rising. The whole album is really a prayer offered after the devastation of 9/11.

At other times Springsteen uses religious imagery to convey a message about society. In Forty-One Shots, for example, he sings, “We are baptized in these waters, and in each other’s blood.”

And he has the best depiction of the Kingdom of God that I have heard outside the Bible. In Land of Hopes and Dreams (played as the Communion meditation at my consecration as bishop) he describes a train going to the land of hope and dreams (kingdom of God). “This train carries saints and sinners, losers and winners. You don’t know need no ticket. Just get on board. This train—dreams will not be thwarted. This train—faith will be rewarded. Just thank the Lord. Just thank the Lord.” This is great theology.

Sometimes I take Bruce’s lyrics out of context for my own inspiration. When I’m feeling a lot of pressure to NOT speak about the social injustices of our time I remember: “When they said sit down, I stood up.” Or when I am feeling discouraged, besides turning to Psalm 121: “I look up to the hills, from where is my help to come?” I hear Springsteen and the E Street Band singing, “No retreat, no surrender.”

Someday soon I’ll give an entire blog to the message of hope and resurrection for all that is found in the music of “the Boss.” For now, I hope I piqued your interest and you will consider joining Rich, Laura and me for an “Un-Quiet Day.”
Perhaps there is something that holds all these announcements about up-coming events together: They are all Glory Days.

+Doug
Epiphany
January 6, 2014

The celebration of Epiphany is so beloved that through the years it has been overlaid with many charming myths. Charming but myths nevertheless. For example we sing of the time three kings went to see the baby Jesus. We know their names—Melchoir, Caspar, Balthasar. According to legend, they reunited sixty years later and celebrated High Mass in Latin (foreshadowing the Church of the Middle Ages by 500 years.) One church in Germany claims to have their bones as relics in the altar.

None of this is true. The names were given by Longfellow in a poem written in the 1800s. And they were not kings. The text tells us they were magi— or magicians. The text also tells us they came from the East. There was a religion in Persia at that time called Zoroastrianism in which astrology was prominent. Perhaps they were from there.

So they were not kings. And there were not necessarily three of them. The text just says “magi”—it gives no number. We fill that in just like we do other times in scripture. (Check Genesis, chapter two—the story of Adam and Eve. You won’t find an apple in that story. Nor Satan. Revisit the two stories of the conversion of St. Paul on the Damascus Road. We say he was thrown from his horse. But there is no horse in the text. Sorry to break this to you but the bishop is always supposed to tell the truth.) We assume there were three magi because three gifts were given—gold, frankincense and myrrh. As polite Episcopalians we assume each person brought one gift. But maybe there were only two magi and one brought two gifts. Maybe there were 20 magi and 17 brought nothing at all.

If we cut beneath the myths and go to the text itself, there is plenty here worthy of our contemplation. Let’s look at just a few of the many insights this iconic story offers.

The magi got to Jesus by studying the stars. The environment revealed God to them. Nature reveals God. At a time when we are compromising the environment, we may be destroying God’s revelation with it. And as our newly appointed Missioner for Creation Care, Margaret Bullitt-Jonas reminds us: “When we rise up to protect God’s Creation, we do so in the power of the Holy Spirit. When we participate in healing the Earth, we are sharing in God’s mission of justice and healing.”

Here is a line I only noticed a few years ago and I have been reading this text for a very long time. When Herod hears the Messiah has been born, “He was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him.” It makes sense that Herod is frightened because he is king and now someone else may be king. But why is “all Jerusalem” afraid? I thought they were looking for the Messiah for hundreds of years. Now he is here and they are afraid? Perhaps, like us, they are afraid of what grace will ask of them. They want God but they don’t want the change that happens when God is in their lives. St. Augustine said it so well 400 years later: “Save me Lord…but not yet!” We gather here this morning seeking the living God, but aren’t we all a little afraid of what would happen if we truly acknowledged God in our midst?

Interesting too is the mistake the magi make. They saw the star at its rising and they went to Jerusalem. Even though the magi were not Hebrews, it seems like they knew Isaiah chapter 60. Isaiah says the Messiah will be born in Jerusalem. Jerusalem, the great city that was destroyed and oppressed, will rise again. But Isaiah was wrong. The baby Messiah was not there. So the chief priests at the Temple did a quick google search and found out there was another prediction in the Bible. It comes from Micah, chapter two. Micah tells us the Messiah will be born in Bethlehem—little, backwoods Bethlehem that was so small it did not have hotel rooms for large groups of visitors. Hearing this, the magi take off for Bethlehem, nine miles away.

Do we do something similar? Do we look for God to work in our lives by restoring something great from our past (our Jerusalem)? Do we want God to recreate a past era and thereby miss out on what God is doing now? Could it be that God is acting in the Bethlehems of our lives— in little, out of the way moments? Could it be that God is doing something new and we are missing it by nine miles?

Back to the magi and Isaiah 60. The magi might have read this part regarding the birth of the Messiah: “A multitude of camels shall cover you, the young camels of Midian and Ephah; all those from Sheba will come. They shall bring gold and frankincense, and shall proclaim the praise of the Lord.”

Gold and frankincense. No myrrh. The magi added the myrrh. Why? And what is myrrh?

Myrrh was an ancient form of embalming fluid. The next time we hear about myrrh is in the 19th Chapter of John’s Gospel. Jesus has died and Nicodemus comes with “myrrh and aloes, weighing about 100 pounds” to anoint the body.

Why did the magi bring the equivalent of embalming fluid to a baby? They knew this child would be a great leader, a king, a savior of his people. Hence gold and frankincense— royal gifts. But they also knew this Savior would hold nothing back.
He would die for his people. The magi are telling us that God, in the person of Jesus, is committed to us no matter what. This love God has for us has no boundaries, no limits. And nothing can stop it – not even death.

The last reflection for this morning. The sermon can go a little long because the Patriots have a first round bye in the playoffs. No game to rush home to today, right? The magi bring gifts. It is natural to ask what gifts do you and I bring to the Savior. Your answer might be a particular skill or quality. You might say I bring my time or talent or treasure and lay them at the feet of the Savior. That’s good. But perhaps there is another way of seeing this. There is a story about a poor child in Africa who wanted to give his teacher a gift. He walked for a whole day from his home to the beach. There he scooped up sand and put it in a cup. Then he walked home, another day of travelling, and gave the cup of sand to his beloved teacher. Someone said, “What a stupid gift! Just a cup of sand.” And the child said, “The journey was part of the gift.”

Could it be that our journey is part of our gift to our Savior? Maybe you are taking care of elderly parents right now. It’s not easy. But your faithfulness in that journey is your gift. Perhaps you are trying with every ounce of patience within you to be a good parent to a child going through a rough stretch. The journey may be the gift you offer. Maybe you are battling something within yourself—depression, addiction. Staying true to the journey is part of the gift. Where is your journey taking you? Where are you being faithful? Our lives may be our gifts. May we put them at the feet of the Savior and know —really know with the knowledge of the heart—that we continue on our journeys guided by an inner light—by God who will never abandon us and is the source of all our hope. Amen.

+Doug