

Christmas

December 26, 2013

Christmas is complicated.

Christmas is complicated because we attach so much to it. It is like the Christmas tree in the Fisher family. Sure, we have angels and religious ornaments. But we also have an ornament from every place we have ever gone on vacation. Saranac Lake, Wisconsin, Chicago, the Outer Banks, San Francisco, London and on and on. Then there are the “baby’s first Christmas” ornaments – all of which are over 20 years old now. And all the ones from the kids’ activities – basketball players, Irish step dancers, baseball players, soccer balls and boy scouts (which my son was in for about twenty minutes in 1997) For this next group I respectfully request that you do not boo the bishop- we have more than a few ornaments celebrating a certain team from the Bronx with an interlocking “NY” and several Derek Jeters. And then there are the ornaments made out of family pictures. The kids sitting with Santa. Betsy and me in front of the tree in Rockefeller Center, when we were first married and I had the world’s worst mustache- which the kids make fun of every time they hang it on the tree.

The Christmas Tree has all this stuff on it that seems to have nothing to do with Christmas. But isn’t Christmas itself that way? It isn’t just the story of what happened to Jesus. We bring here tonight our stories. This is probably the most emotional night of the year. Some bring joyful stories. Others are grieving loved ones who died. Some have had relationships begin. Some have had relationships end. Some come here with inner peace and some with inner conflict. Some with new physical difficulties. We come here with memories that make our spirits soar- and memories that make us want to cry. Christmas is complicated. The good news of Christmas is that God wants to be part of it all. God who comes to us in the form of a vulnerable baby does so that God might be present to us in all life’s many dimensions. No feeling you have tonight is too trivial for God. Nor is it too big for God’s healing, merciful power.

Yes, lots of things get attached to Christmas. Let’s look briefly at a few of them. And then I will attach two more.

We attach helping those in need to Christmas. Giving to charities and church goes way up this time of year. As does volunteering. As well it should. Mary, the Mother of Jesus, declares his birth will mean “the lowly will be lifted up and the hungry filled with good things.” But here’s the challenge: people have to eat every day, not just Thanksgiving and Christmas. The poor need help in May as much as they need it in December. In an era when the gap between the rich and the poor is greater than any time in all of American history, we need Christmas all year round.

It is interesting what artists attach to Christmas. An artist in the 19th century painted a powerful image of Joseph and Mary tending to baby Jesus in the manger. But the background of the painting is not what one would expect. It is not the rocky hills of Bethlehem. It is the crumbling buildings of Rome. The Roman Empire would not fall for 400 years after the birth of Jesus but our artist is saying the birth of Jesus will mean the end of the Empire. The Emperor was considered divine. He had the power of God over people. But Jesus came to set the people free. We worship God, not Caesar. Christmas stands as a beacon of freedom to oppressed people everywhere.

Christmas takes on another meaning when we consider the geography of the story. Joseph and Mary travel far from home so they might be counted in the census. When Joseph realizes his family is in danger, he takes them even further away, into another country, into Egypt. This is a story of hope for refugees and immigrants in our day.

Now let me attach two more ornaments to this complicated Christmas tree sermon. The first one is by way of a story, a true story. Once in a prison the inmates wanted to stage a Christmas Pageant. The authorities allowed it but did not let them bring in any extra people or items to create the Pageant. That means Mary’s part was played by a man. And the costumes were just old blankets they threw over their clothes to look like ancient cloaks. They did not have a real baby to put into the manger, nor did they have a doll to place there. But they did have a crucifix – Jesus dying on the cross. And that is what went into the manger to represent the baby Jesus.

A crucifix in a manger. A startling image but one that contains a great truth. This baby we gather round tonight will die a horrible death—for us. He will be committed to a mission of mercy, compassion and hope and he will be committed to that mission unto death. He will love us no matter what. That is what the cross means – God in Jesus, loving us no matter what. On this Christmas God is not giving up on any of us. God is loving us- and all whom we love, both living and dead- no matter what.

One more attachment. It comes to us from science. Science tells us that there is a most amazing and so far unexplained phenomenon called “quantum entanglement.” If two particles of energy are kept in close proximity to each other for a long time, they form a relationship, a kind of bond, that defies the imagination. The connection between these two particles is so strong that if you take one particle to a laboratory in Los Angeles and remove the other to a lab in Boston, whatever you do to the particle in LA will instantly happen to the one in Boston too. Scientists, at this point, cannot explain it. Albert Einstein had a highly sophisticated and technical term for it. He called it “spooky.”

2000 years ago, we had a religious experience of “quantum entanglement.” God came into the world in the person of Jesus. God lived among us. Jesus preached to crowds big and small, comforted those who mourned, forgave sinners, helped the poor, started a revolution of compassion. He suffered, died and rose to New Life. He spent a short time with us, but it was enough time forever and all time. Because now we know, really know, that God is entangled with us. God reacts with us to everything we are experiencing. The living God is with those here tonight who come in joy. God is with those who are experiencing conflict. God is with those who mourn. And God is with those who are experiencing all that at the same time. Unlike Einstein, we do not call this “spooky.” We call this salvation.

There is a legendary story that illustrates this bond. One time a young woman desired to see the face of God and she set out on a journey to find it. At one point she meets a person who has the keys to a vault. He brings her to a room filled with gold. He says, “This is the face of God.” But the young woman knows it is not. She meets a mountain climber who takes her to a top of a mountain. They view an awesome sky and the valley below. The mountain climber says, “This is the face of God.” The young woman is deeply impressed and understands how many would see the face of God there, but she did not. Finally she brings her request to a monk. He brings her to the house of a dying man. He gives her a bowl of soup and a spoon and tells her to go in and feed the man. As she is doing this, the monk sneaks in and holds a mirror to face of the young woman feeding the dying man. He says, “This is the face of God.”

In our complicated Christmas, in our lives of many dimensions and many feelings, Jesus lives. Let him emerge. Let him be born again in us and bring us a peace that passes all understanding. Amen.

+Doug

Reflections: A Year After Sandy Hook

December 9, 2013

Since the tragedy in Newtown, Connecticut, many have written passionately and well about the need to stop gun violence in our country in editorials and pastoral letters from religious leaders. I felt, however, there was a need for something more thorough as we consider theologically and socially how to respond to an ever growing gun culture. For the past several months The Rev. Chris Carlisle and I have worked on a “reflection” document. It is not a definitive study by any means. It is a reflection that invites more reflection from its readers. And hopefully actions for a safer and sane society.

As long as this document has been in the works, I hesitated releasing it this week- the week of the first anniversary of the awful events at Sandy Hook. But then I took to heart the statement made by the group “Moms Demand Action for Gun Sense in America.” They said, “On December 14, we’ll have a moment of silence for Newtown, but with all the gun violence that has happened since that day, is more silence what we need?”

I invite you to read “Reflections.” And to offer your own thoughts on this blog. May all who follow the Prince of Peace offer an alternative to a culture of violence.

+Doug

The Reflection by Bishop Doug Fisher and the Rev. Christopher Carlisle may be accessed by clicking on this [link](#).

Advent

December 5, 2013

I love Advent. But I wish those who decide on the lectionary cycle would give more of the stories in Luke and Matthew that lead to the birth of Jesus. We only get one of those stories on a Sunday—Advent Four. Advent One is always a “second coming/apocalyptic” story (which seems redundant because we always have one of those two weeks earlier). Advent Two and Three are always about John the Baptist, whom I love, but I think his message fits better at another time of the year. In Advent I want to hear about Elizabeth and Zechariah, Mary and Joseph. With a heavy dose of Isaiah from the Hebrew Scriptures. Oh well. Someday if I get appointed to the liturgical commission...

We do have one text concerning the anticipated birth of the Savior that we read every evening all year long. It is the Magnificat (Luke 1:46-55) and on page 119 of the *Book of Common Prayer*. It is a text well worth reflecting on in Advent.

The Magnificat are the words proclaimed by Mary when she greets her cousin Elizabeth. There is a back story to this story also worth our reflection.

Luke tells us that the angel Gabriel appeared to Zechariah, a priest married to Elizabeth. They were “righteous,” without children, and “getting on in years.” Gabriel tells Zechariah, “Elizabeth will bear you a son and you will name him John.” Zechariah wonders how this could be possible. Because of his question, the angel punishes him. He gives him a terrible punishment for a priest – he takes away his voice.

Six months later, Gabriel is heard from again. This time he visits the young Mary of Nazareth and tells her she will bear God’s son. Just like Zechariah she wonders how this could be possible. But Gabriel does not punish her. He simply explains, “Nothing will be impossible with God.”

Why did Gabriel respond to the same question from the elderly Zechariah and the young Mary in such radically different ways? I’ll offer you three possibilities.

One, perhaps Gabriel believes Zechariah should know better because of his experience. After all those years of praying in the Temple, hearing over and over again about the great works of God, he should have been able to trust and trust immediately and without question. But that seems like a lot of spiritual pressure to me.

Two, maybe Gabriel does not like priests. This is a scary one for some of us. An angel floating around who has it in for the clergy. I hope this one is not true.

The third possibility is the one I favor. Could it be that in the six months between his announcement to Zechariah and his announcement to Mary, Gabriel grew in compassion? Could it be he put down his angelic judgment and recognized the multiple dimensions of humanity—a humanity that yearns for, and yet struggles with, faith?

If an angel needs to grow in compassion, maybe I need to as well. Am I more compassionate than I was six months ago, or has my heart become harder? Am I willing to grow in compassion the next six months? That is something I will reflect on this Advent.

Back to the Magnificat. Mary, pregnant with the Savior, goes in haste to see Elizabeth, who is now well along in her pregnancy. Artist renditions of Mary saying the words “My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior” have her looking so serene. But I think those words were said with great energy and enthusiasm.

I’m reminded of a story told by another preacher about the rehearsal for the Christmas Pageant. The seven year old girl who is playing Mary is told, “Here in the back of the church you will be told by the angel you will bear God’s son. Then you go down the aisle to the front of the church to greet Elizabeth and you say, ‘My soul magnifies the Lord.’” The little actress looks intently at the director and says, “Ok I can do that. Just one question. How do you want me to go down the aisle? Should I walk or should I fly?”

Despite how the artists portray her, I think Mary all but shouted the words of the Magnificat. She recognized God was transforming her AND the whole world.

How was Mary being transformed? Perhaps the answer lies in the word “magnifies.” God acted in her life and Mary “magnified” it. She thought about it. She prayed about it. She dwelled on it. And the grace *grew* until her very being was filled with it.

We know about magnifying. We know about dwelling on something that happens. Many years ago, my children had a book called *The Hurt*. It was about a little boy who was hurt by the words of another in school. Those words did hurt. But he kept thinking about them. He would not let them go. Soon the “hurt” became a physical thing—a “blob” which filled his room, took up all his space. Eventually he talks about the “hurt” with his parents and it begins to shrink.

We all know how to magnify things. Perhaps this Advent we could pray about all the ways we are blessed. We could dwell on those realities until they fill our lives and transform us.

There is another dimension to this proclamation of Mary. It is about the transformation of the whole world. "He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly. He has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty." That is such a revolutionary statement that many churches banned the saying of this prayer during various times in history. Once again we are reminded that faith is not just our individual spiritual journey. It is God's will being done on earth as it is in heaven. How that happens might also have something to do with "magnifying."

A few years ago, Richard Witt, a good friend of mine and the Director of Rural and Migrant Ministry, went to preach at a Baptist church in upstate New York. Almost every Sunday Richard is in a different church, telling about the hardships that farmworkers endure so we might be fed, hoping to raise consciousness and bring in resources for the work of justice. He travelled a couple of hours to this church and found a congregation of nine people. At first he was discouraged, but he got past that and faithfully proclaimed the gospel boldly. He was politely thanked as he left and went home thinking nothing much was gained for God's mission to farmworkers in that trip. Two years later RMM received a check from that church for \$30,000. The congregation had decided to close the church and give away their assets. They wanted that money to go to the farmworker cause.

Sometimes God takes our faithfulness and magnifies it. Now I am not saying like some prosperity preacher that God will reward us with a big check for our faith. But I am saying that it seems to be the pattern of our God to take our faithful commitment and make something great out of it. To take the "yes" of a teenage girl to an angel and bring about salvation for the whole world. To take a man who stays faithful to death on a cross and bring resurrection out of it. To take stumbling apostles and bestow the Holy Spirit upon the world.

Mary is blessed because she was willing to put down her agenda and pick up God's agenda. That is what will comfort and challenge me this Advent. What inspires you this Advent?

+Doug

Thanksgiving

November 27, 2013

I asked the Senior Staff to join me in expressing what we are thankful for in the great Diocese of Western Massachusetts. Here is what they wrote.

Steve Abdow:

I am grateful...

- for those wise and faithful donors who came before us and generously endowed the Diocese and our churches,
- for the faithful and capable lay leaders in our congregations,
- for the chance to collaborate with my new dedicated and talented senior staff colleagues,
- to have had the opportunity to work on Gordon Scruton's team and be a bridge to the new bishop's team, and
- to work for a bishop who allowed me to work for social justice and the poor on an issue I am particularly passionate about.

Pam Mott:

I am grateful...

- for my new colleagues and friends in WMA, especially those with whom I work daily at 37 Chestnut...for the ways they inspire and support all of our work,
- for the clergy and leadership in our churches...for those who give of themselves to serve their communities...for those who have been inspired and transformed by God and live that out in everything they do,
- for the small and large churches of the diocese who are beacons of light offering services and healing and meals and prayer shawls and all kinds of things that show God is present and alive, and
- for the creative, redemptive and sustaining power of the God who called me to this life and work and sustains me every day.

Rich Simpson

I am grateful...

- for those who sing in choirs, large and small,
- for those who show up early to teach Sunday School,
- for those involved in global and local mission,
- for the wisdom of our older members and the passion of our youth,
- for the work Tom and Dianne Wilson are doing on our behalf in El Salvador,
- for those who maintain our buildings and grounds,
- for the natural beauty of this part of the world—the hours on the road this fall were such a reminder of that for me,
- for the emerging ministries of collaboration, and
- for a bishop with an inquiring and discerning heart.

Doug Fisher

I am grateful...

- for Cozette Haggerty keeping track of where I am supposed to be and for all the staff at 37 as they joyfully serve this diocese,

-for our missionaries Bill Coyne, Deborah Johansen Harris, Bruce Rockwell, John White, Tom Callard, Jennifer Gregg, and Ed Farrell,

-for a Cathedral that is a light unto the city of Springfield,

-for two new deacons,

-for all who have embraced “reckless abandon” in risking new ways to express Jesus’ mission of mercy, compassion and hope,

-for all those who have given witness to the faith that is within them through baptism, confirmation, reception or reaffirmation of vows,

-for parish nurses,

-for Chris Carlisle, my co-writer on teaching documents,

-for all who serve on vestries,

-for Betsy who also said “yes” to Western Massachusetts—her support makes this ministry possible,

-for the wisdom and dedication of our Trustees,

-for all who have stayed faithful and courageous as their parishes go through transition,

-for everyone doing campus ministry,

-for all who work for social justice and care for God’s creation,

-for all who have given time, talent and treasure to their faith communities,

-for Pam, Rich and Steve who make teamwork the best and most joyous way to do God’s mission,

-for the Holy Spirit who comforts and challenges and holds all things together, and

-for all that is unexpressed here because blogs are meant to be short.

Happy Thanksgiving!

+Doug

Sermon at the Ordination of Deacons Terry Hurlbut and Beatrice Kayigwa

November 21, 2013



Legend has it that around the year 470 A.D. the bishop of Ireland went to the Kildare monastery to install the saintly Brigid as the abbess of the monastery. When he prayed over her, he mistakenly said the words for the consecration of a bishop. Now this was 1500 years before women were made bishops. The shocked crowd wanted to know what this would mean. To which the bishop said, "I have done what I have done."

Now this is my first ever ordination. Who knows what will happen here today.

I might mess up the liturgy but I don't want to mess up a heartfelt thank you. Thank you Lainey Hurlbut and David Kayigwa. Thank you for your love and support of Terry and Beatrice. You are a big part of this day, a big part of the service they have given, and will give, to the church and to the world.

Here is how we will spend the next eleven minutes and five seconds of our lives. We will look at the reason for the diaconate in the early church; consider saintly deacons through history; and reflect on why it is a right and good and joyful thing that we ordain Beatrice and Terry on this day.

Acts chapter two gives us a glowing account of what life was like in the church in those first months after Pentecost. "Awe came upon everyone, because many signs and wonders were being done by the apostles. All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved."

Ah, how peaceful and glorious it all was. But it did not last very long at all. That was chapter two. By chapter five it is already starting to fall part. And you know how short those chapters are in the Bible! In chapter five we hear that Ananias and his wife, Sapphira, sold a piece of property. "With his wife's knowledge, Ananias kept back some of the proceeds, and brought only a part and laid it at the apostles feet." When Peter confronted him with keeping money for himself and not sharing it all with the community, Ananias drops dead on the spot. Probably out of shame. When Sapphira is questioned, she too dies immediately.

We all know this is stewardship season. If your church is getting a late start on the campaign, tell this story and you might catch up quickly.

This failure to live up to the community ideal of sharing everything was not an isolated incident. In chapter six we learn "Now in those days, the Hellenists (Gentile Christians) complained against the Hebrews (Jewish Christians) because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution of the food."

The holy anarchy was not working. The church needed structure. The church needed people to look out for those who were being neglected. To meet this need the early church ordained seven deacons. And that would make a huge difference in how the church sees herself. Steven Lane, the bishop of Maine, makes this clear: "It is the deacon's role to remind us that we may not neglect the Gentiles' widows while telling the story of Jesus. That feeding the stranger and telling the stories are actually different aspects of the same ministry. It's the deacons' role to remind us that if we aren't feeding the Gentile widows, then we actually haven't heard the story, that there is an enduring connection between hearing and feeding, between praying and sharing. It is the deacons' role to remind us that the apostolic ideal (Acts Chapter Two) is only achieved as we constantly correct our tendency to focus on ourselves and neglect the world around us."

You see, deacons constantly remind us of who is not here. Who is not at the table being fed? Deacons expand the church by keeping us from ever being content. They say, "How about these people?"—like the ones in the Rescue Mission where Terry works "And what about these people?"—like the ones in assisted living whom Beatrice serves. "And don't forget these"

Those were the deacons in the Bible. Let's look at some saintly deacons through history. There are eleven of them in our calendar of *Holy Women, Holy Men*. Here are just a few.

Harriet Bedell. She served as a nurse and teacher to the Cheyenne in Oklahoma and then to the people of Alaska where she travelled 20,000 miles a year... by dogsled. Later she went to Florida and helped the Seminoles revive their traditional crafts of basket weaving which lifted their economy.

Vincent of Saragossa lived in the third century. He was a deacon who had a severe stutter in his speech. But when the Emperor demanded testimony as to what he believed, Vincent lost the stutter and spoke boldly and eloquently about his faith in Jesus. The Emperor responded by executing him—a fate that often befalls those who proclaim the gospel boldly.

Alcuin was a deacon in the 800s. That prayer we said a few minutes ago – “the collect for purity”— Alcuin wrote it and many other prayers and theological essays.

Ephrem of Edessa. He wrote hymns. But when a famine struck Edessa in 372 he stopped writing and threw himself into work for the hungry. After two years of that work, he died of exhaustion. A cautionary tale for you Beatrice and Terry. Serve the Lord with gladness but take care of your health.

And how about Laurence of Rome. He was deacon at a time when the Empire was persecuting the Church. An officer demanded that Laurence bring him “the treasures of the church.” In response Laurence gathered the poor and the sick and assembled them before the officer and said “These are the treasures of the Church.”

Terry and Beatrice join this blessed tradition of deacons and they join the holy service being done now by our active deacons in Western Mass – Jane, Donna, Eric, Audrey and Anne. When they join them we will be up to the biblical number of seven. But we won’t be stopping there.

Terry and Beatrice join these deacons of the past and the present but they will bring us a witness to God’s love that is unique. As we know from Jewish theologian Martin Buber: “God never does the same thing twice.” And Thomas Merton adds, “We are all called to be *New Words* for God.”

How is Beatrice a New Word for God? Her rector, Will Bergmann, says, “Beatrice brings many tremendous gifts and talents—her love of Jesus, her trust that God has a plan and purpose, her hunger to learn and grow, a compassionate and loving heart and true humility. I think that her greatest gift is that she projects that wonderful description of the Christian vocation from the prayer in the baptismal service: “an inquiring and discerning heart, the courage to will and persevere, and spirit to know and to love God, and the gift of joy and wonder in all God’s works.”

Beatrice is a New Word for God as she visits the sick in Assisted Living, works with three parishes supporting Connect Africa, and as a home health aide (echoes of Harriet Bedell). And may I add Beatrice has a smile that lights up a room.

And how is Terry a New Word for God? His rector, John DeBonville, says, “Terry has an inquiring mind and the sincere desire to live the gospel in a variety of ways. He can be seen not only at a book discussion group at Good Shepherd or helping set up chairs for an event, but in volunteering weekly at the Rescue Mission, assisting in our Church Without Walls service, being a servant leader in his daily job, and being totally open to the possibilities that God gives him. He can be counted on to provide frank, positive counsel that is rooted in Jesus’ love and compassion. He is aware and thankful that God has given him an abundant life.”

And Terry and I share a common love for the wisdom of Franciscan Richard Rohr.

Terry and Beatrice remind us that we are all called to service. We are all called to constantly reach out, constantly expand the circle of those touched by God’s love. The way to do that has been laid out very precisely and poetically by another deacon. That deacon is St. Francis of Assisi. Let’s end this sermon by saying together the prayer and the plan Francis gave us. Found on page 833 of the Prayer Book:

“Lord, make us instruments of your peace. Where there is hatred, let us so love; where there is injury, pardon; where there is discord, union; where there is doubt, faith; where there is despair, hope; where there is darkness, light; where there is sadness, joy. Grant that we may not so much seek to be consoled as to console; to be understood as to understand; to be loved as to love. For it is in giving that we receive; it is in pardoning that we are pardoned; and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.” AMEN.

+Doug

An Anniversary Coming Up

November 12, 2013

Since we turned the calendar to November, several people have said to me, “You have a big anniversary coming up.” I know they mean the first anniversary of my consecration as your Bishop – December 1. But there is an anniversary more important than that. It is December 18. Because on December 18, 1954 I was baptized. It was less than two weeks after my birth that I was “claimed as Christ’s own forever.” And that makes all the difference.

I love what theologian Walter Breuggemann says about baptism in a sermon about the passage from the Acts of the Apostles when an Ethiopian is baptized by the Apostle Philip. After his baptism, the man “imagined differently now. He was not paralyzed by fear. He now understood because of the good news, that the right order of the day is generosity whereby the ones with and the ones without are bonded in common respect. It is the same for all of us as it is for this Ethiopian. There is a power beyond fear. There is a gift of self-giving love. There is baptism. There is *new* news. There is a commandment for the new life. Fear keeps welling up among us with authority. But the baptized resist it. There is, we now know, a more excellent way to live, to hope all things, to endure all things. This way never ends; it is a gift that keeps on giving.”

Baptism is a gift that keeps on giving. It only happens once in our lives but the grace of baptism gets renewed constantly. We all get to do that liturgically when we pray the Baptismal Covenant from the Book of Common Prayer. Whenever a bishop does a Sunday visitation, the Baptismal Covenant is part of the liturgy so I have had the opportunity to renew my commitment made at baptism with you many times. Let’s reflect on those questions I ask you in those liturgies. The Baptismal Covenant is found on page 304 of the BCP.

Do you believe in God the Father?

The first time we recognize that we are not the center of the universe, that the stars do not revolve around me, we have the opportunity to believe in God the Creator.

Do you believe in Jesus Christ, the Son of God?

Here we profess belief in the real person, who lived at a particular time in history, and who unites humanity and divinity forever. My favorite theologian Richard Rohr writes, “In Jesus, God achieved the perfect synthesis of the divine and human. The incarnation of Jesus demonstrates that God meets us where we are as humans. God freely and fully overcomes the gap from God’s side...For the Christian, spiritual power is always hidden inside of powerlessness, just as God was hidden and yet revealed in a defenseless baby. If God is ever to be loved and shared, God had to risk both human embodiment and human vulnerability. This is the only thing that enchants and evokes the human heart. We do not properly fall in love with concepts and theological ideas; persons fall in love with persons.” (Note to Christ Church Cathedral—you might be hearing this again on Christmas Eve.)

Do you believe in God the Holy Spirit?

In answering this question we acknowledge a Spirit that is wild and free. The Spirit shows up in our flawed and holy Church, in those of who gone before us in faith, wherever there is forgiveness and where the dead rise in glory.

Will you continue in the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in the prayers?

Here is why we need to break bread together over and over again; recall the Feeding of the 5,000. (You knew I would.) Five thousand hungry people. The disciples tell Jesus, “Send them away because we don’t have enough food.” Jesus takes the five loaves and the two fish, thanks God for them, breaks them and gives them away. And God multiplies the grace. In Matthew’s and Mark’s Gospels, Jesus is with the disciples again a couple of days later and this time there are 4,000 hungry people. What do the disciples do? “Jesus, send them away. We do not have enough food.” They have forgotten already! Jesus patiently (or maybe not) asks them for what they do have. He blesses it, breaks it and gives it away and God multiplies the grace.

We continue to break the bread over and over again, because our memories of God’s abundance are so very short.

Will you persevere in resisting evil, and whenever you fall into sin, repent and return to the Lord?

There is a story of a man who passed by a monastery every day for years and he wondered what went on in there. One day one of the monks was walking on the street and the man went up to him and said, “What happens in that monastery? What is life like there?” The monk replied, “We fall and we get up. We fall and we get up. We fall and we get up.”

Notice the question does not say, “*if* you fall into sin.” It says, “*when* you fall into sin.” We can get up again.

Will you proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ?

Dorothy Day, the Roman Catholic social activist, said, "If I have accomplished anything in my life, it is because I have not been afraid to talk about God."

In an increasingly secular New England, it takes courage to talk about God, about the Good News of Jesus Christ that there is an alternative to living in fear. I'm not saying we need to go door to door testifying. But could we, in our own gentle, polite, Episcopalian kind of way tell others by word and example, that faith makes a difference in our lives? A big difference?

Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself?

One day in the 1930s in apartheid South Africa, a little black boy was walking down the street with his mother. A white Anglican priest was walking toward them. As the priest walked past them, he respectfully tipped his hat to the boy's mother. That was unheard of in those days. It made a deep impression on the little boy. He was determined to learn more about the faith of that priest. The boy was Desmond Tutu.

Serve Christ in all persons. Who knows how God will multiply that grace?

Will you strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being?

This question sounds similar to the one before. Probably because it is so important it needs to be repeated. Paul Farmer, the doctor who works among the poor of Haiti, says, "The idea that some lives matter less is the root of all that is wrong with the world."

But this question also asks for striving for justice and peace—it asks for an effort that does make a difference in the world. A few years ago I attended my son's graduation from Americorps. The pledge those young people said that day continues to inspire me:

"I will get things done for America—to make our people safer, smarter, and healthier. I will bring people together to strengthen our communities. Faced with apathy, I will take action. Faced with conflict, I will seek common ground. Faced with adversity, I will persevere. I will carry this commitment with me this year and beyond. **I will get things done.**"

Our Baptismal Commitment is not an abstraction. Jesus Christ wants to get things done—"thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

Our tradition is a living tradition; therefore it is possible we could add other elements to the Baptismal Covenant. Some have suggested we include a question asking us to be faithful stewards of God's creation. I support that addition.

Yes, baptism changes our lives. It is a wonderful gift to be claimed as Christ's own forever.

+Doug

2013 Diocesan Convention Address

October 26, 2013

Let us pray with the Christ who is within us, among us, and always leading us into Resurrected Life.

Last year's Convention featured this picture (**Gordon Handing Off Crozier to Me**) and what a wonderful job Bishop Gordon did of a smooth transfer in the midst of a church on the move. I will be forever grateful! And now I have that crozier and I'm trying to bring it and what it represents out into the street, into the issues of our time. (**Previous picture dissolves into me with crozier running out of the building.**) And I am not doing this alone. I am blessed by a holy staff. (**Picture of the whole staff running down the street with me**) Showing once again the truth of the words of the Prophet Bruce (**Picture of Springsteen**) that we are all "BORN TO RUN!" Do I see people making friendly bets on whether this is the only Springsteen reference in this address?

In some ways it was the year of the Hat. (**Picture of me in Dr Suess hat**) From Dr. Suess to the mitre that did not fit. (**Picture of me with the mitre over my ears**) Some told me that day not to worry – my head will grow into it. To a hat I never thought I would wear (**Warren's picture of me in a Red Sox hat**). I wore it because it was green – I will do anything to remind us to care for God's Creation! And then there was the hat the Cathedral Chapter gave me to make up for unfurling a banner saying the "Red Sox Are Prayed For Here" when I was seated at the Cathedral. (Puts on the Yankees hat with the blinking NY – done live – not a picture)

It was a year of change in Western Massachusetts and all of you have been so very receptive and accommodating to those changes. But none bore the burden of change more than these guys (**Picture of the Fisher Family**). From my soul – thank you Betsy!

When Pam and Rich were planning this liturgy, they asked me what Gospel text I wanted. I told them I wanted the one with the most important line in the entire Bible.

"In the 15th year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was go vernor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee, and his brother Philip ruler of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias ruler of Abilene, during the High Priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, (Picture of John the Baptist) the word of God came to John, son of Zechariah, in the wilderness." Are you inspired yet? This is the most important line in the entire Bible because it tells us clearly that our faith is not "make believe." It is not "once upon a time." It is not a fairy tale. Our faith is based on God acting in our lives. In this place and this time, when these were the people in charge, the word of God came to a particular man – a priest's kid – a "PK"- John. This line tells us that God is not an idea. God is not an abstraction. God is not floating *out there* or *up there*. God is here – with us.

That's the big picture. Now let's get to some details. This story of the word of God coming to John stands in contrast to times when the word of God seemed to be absent. One of those times is recorded in the first book of Samuel, the third chapter. *"The word of the Lord was rare in those days. Visions were not widespread."* What were those days like? Apparently they were pretty good days for the church. The author of Samuel tells us that the sons of the priest Eli were getting fat off the calves being sacrificed at the altar. Yes, the church was doing well. But the word of the Lord was rare and visions were not widespread. God was not speaking to those PK's or to anyone else.

But the word of God does come to John. And where does it happen? In the *wilderness*. In our Scriptures, the wilderness represents a place of chaos, confusion. A place where people wander, sometimes aimlessly. And it is a place of hunger.

Is our church, our Episcopal Church, like the prosperous times of the Book of Samuel, when the priests ate a lot, or are we in the wilderness? Even though you feed me really well at those coffee hour visitations, I think these are wilderness times.

(Pictures of softball games and people shopping) The fact that 80% of New Englanders go nowhere near a church door on Sunday morning makes this feel like a wilderness time. When our overworked volunteers ask "why don't others come to help us", it feels like a wilderness time. When we look around some of our churches and see so few people under the age of forty, it feels like a wilderness time. When it is so difficult to meet the budget, and some of our congregations have to face the very difficult reality of no longer being able to afford to pay for a priest full-time, it feels like a wilderness time. And when the church building itself is such a burden, but so many members are fearful of giving it up, it feels like a wilderness time. In a world desperate for hope, and yet the life-transforming message of the Gospel is generally ignored, it feels like a wilderness time.

But if we are in the wilderness, the Word of God is coming. Hang on! We are ready, oh so ready, to listen to the Word of God. John received a word that the world was about to change. Radically! Valleys would be filled in. Mountains and hills made low. Rough ways are made smooth. And all flesh shall see the salvation of God. John's vision of what would happen out of that wilderness time was world changing. And we, in 2013 in Western Massachusetts, have a grand vision given to us as well. Not a new one but one that is ever new. It is Jesus' vision of the Kingdom of God – when Mercy,

Compassion and Hope will reign. When the poor will have good news preached to them and the oppressed will go free. When God's will is done on earth as it is in heaven. It is a vision that transforms us personally and as a society. And Jesus gives us the Holy Spirit to make sure that vision becomes reality.

But what will get us out of this wilderness? How do we take our place in that grand vision of Jesus, that Kingdom of Mercy, Compassion and Hope? Maybe right now you are expecting the big strategic plan from the no-longer-so-new Bishop!

Hold that thought. Let's go back 2000 years to John, when Emperor Tiberius was in the 15th year of his reign and Pilate was governor of Judea. **(Picture of John teaching.)** The crowds said to John, after the Word of God had come to him, "What then should we do?" And he said "Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none. And whoever has food must do likewise." Well that's not too hard. Pretty simple stuff. Then the tax collectors ask John for advice. Here it comes. He is going to give them something really big to do. John says "Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you." Really, John, you prayed in the wilderness all that time, emailing back and forth with church growth experts around the world and that's all you've got? Now the soldiers come to John. Maybe they are going to get the grand strategic plan. The one that will save the Episcopal Church, I mean Israel. "Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusations, and be satisfied with your wages." Oh John, come on, how is that going to help "all flesh see the salvation of God"?

You see, John discovered somehow and somehow out in the wilderness that the people were not going to create the new world. God was going to do that. What the people needed to do were the simple, good things that they were capable of, and God would multiply the grace. John was foreshadowing what would happen later, just after Herod executed him and his cousin Jesus went away to a lonely place to grieve. A deserted, wilderness place. **(Picture of the feeding of 5000)** 5000 followed him there and when they were hungry Jesus did something very simple. He took five loaves and two fish, thanked God for them and gave them away. Simple. And it made all the difference.

Now back to 2013. We are in the wilderness. And I have no grand plan. I'm sorry! But I have a few simple things that we can all do that might get us ready for the new world that God will create. Some "if you have two coats, give one away" kind of ideas.

Let's stop "silo" ministry. One priest, one church, one congregation is not working. So let's try a simple new thing. Let's work together. Let's do mission together. Let's collaborate. And do it not just with the closest Episcopal churches. Do ministry with the UCC and the Lutherans and the Methodists and the Roman Catholics (who might start liking us a little better now that Francis is the Pope). And show the world that Christians can work with Jews and the people of Islam. Mission is more effective and more fun that way.

And let's do some neighborhood ministry. Take the idea of the Bishop of Kentucky and send four groups from your church in each direction – north, south, east and west – and walk 20 minutes. When they get back, ask them what they found. Was there a college campus? Immigrants? Young people? Old? Poor? Underemployed? Those people are *your* people. God's people! They are whom God wants you to stand beside in grace. Want some help in finding out what ministry with your neighbors might look like? Call my office and we will walk with you as you explore new possibilities.

We are in the midst of a social media revolution. We don't have to do it all. Some people like Facebook, others blog and some tweet, and some still prefer the phone and handwritten notes. Christians are called to proclaim Good News in all the ways available to us. If you are on Foursquare then check in, if you are on Facebook, then share your status: **(SHOW THESE WORDS ON SCREEN)** "I'm at Diocesan Convention and the Holy Spirit has shown up. I'm proud to be an Episcopalian." If 200 of us send out messages to 20 people each, we will reach 4000 people, thereby beating St. Peter's record of 3000 on Pentecost. And the low-tech ways still work: tell someone who can tell someone else. Pass it on. Spread the Good News.

Let's start making room for one another in the liturgy. If your liturgical expression is helping your church grow, stay with it. I know that is happening in some places. But if it is not, for God's sake, make some changes! That means everyone has to give a little. Our seniors might have to give up a few hymns. And our young people might have to learn a few. We need to try some creative things that might or might not work. But we will not know unless we try. We are not literalists when it comes to the Bible and we should not be literalists when it comes to our *Book of Common Prayer*.

And let's remember that baptism is far more important than ordination. Jesus did not tell us to go forth and ordain. He said go to the ends of the earth baptizing. You have God's permission right now to make a difference in this world. At visitations after the Baptismal Covenant, I invite whomever wants to, to come forward to personally reaffirm their faith. I know, you are probably thinking this sounds like an altar call and this is what happens when the Bishop hangs out with the Methodists so much! But the numbers who come forward are amazing and some tear up when I say their name and "may the Holy Spirit, who has begun a good work in you, direct and uphold you in the service of Christ and his kingdom."

And we need to lift up the gifts of the baptized in our churches. One way to express this is by the intentional development of lay preachers. We can do that!

Here's an idea that is challenging but necessary for us to make our way out of the wilderness and into the future God will create for us. Make the church building serve you, the needs of your neighborhood and God. If you are serving the building, if all your financial resources are going into it, if all your mission is about the building, if caring for the building is draining your congregation of Spirit, then it might be time to move on and find another space to worship in – a space that will set you free to pray with hope and serve with generosity. And, again, we will walk with you!

As John the Baptist embraced the issues of his time (that's why Herod beheaded him) and Jesus embraced the issues of his time (that's why Rome added him to the thousands of crucified) let's embrace the issues of our time. Remember God is not ethereal. God is at work in this time and in this place. Like John, let's start with simple, share your second coat kind of things! Here are a few humble examples:

- Tell the truth about casinos. Anyone who knows the truth about casinos will never let them ruin another neighborhood. Jesus came to bring good news for the poor. Casinos are bad news for the poor. We follow Jesus.
- As followers of the Prince of Peace, let's at least start to turn the tide from what has become a run-away gun culture. Nothing as radical as the end of the second amendment. For now just some simple things. The highlight of my new television career happened over at CBS Three a few months ago. The reporter asked me to highlight a few of the 50 gun reform laws that are now in front of the Massachusetts legislature. To help end the plague of gun trafficking, there is a law that would limit the purchase of guns to one per month per person. I asked the reporter "*Who needs to buy more than one gun per month per person?*" She leaned in towards me and said "*Yeah, like really?*"
- Fulfill the biblical mandate to welcome the stranger. We are an immigrant nation.
- Realize that the time to save our planet is running out. Learn about climate change and see how your church can become involved. The Psalms tell us "*The Earth is the Lord's and all that is in it.*" The Lord's Earth is in trouble right now. That means the Lord's people are invited to action.
- The latest studies show that one in five children in Western Massachusetts live in food-insecure households. That rate has grown by 43% in the last four years. It seems right that the church that hands out bread as the summit of its worship should be involved in feeding the hungry.
- The problems that many of our Armed Forces veterans have are well documented. Many are without employment, some suffer from drug addiction or combat memories or physical wounds. They are not "out there", they are in our neighborhoods. I think if Matthew were rewriting his 25th chapter in our time, he would include "when I returned from military service, you welcomed me." This is church work.

Two years ago you wrote a profile of this Diocese that touched something in my soul. You were oh-so-honest about the blessings and challenges here. One line that jumped out at me – easy to see because you printed it in big, bold letters – "*we want a bishop that will try 50 new things even if 49 of them fail.*" I wanted to embrace that call then, and now, getting to know and love you, I want to do that even more. And now I ask you if you are willing to do the same. You have more than my permission. You have my encouragement and even prodding to take risks for the sake of the Gospel. That is what I mean by reckless abandon.

If we do these things, and we stay centered on the big picture of Jesus – the Reign of Compassion, Mercy, and Hope – also called the Land of Hope and Dreams – God will multiply the grace. We will move into God's future!

This convention address is getting too long. I have a lot more ideas and I know you do too. Let's talk about them at lunch. Because when Barack Obama was in his 5th year as President, and Duval Patrick was Governor of Massachusetts, and Jim Munro was Dean of the Cathedral, and the Red Sox made the Playoffs but my Yankees did not, the Word of God came to the Episcopal Church of Western Massachusetts in the wilderness. Amen.

Children, Church and How the Spirit Works

October 10, 2013

The Bishop's Blog is the Vicar's Blog this week. My wife, Betsy, the vicar of St. Thomas in Amenia Union, New York, wrote this on her blog recently. I think it is a wonderful reflection on why it is worth the effort to bring our children to church.

My parish of St. Thomas recently started a Family Service. The first Sunday of each month, the kids of the parish take on the liturgical roles. It's really a lot of fun! Planning the Family Service brought back many memories for me of being in church with my own children when they were young. We were regular church-goers all those years. And despite the fact that we did it and believed it was important for our children, it was still a big challenge to get three little kids up, dressed and in the car for the 30-minute drive we made to St Peter's Church in Peekskill, New York each Sunday. It was a bigger challenge sitting in the pew with them for the service each week! (Keep in mind I was alone in that pew with them for most of their childhood, as their father was the celebrant on the altar!) I remember frantically trying to get them in the car and to church on time, trying to break up petty arguments in the pew, distracting them with cheerios, crayons, books, anything that would keep them quiet during the sermon and the Great Thanksgiving. It felt completely chaotic, and there was more than a few Sundays where I would sit there and ask myself, "Why am I doing this? What earthly good could this possibly be doing any of us?" I didn't get an answer to that question until many years later.

Despite the fact that it was hard to do (and even harder to say no to things like joining the T-ball team that played on Sunday mornings), it turned out those Sunday mornings in church were some of the best things we gave our kids. Yeah, they were climbing all over the pews a lot of the time, but somehow, the message of God's love got through. They grew up with a great sense of being loved, not only by their parents, but also by lots of different people in the church, and in lots of fun and surprising ways. They learned that kind of acceptance and love was not just something they got at home, but that it was waiting for them out in the world as well. They learned that they were part of something bigger than just themselves. That sense of being part of a bigger whole has led them to seek out community in their lives as they have grown up. They got that they weren't the center of the universe, and that was a very good thing! The message of love and justice and equality that they heard over and over in the bible stories has formed them as adults who care about the well-being of others, no matter who they are. And when they are faced with moral decisions or life decisions, I watch as they draw on the values they experienced each week in those various faith communities that we shared. These are lessons that Doug and I could not have taught them alone. They needed the experience of a larger community of love to reinforce these important values.

Having children in church is not just important for the children or their families. It is important for all of us—young and old. Being with people of all different ages brings a richness to our parish life. And it teaches us how to step outside our comfort zone and learn to love all kinds of people, even those whose lives bear no resemblance to ours. I recently read a blogpost, and the writer was talking about how important it is for all of us to be together in worship. She wrote: "Let's face it. Any idiot could find God alone on a mountain looking at a beautiful sunset!" But sitting next to a fidgety child, or sharing a pew with someone who does not share our political views and did not vote for our candidate—well, that's when the rubber hits the road. That's when it is harder to be patient, and harder to be loving, and harder to be accepting. But that is who Jesus calls us to love. That's how we are changed, transformed. Dorothy Day said, "*Love in action is harsh and dreadful compared to love in dreams*". Sitting in a pew with perfectly behaved children is love in my dreams. Being part of an imperfect community, filled with noisy children, and fussy adults, and all the other things that move us outside our comfort zone, is how we learn to really put love in action. That's the true gift of community—it's messy and inconvenient and brimming with opportunities to love and be loved.

The great theologian, my mother, used to love to say, "God writes straight with crooked lines." Nothing could be more true of life in the pews with children. Stick with it. It's worth it. God is doing great things.

Betsy+

Notes from the House of Bishops

September 24, 2013

Greetings from Nashville, Tennessee! I'm at the House of Bishops meeting where the liturgies are outstanding expressions of worship of the Living God, the music is great (almost all bishops and their spouses sing far better than I do), the sermons are inspirational, and the friendships formed among these church leaders run deep. Instead of a summary, in this blog I will offer you snapshots of the week.

When I got into the elevator at 6:00 a.m. today to go down to the exercise room, Bishop Mark Beckwith (Bishop of Newark New Jersey and formerly rector of All Saints Worcester) was there, also going to the exercise room. I'm wearing a Yankees tee shirt. He is wearing a Red Sox tee shirt. We just laughed.

Many came up to me and expressed gratitude for all we are doing in the anti-casino movement. And some asked for advice as they face the same issues.

The Diocese of Tennessee has an amazing ministry located on the grounds of Vanderbilt University. It is called Magdalene—a residential program for women who have survived lives of prostitution, trafficking, addiction, and life on the street. They run a very successful business called *Thistle Farms* that markets lotions and healing oils. Seventy-five percent of the women who have entered this program have never returned to the streets. It is run by Becca Stephens, an Episcopal priest and chaplain to Vanderbilt. This is a miracle story that needs to be told.

Another inspiring story is that of the Diocese of Nevada. A few years ago they had five churches in Las Vegas, all in decline. Then they started Latino ministry. That resulted in growth of over one hundred per- cent at each church. Nevada had a number of other rural churches, also in decline. But recently they have changed the questions they ask. Instead of saying, "*Where are all the young families?*" and wringing their hands, the churches now ask, "*Who is my neighbor and what do they need?*" Nevada has the highest rate of suicide in the country and the highest rate of alcohol-related diseases. This has led them to evangelize with a passion because they believe Jesus offers life-transforming grace. (Nevada has very hot weather. Heat shields on windows on parked cars are essential. The Episcopalians put the address of the local church in large letters on their shields.) And the Episcopal Church in Nevada had become very active in social justice—campaigning for stricter gun laws and advocating for the many teenagers from other countries who have been trafficked in Nevada for the sex industry. This new passion for evangelization and social justice had reinvigorated the churches.

We heard much about our continuing dialogue with the Methodists. There is still much work to be done, but the hope is that someday we will have a "concordat" with them as we do with the Lutherans.

There is a great emphasis here on outreach to the neighborhood of the church. Terry White, Bishop of Kentucky, urges his churches to send people out from the church building for a twenty-minute walk. One group goes north, another south, another east, another west. And then they report what they found there and ponder what God is calling them to do there. Did they see a college campus? Immigrants? Nursing homes? And Diane Bruce of Los Angeles urges her clergy to leave their offices and walk the streets.

Here are a few quotes from a variety of preachers and presenters that made a particular impression on me and are a source for further reflection:

"We will tackle new things when our level of longing for God's dreams for the world exceed our dread of loss."

African proverb: if you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together

"Where is Jesus where we are not?"

"Mission is something God does and we are sucked up into it."

"The Jesuits are moving from a daily examination of conscience to a daily examination of consciousness."

The advice of Bishop Brian Thom to his churches that may have to close: "Go out in a blaze of mission."

And from the Presiding Bishop: "Christianity is about the eternity of hope."

+Doug

Living Without Fear: Mariano Rivera

September 16, 2013

“Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.” Jesus to his disciples in John 14:25. “Do not be afraid” is said 364 other times in the Bible.

Enter Sandman. (That is the song played at Yankee Stadium every time relief pitcher Mariano Rivera enters a game.) For 19 years in the Major Leagues, Mariano Rivera has played a high pressure game, in the highest pressure time of the game—the ninth inning—without fear. And he has done it because of his faith. I want to reflect on this with you in this blog. This is taking a big risk—praising a New York Yankee in Red Sox Nation. But it is a way for me to model R.A. (reckless abandon). And it should be less reckless because everyone—no matter whom they root for—acknowledges Mariano as the greatest closer in the history of the game. Over 650 regular season saves. And even better in the playoffs and World Series—a record-shattering 42 saves and 0.70 era. Red Sox fans should know that Mariano blew more saves against the Red Sox than any other team – so be kind to him.

This great pitcher gives us three pathways into the spiritual life. One concerns fear. Over and over again—hundreds of times—“Mo” has come into the game with everything on the line. The score is close. One bad pitch and his team loses. Why does Mo look so calm? Is it a psychological gimmick? Is it mind over matter? No, it’s faith. His pitching glove is inscribed with “Phil 4:13” referring to Paul’s letter to the Philippians “I can do all things through Christ, who strengthens me.”

This is not to say that God is a Yankee fan and not a Red Sox fan. Even I acknowledge that. Mariano’s faith allows him to be free of anxiety. In numerous interviews he says his life is in the context of God’s love. Even if 50,000 screaming fans in the ballpark and millions watching on TV and the Steinbrenner family glaring from the skybox believe the next pitch is life and death, he knows he and everyone watching is embraced by a greater reality. He knows he belongs to God and everything that happens belongs within God—who holds us in love no matter what.

Our BCP invites us to “a peace that surpasses understanding.” I ask God for that peace often. A peace that goes beyond my reason. A peace that is in my heart even if it is not in my fluttering stomach and my panicky mind. I might be wrong, but I see that type of peace in the great #42 every time he takes the mound. If he can have it, maybe I can too.

And Mo does this even though he has failed. Many times against the Red Sox—see above. And famously in the 1997 playoffs against the Indians and in the 7th Game of the 2001 World Series against the Arizona Diamondbacks. (Although I blame manager Joe Torre for playing the infield in and thereby letting a shallow bloop by Louis Gonzales to land safely for the game-winning hit. Don’t get me started.) After every failure Mo goes out there with confidence. He does not live imprisoned in his past but hopeful in his future. He forgives himself. We could all learn from that.

Lastly, #42 models generosity. He is from the poor country of Panama and he remembers where he came from. Mo has donated millions to charities and churches in his country. He has been given much and he given much back. In this, his last year in baseball, Mo has gathered together all the “behind the scenes” people at every ballpark he goes to for the last time. He sits with the secretaries and the ushers and the vendors and tells them how much he appreciates what they do.

I will miss Mariano taking the ball in the ninth inning of a close game. I will miss his famous “cutter”—the pitch that has baffled thousands of batters and broken hundreds of bats. And I will ask for the “peace that passes all understanding” so I, too, can live without anxiety, with confidence that I am held by God and that “all things shall be well” (Julian of Norwich).

If you don’t give me too much grief about this blog, I promise to write something spiritually affirming of the Red Sox. How about a reflection on “The Impossible Dream” of 1967? Could this be an analogy to the Kingdom of God – so near but not yet?

+Doug

Same-Sex Marriage and the Diocese of Western Massachusetts

August 28, 2013

In July, 2012 The General Convention of the Episcopal Church passed these resolutions regarding same-sex marriage:

“Resolved, That bishops, particularly those in dioceses within civil jurisdictions where same sex-marriage, civil unions, or domestic partnerships are legal, may provide generous pastoral response to meet the needs of members of this Church; and be it further

Resolved, That bishops may authorize adaption of these materials (referring here to the provisional liturgy *The Witnessing and Blessing of a Life Long Covenant*) to meet the needs of members of this Church...”

Since my consecration on December first, “generous pastoral response” has been mine to decide. I’m writing this blog so you may know where I am on this.

As a priest in New York, I was happy to bless same-sex unions when asked. I knew couples who were deeply committed to one another and had been for a long time. They modeled fidelity and their love was another expression of God’s love in the world. When New York State passed the *Marriage Equality Act* in 2011, I was one of the clergy urging our bishop to allow us to witness these weddings and sign the marriage license (contending that the 2009 General Convention also gave bishops the right to “a generous pastoral response” – although not as specific as the 2012 resolution.) He did not allow it then, but did in the fall of 2012.

So this decision to allow clergy to witness the marriage of same-sex couples and sign the civil license should be an easy one for me to make. I was so clear about it as a priest. But as your bishop, in Western Massachusetts, it is not an easy decision.

Here’s why. As a bishop I promised to “guard the unity” of the Church. Now that phrase has many levels of meaning, but in this context I’ll apply it to the diversity of opinion we have in our Diocese as to marriage equality.

Many of us hold to what is written in *The Liturgical Resource for Blessing Same-Sex Relationships*: “Our covenantal life with God is expressed in relationships of commitment and faithfulness, including those of same-sex couples. It is the Church’s joy to celebrate these relationships as signs of God’s love, to pray for God’s grace to support couples in their life together, and to join with these couples in our shared witness to the gospel in the world.”

Other people of good will, with great respect for our gay and lesbian people, believe marriage is only between a man and a woman. They appeal to Scripture and the Book of Common Prayer to support this view. But within this group there are at least two different opinions. Some would say that gay unions should not be blessed. Others agree with the blessing of same-sex unions, and might agree that the State should allow gay couples to marry, but contend that in the Church, marriage should still be reserved to a man and a woman.

It is my expectation that we can continue to hold that diversity of opinion in our Church. When Bishop Gordon Scruton and I gave permission to our clergy to bless same-sex unions last July, we stressed that it was “permission” and not a “command.” Decisions to bless same-sex unions and decisions not to bless same-sex unions were to be respected. I hope in this past year all clergy and churches have experienced this respect from me. Part of that respect was putting together a team of clergy with diverse opinions to create a conversation guide for our parishes. I’m happy to see that many of our churches have used that guide and have been engaged in meaningful dialogue.

I take very seriously my commitment to the unity of our church. Unity does not mean uniformity. Unity does not mean everyone agrees. Unity does not mean we can only make decisions when we all agree. Unity does not mean majority rules. But unity does mean praying together, doing God’s mission in the world, and always staying open to the Holy Spirit which is God’s own dynamic and creative presence within and among us.

Let me fill you in on a few of my thoughts regarding “a generous pastoral response.” One dimension of my thinking goes back to the reasoning I would have used with my own bishop and colleagues when marriage equality was passed in New York. We are the Church that welcomes you. It is on all our signs. And we have been a leader in welcoming our gay brothers and sisters. I am proud of that. But it is disconcerting when we say “welcome” and then we say “stop.” We welcome you but only this far. You can join us but we will not celebrate your marriage, even though the state already does.

Here is another dimension of my thinking. Some will argue that the Church cannot witness and celebrate the marriages of gay people until we have a theology that allows for it. We need a further development in our theology of marriage and that theology has not been expressed. Right now there are theologians in the Episcopal Church working on that, but we do not have this theology yet. And perhaps we should not go forward without that theology.

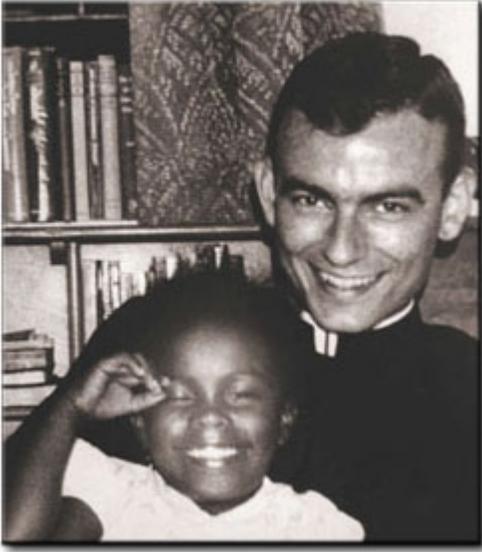
On the other hand, sometimes action precedes theology. I have often referred to The Center for Action and Contemplation in New Mexico, led by Franciscan priest Richard Rohr. He stresses the order of the words in that name. Action for a just world comes first, and then we contemplate and learn from those actions. Some could say that we should witness and celebrate the marriages of gay people, and through that experience our theology emerges.

I hope this has been a helpful expression of where I am in trying to be faithful to a “generous pastoral response” at this time in the life of our diocese. Even as I hold all of you in prayer, with our many different opinions on these matters, I ask for your prayers as well. In the days and weeks ahead, I ask also for your insights and responses. Context matters a great deal, and I will be listening both to the Holy Spirit and to the people of this diocese as we move forward, always and only with God’s help.

+Doug

Jonathan Daniels

August 7, 2013



On August 14 we celebrate the feast day of one of my favorite saints—Jonathan Daniels. His day does not get much attention because it is in August and we all know what happens to Episcopal church attendance in August.

Jonathan Daniels means a lot to me because his story conveys so many spiritual insights that I experience as foundational. Let's look at that story and those insights.

Jonathan was born in Keene, New Hampshire in 1939. Even in his youth, Jonathan wrestled with questions of meaning and faith. He attended Virginia Military Institute. While at VMI, his father died and his sister became seriously ill, leading Jonathan to a crisis of faith. After graduation Jonathan entered Harvard to study English Literature. On Easter Sunday, wrestling with his doubts, he went to a liturgy at the Church of the Advent in Boston and experienced a profound conversion. (Insight: formation is what we do to become better people. Transformation happens in the cracks—when life falls apart. We can't plan transformation. It happens to us. But formation gives us the "language" to understand it. I will write more about this at some other time.)

The Easter conversion experience inspired Jonathan to go to Episcopal Divinity School in Cambridge. While there he heard the call of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. inviting church leaders to come to Selma, Alabama and work in the civil rights movement. At first, Jonathan did not go. Bishop Carpenter of Alabama had said that civil rights' workers from outside the state were not welcome. And Jonathan felt he could not disobey a bishop. But King's compelling argument for justice ultimately superseded Jonathan's obedience to the bishop. (Insight: justice issues sometimes move faster than bishops.)

Jonathan went to Selma in March 1965. He worked there for a weekend with other volunteers and at the end of the time he was ready to go home. He did not experience anything life-changing. But he and his friend Judith Upham missed the bus home. Forced to stay a few days longer, Jonathan experienced the poverty, injustice and desperation that African-Americans were living with. Now he understood in his soul what Dr. King was saying. All because he missed the bus. (Insight: grace is wild and free.)

Jonathan returned to the seminary and asked for a leave to work in Selma. He was still struggling with this decision when he went to Evening Prayer and heard the Magnificat: "God has put down the mighty from their thrones and has lifted up the lowly. He has filled the hungry with good things." (Insight: the Bible really is a LIVING Word.)

Working in Selma, Jonathan attempted to integrate the local Episcopal church by bringing African-American children with him. He encountered great resistance from the rector and the congregation. (Insight: sometimes society moves faster than the church in terms of justice.)

On August 14, Jonathan and others were arrested for joining a picket line outside "whites-only" stores in Fort Deposit. Jailed for six days, they were unexpectedly released. Jonathan and a Roman Catholic priest, with two young African-American women, went to get a cold drink at a store that served all people. They were confronted there by Tom Coleman, an unpaid special deputy with a shot gun. Coleman cursed and threatened sixteen-year-old Ruby Sales. Jonathan sensed the danger and put his body between her and Coleman. Coleman shot at her and the blast hit Jonathan, killing him instantly. (Insight: following Jesus means entering the vulnerability of life.)

Tom Coleman was later acquitted by an all-white jury. Richmond Flowers, the Alabama attorney general, said the verdict represented the "democratic process going down the drain of irrationality and bigotry."

Ruby Sales went on to become a leader in social justice issues, speaking out for people of color, lesbian and gay people, women and seniors. She founded the SpiritHouse Project that uses the arts, research, education, action and spirituality to bring diverse people's together to work for racial, economic, and social justice, along with spiritual maturity. (Insight: Resurrection takes many forms. It is not all about the afterlife.)

There is a sculpture dedicated in Jonathan's memory at the Trappist Monastery in Gethsemani, Kentucky where Thomas Merton, monk, author and social activist lived for 28 years (my pectoral cross is designed from a cross drawn by Merton). The sculpture is Jesus praying in the Garden on the last night of his life, surrounded by three sleeping disciples. (Insight: the spiritual life is about staying awake to the life around us. The spiritual life is not an escape.)

Perhaps the best insight comes from the words of Jonathan himself, quoted in *Holy Women, Holy Men*: “The doctrine of the creeds, the enacted faith of the sacraments, were the essential preconditions of the experience itself. The faith with which I went to Selma has not changed: it has grown...I began to know in my sinews that I had been truly baptized into the Lord’s death and resurrection...with them, the black men and white men, with all life, in him whose Name is above all the names that races and nations shout...We are indelibly and unspeakably one.”

+Doug

Mercy, Compassion and Hope in Ghana

July 25, 2013



Bishop Fisher surrounded by gleeful children from St. Justin's School in Ghana.



Bishop Fisher surrounded by gleeful children from St. Justin's School in Ghana.

Betsy, Caragh, Grace and I were scheduled to fly out of Accra, Ghana at 10:00 p.m. last Sunday night. But the flight was cancelled so the airline arranged for everyone booked on that flight to stay at a nearby hotel to wait for another flight early the next morning. We made our way to the hotel restaurant for a very late dinner and gathered with many other stranded travelers. We had some wonderful conversations with Ghanaians, Americans and Europeans. When we told them we were visiting the Anglican Church, several people said, "Oh that Church does so much good in Ghana."

After spending a very full week in Ghana, that is exactly what the Fishers say, too. The Church has "taken the altar to the street" with a faith-driven generosity that engages those in need in this very poor country.

Many of you already know about the "Babies' Home" in Mampong. They take in babies whose mothers died in child birth, and the fathers and extended families are not ready to raise them. The children stay for two to six years and then return to their families. Right now 37 children are being cared for at the Babies' Home.

Maggie Addai, the director, is an energized and dynamic leader. She has been doing this for 30 years and she has the same passion for this work as the day she started. At a liturgy in which I blessed the solar energy generator given to the Home by our Diocese, I declared Maggie to be a Saint. That announcement was met with wild applause. (Now we just need to get a day dedicated to her in the calendar of *Holy Women, Holy Men.*)

A few weeks before we arrived, Maggie found a baby abandoned at the riverside. The river is a place where mothers sometimes leave babies they feel they cannot care for. The baby had been there for a couple of days and needed immediate medical care, which Maggie arranged. When the baby was first brought to the Home, she was unable to react to anything. She did not look at anyone. But through the care and nurture of the staff, she slowly started to respond and now looks to be held. They named her Grace. Holding this baby, we felt like we were witnessing a miracle.

We were welcomed by prayer services in a variety of churches, including St Cyprian's Cathedral in Kumasi and the soon-to-be cathedral in the new Diocese of Mampong. The singing was beautiful, and the prayers fervent – and no one stopped when the lights would go out (a frequent occurrence). The best prayer service of all was at the aforementioned blessing of the solar panels. A large choir from the high school sang contemporary versions of traditional hymns. And at one point, Maggie led the children through the gathered congregation in a joyous liturgical dance. My daughter, Caragh, agrees; "It was a great trip, and the best part was the Babies' Home. It is an amazingly spiritual, hopeful and loving place. I will pray for the staff and children everyday."

The Anglican Church also sponsors the Diocesan Women's Training Center where teenage girls are taught job skills for a variety of careers. Again, the staff is so very dedicated. Our girls were a big hit there. We had group pictures taken, but then each girl wanted her own picture taken with Caragh and Grace – all 35 of them! My daughters were happy to do it.

Then we went to St. Monica's School, a high school for girls. The Anglican Church has long been an advocate for women's education in a country that desperately needs it.

Among other social services, the Church sponsors an eye clinic that we visited. Throughout our visit we recognized the Church to be on a mission that takes both Matthew 28 ("go forth and baptize all nations") and Matthew 25 ("when I was hungry, you gave me food, when I was...") seriously.

A disturbing sign of our times was clear when we visited the rain forest. During the tour, our guide brought us to the "waterfall." The picture of the waterfall in the visitors' center was magnificent, and we were looking forward to seeing it up close. But when we got there it was just a thin stream of water flowing over a rock formation. The guide pointed out that although this was the rainy season, and the waterfall should be gushing, a lack of rain had reduced it to this, and there has been far less rain than usual for several years now. He attributed it to climate change and, sadly, I think he is right.

Ghanaians are known for their hospitality and they certainly lived up to their reputation on this trip. We are grateful for all that Archbishop Daniel Yinkah Sarfo and Bishop Cyril Kobina Ben-Smith did to welcome us and all the arrangements they made for prayer services and gatherings throughout Kumasi, Accra, Mampong and Cape Coast. All of us in the Diocese of Western Massachusetts are blessed by our relationship with our brothers and sisters in Christ in Ghana.

+Doug

P.S. The diocesan website will have more pictures of our trip to Ghana soon.



Caragh Fisher holds hands with a new friend at the Mompang Babies' Home in Ghana.



Caragh and Grace Fisher with students at the Diocesan Women's Training Center in Kumasi.



Theology and Casino Gambling

Grace Fisher at the Mompang Babies' Home in Ghana. Bishop Fisher is in the background.

July 15, 2013

In Diocesan Convention last October, the clergy and delegates representing our 65 churches voted unanimously to oppose casino gambling in Western Massachusetts. In the months following, many of you have worked faithfully to educate voters as to what casinos really do in communities. That effort included educating me. In the last few weeks as we get closer to the July 16 vote in Springfield, I have been interviewed numerous times by television, radio and newspaper reporters.

The very nature of interviews demands "sound bites." Studies show you get seven seconds to grab the attention of viewers or listeners before they switch channels. My sound bite has been "Jesus came to bring good news to the poor. Casinos are bad news for the poor. I follow Jesus."

But there is far more to the casino debate than a sound bite. To express the depth of our position, Steve Abow and I have worked with The Rev. Chris Carlisle to produce the essay "Theology and Casino Gambling."

Here you will find a reflection on gambling from the perspective of Holy Scripture. And because our theology is not abstract but "incarnate" (manifested in "the flesh", in reality), you will see many references as to what casinos have actually done to neighborhoods.

In this essay we sometimes focus on the situation in Springfield. But we hope this reflection will be helpful to those who face possible gambling institutions in West Springfield and Palmer and in many other places within and beyond Massachusetts.

This summer I have been re-reading Edwin Friedman's book *A Failure of Nerve: Leadership in the Age of the Quick Fix*. The "quick fix" -which is no fix at all- is in front of us with the seductive lure of casino gambling. We all want prosperity for our cities and neighborhoods. Let us pray for the leadership from our church, government, business and social leaders to make real strides in quality of life for ALL God's people.

+Doug

Diocese of Western Massachusetts Anti-Casino Gambling Statement

There is only one story in the Christian gospels that has to do with gambling. And it happens at the death of Jesus. For all the wondrous hope that Jesus inspired in his corner of the Roman Empire – that the poor were not alone, that wealth was not enough, and that life's riches came by sharing – for three days, Jesus's death appeared to be the death of a miraculous abundance that was generated not by acts of possession, but by acts of self-giving and sharing.

The Episcopal Diocese of Western Massachusetts has committed itself to a stated mission of "Celebrating God's Abundance." Unlike its often vague connotation, here "abundance" bears a technical meaning: if in the world's economy, the more one takes, the more one ultimately has, in God's economy, the more one gives, the more one ultimately has.

In this regard the nature of the material world is different from the nature of God. In the material world where resources are scarce, one must possess in order to survive. In the world of God's abundance, to truly live, what one has must be shared with others.

It should be startling to Christians that the darkest moment of all time should begin with an act of gambling. Roman soldiers – responsible for Jesus's death – are described by the gospel writers as gambling for the paltry possessions of a man who literally gave his life for the poor. "And they crucified him, and divided his clothes among them, casting lots to decide what each should take."^[1]

The act of casting lots appears seventy-seven times in the Bible. In its original form, casting lots was a way that communities divined God's will – employed for decisions from dividing tribal lands to determining a twelfth disciple. In order to avoid favoritism or inevitable politics, sticks of varying lengths were chosen by participants to ascertain the mind of God.

Though at first a sacred act in relationship with God, in the hands of these Roman soldiers, casting lots became a sinister, rudimentary form of gambling for personal gain. Instead of an act performed on behalf of God's entire people, it became a private bet whose ultimate goal was to take a poor man's possessions. Physically powerless and hanging from a cross, Jesus watched an empire turn its back on the chance of the abundant life that he knew only ever came by sacrifice.

The story of the casting of lots for Jesus's clothing illuminates several truths. First, gambling inherently profanes life as a gift by pretending it can be possessed – perverting the dynamic abundance of God that comes by relationship. Here life is little more than a commodity to be traded and finally “taken,” rather than a sign of the richness of creation that none of us can ever repay.

Second, just as it was two thousand years ago, gambling takes from the poor. Despite political claims that a casino in Springfield will generate greatly needed jobs, most of the well-paid positions will likely be filled by those from other places. And the construction jobs created to build the casino are by their nature, temporary, rather than providing permanent work that would fuel the city's economic engine.

Those lucky enough to secure permanent jobs are likely to be disappointed. On average, card dealers earn \$15,810 a year – inadequate to support a family of two in most Massachusetts communities. Indeed, a family earning this amount is eligible for Food Stamps, WIC, Fuel Assistance, Utility Shutoff Protection, Mass Health, and Section Eight Rental Vouchers.^[2]

“Lower taxes” that are claimed to help the poor appear equally illusory. Statistics show that casino gambling – specifically that facilitated by slots machines – generates its income in undue proportion from the lowest economic classes. The tax burden is therefore shifted from a relatively more equitable distribution to one in which the already economically deprived are further compromised.^[3]

Based on the experience of Foxwoods Casino in Connecticut, the 200 million dollar state tax revenue generated in 2007 required that 40,000 people lose an average of \$234 every day, 365 days a year.^[4] On the local level, net social benefit is similarly absent. According to Susan Mendenhall, former Mayor of Ledyard, CT, home to Foxwoods: “The drugs, the guns, the prostitution. It just follows the money and people don't want to talk about it. Our sleepy little town did not have this kind of problem, but it's everywhere now. It's been so painful for us.”^[5]

It should thus not be surprising that companies resist locating in “casino cities.” As important to Springfield as such companies could be, allowing such a casino could prove a death knell to an economic future one which thousands of citizens depend. If it is true that casinos are a proven vacuum cleaner that sucks the life out of the public square, it is those on its margins – specifically the poor – that stand, barely stand, to lose the most.

It is argued that at least middle-class shop and restaurant owners benefit from casinos. Yet this has not been the experience of either local business people or casino owners themselves. In Atlantic City, one-third of the city's retail businesses closed within just four years of the casino's arrival, and the number of independent restaurants dropped from forty-eight to sixteen between the casino's opening and 1997 – a loss of two-thirds.^[6] In the words of current Ledyard, Connecticut Mayor, Wesley Johnson, “There has been no economic development spin-off from the casino. Businesses do not come here. Tourists come mainly to gamble. Gamblers have one thing in mind: get to the casino, win or lose their money, get in their cars, and go home.”^[7]

One might expect casino owners would argue for the economic advantages of casino development. But according to two of the most powerful casino owners in the country, this is not the case. Casino developer Steve Wynn said to a group of Connecticut business owners, “Get it straight, there is no reason on earth for any of you to expect for more than one second that just because there are people here at my casino, they are going to run into your store or restaurant or bar.”^[8] And casino magnate Donald Trump observed, “People will spend a tremendous amount of money in casinos, money that they would normally spend on buying a refrigerator or a new car. Local businesses will suffer because they lose customer dollars to the casinos.”^[9]

Many who support of a casino in Springfield may well have the city at heart. The promises of jobs, lower taxes, and funding for public education, are in themselves powerful social incentives for MGM's seductive proposal. Yet given the long-term implications of investing in such a casino, it is critical the City not take an errant road – however paved with good intentions.

One needn't look far to find the many dead ends. The two Connecticut casinos are refinancing their operations due to crushing debt; and because of increased competition from neighboring casinos, Indiana, [Michigan](#), [New Jersey](#) and [Pennsylvania](#) are suffering falling revenues. Greed begets greed between gambling casinos as much as between their clients – widening the black hole of avarice casting a pall across the country.

In Delaware, gambling provided the state its fourth largest source of revenue, enabling the legislature to allow aggressive casino expansion. Yet in the last several months this same government had to grant an eight million dollar bail out – due to the withering of an industry that is plaguing states across the country. As will go the industry, so is will go the state, and hence the consequently plunging revenues are charted to leave a trail of broken promises to such priorities as public education.^[10]

In a time when the City of Springfield is threatened by economic demise, a final blow to its viability as a community may be the advent of casino gambling. It would be wise for its citizens to consider the experience of other host towns within five years of introducing casino gambling into their communities: robbery up 138%; auto theft up seventy-eight percent;

aggravated assault up ninety-one percent; rape up twenty-one percent. These same communities experienced dramatic per capita increases in prostitution, drunk driving, embezzlement, family breakdown, domestic violence, bankruptcy and suicide – all in the midst of enhanced police protection.^[11]

Equally unsettling is the potential impact of gambling on Springfield’s children. According to the National Gambling Impact Study Commission, “Children of compulsive gamblers are often prone to suffer abuse, as well as neglect, as a result of parental problems or pathological gambling.”^[12] And in the words of Howard Shaffer, Director of the Harvard Medical School Center for Addiction Studies, “We will face, in the next decade or so, more problems with youth gambling than we will face with drug use.”^[13]

As former Connecticut Congressman Bob Steele said about casino development: “If it seems too good to be true, it probably is.”^[14] With little evidence of economic benefit to host communities, one is left to recognize a fixed-sum game in which resources are simply moved around. In the view of Nobel Laureate economist, Paul Samuelson, “(Gambling) involves simply sterile transfers of money or goods between individuals, creating no new money or goods. Although it creates no output, gambling does nevertheless absorb time and resources. When pursued beyond the limits of recreation, where the main purpose after all is to kill time, gambling subtracts from the national income.”^[15]

The casting of lots at the foot of the cross, produced just one thieving soldier. Nothing new was created by this soldier’s winning bet to revive that sad community. The abundance of God was laid fallow for three days – choked by division and fear.

Then three days later, something miraculous happened. The death of Jesus’s body was suddenly transcended by a resurrecting spirit: of community, of sharing, and unprecedented courage that became the miracle itself. Jesus’s followers undoubtedly remembered the words of their friend who lost his clothing on a bet: “Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none.”^[16] And they undoubtedly remembered his startling proclamation – “I come to bring good news to the poor” – and were moved, as we can be, to stand with the poor, that together we might live in God’s abundance.

If most of us suspect casino gambling is indeed too good to be true, we are called as a people – “religious” or not – to bring this truth to light. If most of us suspect that the cheapness of a bet – for coats or economic solutions – is unable to sustain the abundant life we seek, we need to stand up and be counted. If most of us recognize that betting is by nature, a fixed-sum game against the poor, we are called together to be our brothers’ keepers, and so to share in God’s miraculous abundance.

Footnotes

[1] Mark 15:24, New Revised Standard Version

[2] <http://www.citizensagainstcasinogaming.com/facts.html>

[3] <http://www.noslots.com/documents/30ReasonsToOppose.htm>

[4] <http://www.citizensagainstcasinogaming.com/facts.html>

[5] <http://citizensagainstcasinogaming.com/downloads/casino.spfld.flyer.3-20.pdf>

[6] http://uss-mass.org/local_businesses.html

[7] <http://citizensagainstcasinogaming.com/downloads/casino.spfld.flyer.3-20.pdf>

[8] <http://citizensagainstcasinogaming.com/downloads/casino.spfld.flyer.3-20.pdf>

[9] <http://citizensagainstcasinogaming.com/downloads/casino.spfld.flyer.3-20.pdf>

[10] <http://www.getgovernmentoutofgambling.org/tag/delaware>

[11] <http://uss-mass.org/crime.html>

[12] <http://www.citizensagainstcasinogaming.com/facts.html>

[13] <http://www.citizensagainstcasinogaming.com/facts.html>

[14] www.masslive.com/news/index.../casino_gambling_opponents_have.html

[15] <http://www.library.ca.gov/crb/97/03/chapt9.html>

Bad News for the Poor

June 24, 2013

Last week I was at “The College for Bishops” in Roselyn Virginia. All new bishops go to this hands-on educational event for one week a year for three years. I have a lot to learn so I looked forward to this week and the opportunity to catch up with the many friends I have made in this common experience of being church leaders at a challenging time.

One day was an intensive immersion in media relations. We were grilled by real reporters and our responses were seen on television and critiqued by our classmates. Reporters like to throw you off guard in creating a story. One reporter said to me: “You are on this one-man campaign to keep casinos out of Springfield. What are you – the ‘no-fun’ bishop!”

I responded: “This is far from a one-man campaign. I am one among many. Our Diocese voted unanimously – that’s 65 churches – to oppose casino gambling in Western Massachusetts and specifically Springfield.” Then I went into my rapid-fire New York speedway of talking so he could not get another word in: “I follow Jesus. In his first sermon Jesus proclaimed ‘I have come to bring good news to the poor and to set the oppressed free.’ Now Springfield has bad news for the poor. A casino right in the heart of the most financially vulnerable place in our city.” Now I start talking even faster! “For those who have little, the illusory chance that they can gain much, even in a game stacked against them, is tempting and ultimately destructive. Our churches stand with the economically poor of our society, and that always means taking a stand against gambling establishments in our cities.”

The reporter was about to break in but I wouldn’t let him. “Let me tell you about a woman named Shirley (not her real name) who goes to our Loaves and Fishes program at our Cathedral – less than two blocks from the proposed casino. She works two jobs. She is raising three kids. Her husband has a gambling addiction. She is scared to death that her husband is going to throw away the little they have at that casino.”

Television is all about sound bites so I could not get in more than that. But I can now. 85% of all casino gamblers live locally. That means the economically vulnerable of Springfield. 70-80% of all revenues at casinos come from addicted and problem gamblers. (Now think of the odds that “Shirley’s” husband gets caught in this trap.) Casinos do not create jobs in the long run. Sure there will be construction jobs for a while. Then it is all minimum-wage jobs. Do you know how much a card dealer makes? \$15,810 – a family of two with that income qualifies for Food Stamps and numerous other government programs that cost Massachusetts tax payers’ money. Some casinos pay their employees in cash on the morning of payday – tempting them to bet their paychecks as the day goes on. Casinos do not develop the local economy – the whole point is to keep people IN the casinos, gambling their money. Of all the casinos built in the United States, none (that is NONE) have improved the quality of life in the local neighborhood.

I could go on – but blogs are supposed to be brief. For more information, go to

<http://www.citizensagainstcasinogaming.com/>

And join us at **Christ Church Cathedral, Springfield on Wednesday, June 26 at 7:00 pm** for an educational event about how the casino will affect life in Springfield. Political and religious leaders will be speaking. The vote on the casino will be July 16.

Jesus was and is on a mission to bring good news to the poor. The casino is bad news for the poor. We follow Jesus.

And I believe I am a fun bishop!

+Doug

Praying With the Methodists

June 17, 2013



Bishop Fisher and UCC Bishop Sudarshana Devadhar with the newly ordained.



Bishop Fisher and UMC Bishop Sudarshana Devadhar with the newly ordained.

On Friday night, at the invitation of Bishop Sudarshana Devadhar, I prayed with the New England United Methodist Conference as they ordained five new elders in Wenham, Massachusetts. It was a spirited three hours of prayer, including an altar call at the end. I loved it. Everyone was so welcoming and so happy I was there (representing you.) Bishop Devadhar is a good and holy man, and I look forward to working with him for many years to come.

At the liturgy I read the Gospel and led some prayers. I did not “impose hands” at the ordination because our denominations are not there yet, but hopefully some day we will. One of the new elders was a cadet at West Point when I was the Episcopal Chaplain there. He served two tours in Afghanistan. After the liturgy, I prayed with him and his wife as they leave to minister in Alaska.

The liturgy had many moments of grace, but one that stood out for me was the “Litany of an Unfinished Church.” Here is a portion of it for your reflection:

We are an unfinished church.

Like the disciples so many years ago, we are not sure we know the way. We are afraid to make mistakes. We are afraid to fail.

We are an unfinished church.

But Christ calls us to carry on the blessing of discipleship, to move forward in love and faithfulness, so that all might find a place in our holy space, our church.

We are an unfinished church.

So long as even one of us is left outside the door because of our coldheartedness, we are an unfinished church.

So long as one is lonely, hungry, sick, in prison, we are an unfinished church.

So long as any one of us is destitute of the great Hope that is our future in Christ Jesus, raised up to set us free from death into holy and everlasting life...

We are an unfinished church.

We are an unfinished church but... WE ARE GOD'S CHURCH.

Hey Episcopalians, what do you think about that? Does it warm your soul?

+Doug

Thank you, Bill Coyne

June 13, 2013

Churches receive a lot of criticism these days. We hear about the ever growing number of “nones” (those who have no church affiliation). And if I had a dollar for every person who tells me he or she is “spiritual but not religious,” we could support a lot of mission. That is why it is such a joy to work with The Rev. Bill Coyne. He loves the church—in all its true holiness and with all its many flaws. Bill sees the church as continuing the transformational mission of Jesus in this world. He believes in the Church and he has generously given a big part of his heart to it. (Other significant parts of his heart go to his wife Janet, their children, and the New York Mets.) Bill is ordained 35 years. For the last fifteen of those years he has served on the Bishop’s staff as the Archdeacon for Mission. In that role he has encouraged and inspired parishes large and small to be the best churches they can possibly be. This is Bill’s last week in that position. In this next stage of his life, Bill will get to spend more time with his family as he works for the diocese “full time for part of each year.” That means working on special parish projects when he returns from his three month sabbatical and he will have the title of “Missioner for Congregational Vitality.” Bill’s ministry impacts numerous lives. Many could say something similar to what The Rev. Scott Seabury writes: “Bill has been a faithful colleague and good friend of mine for over three decades. Whenever I have approached him with a question or concern, he has responded generously with good common sense, a great deal of patience, and a healthy sense of humor. I’ve greatly appreciated his supportive ministry and encouragement over the years.” I have been blessed to work with Bill for a year as WMA Bishop #9. WMA Bishop #8 worked with Bill for 14 years on staff and for many years before that in the Diocese. I invited Gordon Scruton to reflect on Bill’s ministry and he sent this: “Archdeacon Bill Coyne has been a humble and absolutely dependable servant of the clergy and congregations of the diocese. He brought a relentless passion for finding and sharing creative, cutting edge ideas and resources for developing healthy mission-focused congregations. Many people have appreciated his gifts of facilitating effective meetings, stimulating preaching, spiritual depth, tech skills and attention to administrative details. Across the country, Bill’s wisdom and experience is valued by his congregational development colleagues who have invited him to share his insights with other dioceses. His active voice in General Convention led to his appointment to the influential Program, Budget and Finance Committee. Bill has quietly and faithfully embodied supportive continuity, shared the long-term memory of the diocese as well as constantly inviting and pushing us to experiment with fresh ways of living the Gospel of Christ in this generation. I join with Bishop Fisher and the clergy and people of the Diocese in thanking God for Bill Coyne.” I’ll end this blog with a prayer for the Church that Bill loves: “Gracious Father, we pray for thy holy Catholic Church. Fill it with all truth, in all truth with all peace. Where it is corrupt, purify it; where it is in error, direct it; where in anything it is amiss, reform it. Where it is right, strengthen it; where it is in want, provide for it; where it is divided, reunite it; for the sake of Jesus Christ thy Son our Savior. Amen.” (BCP, p.816)

Signs of Hope

June 5, 2013

As I travel around this great Diocese, I'm impressed daily by the many ways the Holy Spirit is at work here. Here is a small sample of recent moments of grace.

-Leaders from five of our churches in the Southern Berkshires gathered with The Rev. Tom Callard and myself to explore plans for Hispanic ministry in the area. The energy and enthusiasm in the room were wonderful. Together these churches are looking to develop a dynamic ministry with a growing population. The key word is "together." Our parishes throughout the Diocese can do more in collaboration than the old "silo" approach.

-In a previous blog I commented on the "new ecumenism" which is developing in New England. Next week representatives of our Episcopal Church and The United Church of Christ will gather here at 37 Chestnut Street to discuss theology. We already know we want to do mission together. A theological dialogue will help us see how our understandings of God and of the Gospel can complement one another. And on June 14th I will be praying with the Methodist Bishop (Sudarshana Devadhar) as he ordains new ministers.

-On Pentecost we had a "revival" called *Fire on the Water* at Indian Ranch in Webster. Organized by The Rev. Janice Ford, this three-hour event featured praise music and preaching. I was blessed to baptize three young people in the lake. Read more about this story in *Mission Matters*. It was a lot of fun and a great example of R.A. (expressing the Gospel in new and creative ways with reckless abandon). Who will host the next one?

-Gathering the resources for transitional housing for female veterans of the Armed Forces continues. I knew this would be a big project requiring collaboration from churches, government and social agencies. The enthusiasm for this project has been tremendous. Look for more news on this effort in the months to come.

-In October our Diocesan Convention voted unanimously to oppose casino gambling in Western Massachusetts. In Worcester plans for a slots parlor have been abandoned. We thank our church leaders who spoke up against it. The debate still rages in Springfield. I am joining a line-up of speakers at the Cathedral on June 26 at 7pm in which we explore how a casino will affect families in Springfield. This is a justice issue. Casinos prey on the poor. And they do not help the local economy in the long haul. Defeating these casino initiatives is important but leaves us with another challenge. How do we help our cities to prosper? What do we do about urban poverty and violence? As we embrace the issues of our time, this is a big one.

-I applaud our Trustees for researching the complicated issue of divestment from fossil fuel companies. Some experts on climate change say this is the best strategy. Others, who also see climate change as a lethal threat to our planet, disagree. We are blessed to have Trustees willing to wrestle with the question.

These are but a few signs of hope in a dynamic Church. May our living God continue to comfort and challenge us. And may we be led ever deeper into a Kingdom of Mercy, Compassion and Hope.

+Doug

Memorial Day Reflection

May 23, 2013

In July, 1913, the Civil War veterans who had fought in the battle of Gettysburg got together for a reunion on the 50th anniversary of that bloody battle that was seen as the turning point in the war. These men who had fought as teenagers and young men were now in their late sixties and seventies. They were there to re-enact Pickett's Charge, the time the armies ran across a field and engaged in hand-to-hand combat. There is an old, grainy film of this re-enactment, and Ken Burns includes it in his award winning television documentary *The Civil War*. The Confederate and Union soldiers lined up on opposite ends of the field where they had fought 50 years earlier. They run, walk and limp towards one another, many carrying guns. When they get to the middle of the field, the place where so many died, the Union and Confederate soldiers, the Blue and the Gray, stopped...and hugged one another.

That scene expresses to me what Memorial Day is all about. We remember those who died serving our country. But they did not die so that war might continue. They died so we might end war. The best way we can honor the memory of those, who died serving their country in war, is to work for peace. It is what they would want. Peace gives their sacrifice value. They did not die in vain.

That is why when I was the Episcopal Chaplain at West Point, we would include these two prayers, one after the other, in the Prayers of the People. We would pray from page 823 of the *Book of Common Prayer*: "Almighty God, we commend to your gracious care and keeping all men and women of our armed forces at home and abroad. Defend them day by day with your heavenly grace; strengthen them in their trials and temptation; give them courage to face the perils which beset them; and grant them a sense of your abiding presence wherever they may be; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen."

We would follow that up with the Prayer for Social Justice on the same page in the BCP: "Grant, O God, that your holy and life-giving Spirit may so move every human heart (and especially the hearts of the people of this land), that barriers which divide us may crumble, suspicions disappear, and hatreds cease; that our divisions being healed, we may live in justice and peace; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen."

Memorial Day has evolved into a day that we remember not only those who died in service, but all those who serve in the Armed Forces. For that reason, I always used these prayers after I left West Point, for the twelve Memorial Days that I led the prayers at Tribute Gardens in Millbrook, New York. I invite you to consider saying those prayers yourself this Memorial Day.

And consider this prayer as well. It was said at Arlington Cemetery last year on Memorial Day, right after the President Obama spoke. The chaplain prayed, "Go into the world to preserve peace. Remember the wisdom you have learned and be courageous. Pursue excellence in all things and cling to that which is good. Resist evil always. Fear no man. Above all, love and serve the Lord. Amen."

All those encouraging words are worth reflection. But the "fear no man" really resonates with our faith. "Fear no man." That is what Jesus gave people as he set them free from anxiety, fear, addiction, obsession. Jesus took timid, scared people and sent them back out into the world fearless. Fearless people will upset the status quo.

We need fearless, faithful people to work for social justice. As we do that, we honor those who made the ultimate sacrifice. Those who died, not for more war, but for peace.

+Doug

Pentecost is a Pivotal Story

May 16, 2013

Pentecost is a pivotal story for our faith on many levels. In this blog I will look at the way the brilliant author, Saint Luke, takes what is old (the tradition) and gives birth to something new.

The New Testament is filled with references to the Hebrew Scriptures (the Old Testament). Luke is on Old Testament overdrive in the first four verses of the Pentecost story – Acts 2:1-4. The apostles are gathered on the Day of Pentecost (the ancient Hebrew celebration Feast of Weeks or Feast of the Harvest). “They were all together in one place.” That reminds us of Genesis 11 when all the peoples of the earth came together in one place. But those in Babel would seek to “make a name for ourselves” with a building that goes to heaven. These disciples are not seeking to make a name for themselves but are there to listen to God. In Genesis the people build a tower to heaven. In Acts the disciples create a bridge to God’s people on earth. The result in Genesis is a scattering of the people who can no longer speak the same language. The result in Acts will be unity as all hear the “mighty acts of God in their own language.” So this is a story telling us to go “out” to the world and not “up” to God. It tells us to use words that connect with others and not words that split us into factions where nothing can be accomplished (think Congress). That could be right, but there is more.

Luke does not want us to simply think about the contrast with the Tower of Babel story in Genesis. He also wants us to think and pray about the Exodus story. “Suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind.” Any Jewish person reading that would immediately think of the Hebrew people being trapped at the sea with the Egyptian army bearing down on them. What did God do? “The Lord drove the sea back by a strong east wind all night and turned the sea into dry land.” And in case the readers missed this reference, Luke gives us another chance. “Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them.” Look up Exodus 24:15. The Hebrews have escaped the Egyptians and now Moses has gone to the mountain to meet with God. “Now the appearance of the glory of the Lord was like a devouring fire.” So Luke is telling us that what the disciples experienced on Pentecost was what the Hebrews experienced in the Exodus – liberation. The Hebrews were enslaved to the Egyptians and now they are free. The disciples were enslaved to their fear. And now they are set free. Free to do what?

Now that Luke has firmly grounded us in the tradition, he can show us that God is doing a new thing. The disciples go out to the “devout Jews of every nation” who have gathered around and speak to them in their own languages. Luke lists the many places they are from. (I always have great sympathy for all the lay readers that have to navigate their way through this list.) At the end of this great linguistic display, some are amazed and some say “they are filled with new wine.”

If someone speaks a foreign language, I call them smart, not drunk. Why would anyone think that? I do not think it was because the disciples were speaking a foreign language. I think it is because they dared to speak about the power of God outside the buildings of the Temple and the synagogues. They dared to speak about God in the streets. And when some heard that, even the devout, they said “are you crazy? That’s spiritual language and has nothing to do with the world.”

Maybe that is the new thing God called the earliest Christians to do and what God is calling us to do in New England in the 21st Century. Grounded in our faith, in our tradition, we are to go out to the world with the message of a life-changing Spirit. I’m not inviting us to say “The Lord be with you” on Main Street. But we are invited to take Jesus’ mission of mercy and compassion and hope and bring it into our families, our neighborhoods, our places of work, our economic and political systems. The message of Jesus was never meant to be contained in a building- not the Upper Room where the disciples stayed nor the wonderful churches our ancestors selflessly constructed for us. Perhaps we could think of our church buildings as “mission centers” – sacred places we go to experience God in Word and Sacrament, and then we leave to express God’s mission that “thy will be done on earth.”

Some might think we are drunk. Some might think we have been set free to work with the Spirit for a “new heaven and a new earth.”

Pentecost is not a one time event. The pouring out of God’s Spirit continues. Read the Acts of the Apostles straight through sometime and see how many times the Spirit reappears. The Spirit is being poured out in our time. May that Spirit fill us with joy and a zeal to continue Jesus’ mission of mercy and compassion and hope now.

+Doug

Climate Revival

April 30, 2013

The Bishop's Blog – April 30, 2013

Climate Revival

I just attended the semi-annual meeting of the denominational leaders of New England. It is one of many ecumenical and inter-faith conversations I have been blessed to be a part of in these last few months. The Holy Spirit is really moving among us, bringing about new possibilities for cooperation in mission among our many churches. It is a new era and we all know we have far more in common than that which separates us. And what is most important is following Jesus in a mission of mercy, compassion, and hope.

An example of that unity in mission was the Climate Revival held last Saturday in Copley Square, Boston organized by our own Rev. Margaret Bullitt-Jonas, Bishop Bud Cederholm of Boston (the one who gave me a green Red Sox hat), and the Rev. Dr. Jim Antal of the United Church of Christ. We prayed at Old South Church (UCC) and then processed to Trinity Episcopal Church, stopping to pray and place flowers at the informal memorial in the Square where the bombs exploded at the Marathon.

The preaching at these services was tremendous. The sermon from our Presiding Bishop, the Most Rev. Katharine Jefferts Schori is [here](#). We had video messages from Bill McKibbin and Archbishop Desmond Tutu. The singing was soulful and the prayers powerful. The message throughout the day was consistent: the Earth God gave us is in trouble, but we are a people of hope.

An example of that truth and that hope is clear in this prayer we used that day:

With the prophets and the psalmists, we have the courage to speak to you our God of our despair and our fear. We raise to you, O God, our awareness of the trauma of our world: the suffering and death inflicted by toxins and pollution, the destruction of places where we once found beauty and serenity, and the ongoing destruction of ecosystems. We lift our anguish at the demise of species and the loss of diversity, the pollution of air and water and soil, the transformation even of oceans and atmosphere. We grieve and fear at the Earth's distress. Because we trust in you, O God, we are not defeated! We live in faith and as a Resurrection people!

One of the prayers I was given to read said this: We hope for vision and courage from our political leaders. We hope for restless insistence for change from our people. We hope for cooperation for healing among the nations of the earth.

Hear that? "Restless insistence for change from our people." I invite your "restless insistence for change." God's creation needs it.

+Doug

The Bishop's Blog

April 18, 2013

April 18, 2013

Praying in Boston

Please click here to access the blog site and post your comments:

<https://blog.diocesewma.org/?p=131>

Laura Everett of the Massachusetts Council of Churches invited me to be one of the church leaders at the interfaith liturgy held at The Cathedral of the Holy Cross – a prayer service responding in faith to the bombings at the Boston Marathon. Early this morning I was there, going through many security checkpoints and waiting for the arrival of the President of the United States. Whenever I go to these events, I do so representing you, the Diocese of Western Massachusetts. Spiritually, I bring you with me.

And here is what I bring back. The service was part prayer, part rally. The music was beautiful and the speeches uplifting. Our President can really preach! He was interrupted by several standing ovations and left us sure that we will always have a society that is open and free and the Boston Marathon will be back.

All the speakers, whether politicians or church leaders, emphasized the resilience of the American people and Bostonians in particular. They all expressed heart-felt gratitude to all who made sacrifices on Patriots Day, doing whatever they could to save lives. One preacher spoke of those at this iconic race who “ran toward the explosions, making their bodies into sacraments of mercy.” And all declared that love and hope will always win.

This is a great message and I believe it is true. But I also felt the service was missing a sense of lamentation – something the writers of the Hebrew Scriptures often expressed so well. I mentioned this to my wife Betsy who has a degree in grief counseling. She said, “Yes, Americans often do not mourn very well.” Sometimes, before we can express the ultimate victory, we have to stay with the mourning. Not forever, but for a while. We need to acknowledge it. We need to hold the hands of those who suffer and might be doubting God, and do so in silence until words make sense again. Remember the Easter message: Jesus did not leave the wounds behind. He took them with him.

Nancy Taylor, the senior ministry of Old South Church in Boston, described the liturgy they have for all the runners the day before the Marathon. In it the whole congregation prays over the runners with the powerful words of Isaiah 40: “May you fly on eagle’s wings, may you run and not grow weary, may you walk and not faint.”

Many times I have prayed about those words. I used to be puzzled by the order of them. Fly, run, walk. Should it not be the other way around? Don’t we walk in faith, then we run, then we fly? But a few years ago I realized the genius of Isaiah. It is actually harder to walk than it is to run or fly. Think about it. Thinking of running from thing to thing. We can do that. Perhaps my personal strength, and my weakness, is I can run and not grow weary. But walking through the tough events of life, mile after mile, and not losing consciousness? That’s hard. That’s what those who grieve loved ones killed in this tragedy will have to do. Slog through the pain and not faint. Get up day after day even when they don’t want to. That’s what those who lost limbs in the bombing will have to do. They will have to slowly, inch by inch, learn how to move again and not quit. That is what their caregivers will have to do. They will have to slow down and go at the pace of those they strive to heal. That is what we who follow the Prince of Peace in a world of violence need to do – walk day after day through it, always staying aware, always keeping hope alive in this world and not escaping to another.

No one prayer service can say it all. No one sermon can say it all. But we have a God who can hold it all – the suffering, the grieving, the hopeless and the hope-filled, the fear and the courage, the anxiety and the resilience, the mercy and the compassion, and a New Heaven and a New Earth.

+Doug

Prayers for the Victims of the Marathon Explosions

April 15, 2013

We in the Diocese of Western Massachusetts join our sisters and brothers in the Diocese of Massachusetts and people throughout the world in praying for those killed and injured in today's tragic events at the Boston Marathon. Just a week ago we heard in our Scriptures the demand of Thomas that he would only believe in the Risen Jesus if Jesus took the wounds and the wounded of this world with him into New Life. We believe and trust in a God who wraps the dying and wounded of this world in love.

So we pray: God of life and love, surround those who suffer this day with hope and grace. Thank you for the helpers who rushed to their aid. Guide the hands of those who strive to heal. Comfort those who mourn. Be our God as we cry out to you "into your hands we commend our spirit." Amen.

+Doug

Presiding Bishop offers prayer for Boston

[April 15, 2013] Episcopal Church Presiding Bishop Katharine Jefferts Schori calls for prayer following the explosions in Boston, MA, and offers the following prayer:

Gracious God, you walk with us through the valley of the shadow of death. We pray that the suffering and terrorized be surrounded by the incarnate presence of the crucified and risen one. May every human being be reminded of the precious gift of life you entered to share with us. May our hearts be pierced with compassion for those who suffer, and for those who have inflicted this violence, for your love is the only healing balm we know. May the dead be received into your enfolding arms, and may your friends show the grieving they are not alone as they walk this vale of tears. All this we pray in the name of the one who walked the road to Calvary.

Contemplating Resurrection

April 12, 2013

How is your Easter Season going? I have been blessed by powerful liturgies at Christ Cathedral (in English and in Spanish) on Easter Sunday and last week at Christ Church, Fitchburgh. I look forward to praying the rest of this holy season at St. Mark's (Leominster), St. Andrew's (North Grafton), St. Francis (Holden), Trinity (Shrewsbury), Grace (Dalton), Trinity (Milford) and at a "tent revival meeting" in Webster on Pentecost. I usually do not write out my sermons before delivering them but sometimes I write them out afterwards for publication on our website. I seriously doubt that is going to happen over these next few weeks, so I decided to share some brief reflections on the Resurrection stories in this blog and in another blog next week.

Mark 16:1-8 Mark does not give us any Resurrection stories (later on someone added a few but Mark's original gospel really ends at verse 8.) Mark does tell us three women discover the empty tomb and are told by a young man dressed in white that Jesus "has been raised" and they should go tell the disciples. But they don't do it. The gospel ends "terror and amazement had seized them and they said nothing to nobody. They were afraid because..." (This is the translation of some Koine Greek scholars.) Theories abound as to why Mark ended the Gospel in mid-sentence. But remember how Mark began his gospel: (Mk 1:1) "The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God." He tells us the beginning but he does not tell us the ending. Could it be because the good news of Jesus Christ does not end? The Resurrected Life of Jesus continues in us. We need to fill in the blank as to why we are afraid, experience a life in God that is so much greater than our fears, and then say something to somebody – become the embodiment of the good news that love is stronger than death.

John 20:1-21:24 As Mark has the least number of Resurrection stories, John has the most. I love how John seems to end his gospel at 20:30 -31 telling us that "Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book." But then he keeps on writing as if to say "wait, there's more and I just have to tell it."

In these stories Jesus has in-depth encounters with Mary Magdalene, Thomas and Peter and in each reveals another dimension for our life in God. Mary Magdalene wants to hold on to Jesus but he won't let her. The Risen Jesus needs to be the Cosmic Christ and therefore cannot be held in one time and place. (Richard Rohr's new book [The Immortal Diamond](#) has a brilliant theology built on this passage.)

The meeting between the Risen Jesus and Thomas is my favorite. Although Jesus has appeared to the disciples, Thomas will not believe until "I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side." Good for you, Thomas. I'm with you. Thomas would not believe in a Jesus that escaped the real world. He wants to believe in a God who takes the wounds and the wounded with him. He wants a God that still identifies with and cares for a wounded humanity. And when Thomas sees those wounds still there in the Risen Jesus he can say the most profound faith proclamation of all: "My Lord and my God." Not "Lord and God" but "*my Lord and my God.*" My life, my real life, is found in this God. God does not love an ideal, perfect, unscarred me. God loves a wounded me. And on a societal level the Risen Jesus will never abandon all those who suffer, those who are oppressed.

And in this Sunday's passage we hear the conversation of the Risen Jesus with Peter (after the great catch of fish). Jesus has already told the disciples, who had deserted him at the cross, that they were forgiven and should be at peace (20:19-23). But somehow Peter was not feeling forgiven, not feeling the peace. Remember Peter had denied knowing Jesus three times on the night before his death. In his wisdom Jesus reverses the three time denial by asking Peter three times "do you love me?" He makes Peter aware that he loves Jesus and is loved by Jesus – a love that is stronger than death *and* a love that is stronger than sin. Jesus invites Peter into a love that sets him free from a past that was paralyzing him. And it is a love that frees him for commitment to "follow me."

Next week I hope to look at the Resurrection stories of Matthew and Luke. For now I will leave you with a question for which I have never found a good answer. In this Sunday's telling of the great catch of fish, John tells us the exact number of fish caught – 153. Now it is not unusual for fishermen to count the fish (when I was a boy my dad and I once caught 220 mackerel, so the apostles did not beat our record.) But it is unusual for John to mention something that does not have symbolic value. John does not waste details. They all mean something and often it is a reference to the Hebrew Scriptures. I guess I will have to go back and read it again, but I don't remember a 153 mentioned in the Old Testament. Some scholars have said it refers to the 153 known species of fish in the world at that time, meaning that all people would be brought into the "net" of Jesus. I think those scholars are just guessing. They don't offer any legitimate evidence that there were 153 known species or that John would know that.

What do you think? What does 153 mean? Please don't offer the bizarre argument of St. Augustine in which he added 17, 16, 15 and so on down to one which gets 153 and why that is meaningful. Augustine is a saint and possibly the most brilliant theologian of all time but this was not one of his better moments. You could google this question and get "about 19,200,000 results" but none of them make any sense to me. What do you think? Is the 153 significant or is John just messing with us?

Happy Easter Season to all.

+Doug

They Deserve a Vote

March 26, 2013



Bishop Douglas Fisher; the Rev. Peter Swarr, St. Mark's, East Longmeadow; and the Rev. Meredyth Ward, Epiphany, Wilbraham in Washington, DC, March 25.

I'm writing this blog from an airport in Washington DC after a day of meeting with White House staff and praying the Stations of the Cross in the streets near the Capitol. It snowed and rained throughout. I'm still cold and wet. We were told to wear cassocks. That cassock is in my carry-on bag and it must weigh ten pounds. But what a very, very small price to pay to stand with those who mourn loved ones killed by gun violence. Gun violence that our government can reduce with wise policies. Gun violence that our government is too paralyzed by special interests to address.

Walking the Stations of the Cross with several hundred people, including those from Western Massachusetts who got on a bus at midnight to get here and won't be home until after midnight tonight, was a spiritual experience with political implications. We remembered our Savior, an innocent person who willingly died a violent death to show God's unity with all who suffer. And we did it within steps of the White House and Capitol. With all the words of the powerful religious service, I could not help but go back to the words of our President in the State of the Union Address in which he listed all the massacres by gun violence of the last few years and he kept shouting, "They deserve a vote! They deserve a vote!" Remember the power of that moment? I do. And I remember the power of Jesus' words when, after dying a violent death, he came to us as the Resurrected Christ and did not say, "Vengeance", did not say "Arm up." He said, "Peace" and gave us a whole new way of living.

Reducing and ending violence of all kinds is God's plan for the world. It is worth walking in the rain and snow. It is worth a vote in Congress. And it is worth a lot more.

+Doug

GIVEN AT WARDENS' VESTRY DAY, AMERICAN INTERNATIONAL COLLEGE, SPRINGFIELD, MA

March 16, 2013

PROPERS: MARK 2:1-12

Jesus Heals a Paralytic

2When he returned to Capernaum after some days, it was reported that he was at home. 2So many gathered around that there was no longer room for them, not even in front of the door; and he was speaking the word to them. 3Then some people* came, bringing to him a paralysed man, carried by four of them. 4And when they could not bring him to Jesus because of the crowd, they removed the roof above him; and after having dug through it, they let down the mat on which the paralytic lay. 5When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, 'Son, your sins are forgiven.' 6Now some of the scribes were sitting there, questioning in their hearts, 7'Why does this fellow speak in this way? It is blasphemy! Who can forgive sins but God alone?' 8At once Jesus perceived in his spirit that they were discussing these questions among themselves; and he said to them, 'Why do you raise such questions in your hearts? 9Which is easier, to say to the paralytic, "Your sins are forgiven", or to say, "Stand up and take your mat and walk"? 10But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins'—he said to the paralytic— 11'I say to you, stand up, take your mat and go to your home.' 12And he stood up, and immediately took the mat and went out before all of them; so that they were all amazed and glorified God, saying, 'We have never seen anything like this!'

FOLLOWING JESUS

Wardens/Vestry Day and an election of a Pope all in one week. The Holy Spirit must be in overdrive. We are all praying for the new Bishop of Rome. I'll let him settle in for a while – I know how time consuming a new ministry can be – and then I'll write to Pope Francis and invite him to a pulpit exchange. He could preach at Christ Cathedral one Sunday and I'll preach at St. Peter's.

This is one of two reflections I will offer at this morning's Eucharist. My theme now is Following Jesus. After Communion, I will offer some thoughts on Leading in Jesus Name.

To follow Jesus we need to know Jesus. And as Episcopalians, we appreciate many perspectives on whom Jesus is. There is an old story of a Roman Catholic, an evangelical Protestant and an Episcopalian who appear before Jesus, hoping to be let into heaven. Jesus asks them each the question: "Who do YOU say I am?" The Roman Catholic says "Well, the catechism says..." Jesus cuts him off and says "I don't care what the catechism says. What do you say? Go back down there and think about it some more." Jesus turns to the evangelical Protestant and asks "Who do YOU say I am?" And the Protestant replies, "Well the Bible says..." And Jesus stops him and says "I didn't ask you what the Bible says. I want to know what you say. Go back there and think about it some more." Now it's the Episcopalian's turn. Jesus asks "Who do you say I am?" And immediately the Episcopalian says "You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God." Jesus is thrilled with that answer and just as he starts to lead her into the Kingdom of Heaven, she says "But then again on the other hand..."

I chose today's reading from the Second Chapter of the Gospel of Mark because it reveals who Jesus is AND it tells us what it means to follow Jesus. Let's look at this great story.

Jesus is "at home"- probably in Simon Peter's house. He is teaching and the house is packed with people, spellbound by his teaching. We know when Jesus teaches, he teaches with authority. One of our great teachers right here in Western Mass is Margaret Bullitt-Jonas. She tells us "When Jesus speaks, he speaks with the authority of God. He conveys through his presence, gestures and words, the very presence and power of God. Jesus is not just imparting information. He is not just passing along something he read in a book. He is not just giving second-hand ideas, however interesting they may be. No, when he teaches, he is lit up with God. He is not inviting us to think about God or talk about God,

but to experience God. Jesus is a teacher who wants not just to put new ideas in our minds, but to transform our minds. Not just to fill up our consciousness but to enlarge it, to break it open, so that we can meet the God who makes all things new."

That is who is in the house. There is a paralyzed man and his friends know that something will change for him if he can just get to meet Jesus. Four of those friends carry him to the house and that very action tells us two dimensions of what it means to be a follower of Jesus.

One, we need others to know Jesus. It is impossible to know Jesus unless someone tells us about him. Consider this: You can believe in God without anyone ever telling you about God. You can go to the ocean or a mountaintop, look out and realize there is a creator and center of the universe and it is not me. Humans are hard-wired for God. But you can't go to a

mountain or an ocean and suddenly experience Jesus. Jesus is a real person and we only know him because others tell us about him. To be Christian, to be a follower of Jesus, requires a community of faith. We can be spiritual but not religious. We cannot be Christian and not religious.

The four people who bring the paralyzed man to see Jesus reveal another great truth, see how much they love their friend. The life of Jesus, indeed all the wisdom of the Hebrew Scriptures and that of holy women and holy men through the centuries tell us this: God loves you at least as much as the person who loves you the most.

They get to the house and can't get in. How they get in is the subject of my second reflection, the one of "Leading in Jesus' Name." So let's skip to what happens in the house when they finally do get to see Jesus.

The first thing Jesus does, without being asked, is forgive the paralyzed man of his sins. How does Jesus know he has sinned? Because he knows he is dealing with a human being. And Jesus is doing what God does. He is making the man whole again, even with his physical handicap. He is freeing him from his sin so he may see the love which is all around him. An encounter with the Sacred always expands us and that is what happens here. Jesus is offering transformation. The paralyzed man has the possibility of being a loving person now because we know that loving, forgiving people have always encountered a loving and forgiving God.

This leads to a heresy charge from the scribes. Only God can forgive sin, they say. To which Jesus responds "ok, so what's your point?" Jesus is God among us. And to show that Jesus then does what God does – he goes to where the pain is. It is what he will do definitively by going to his death on a cross.

There are many good theologies of the Cross (as the Episcopalian said "on the other hand.") Here is one of my favorites from Richard Rohr. "Jesus hung on the cross in total solidarity with the pain of the world and the far too many lives on this planet that have been nasty, lonely, brutish and short. After the cross, we know that God is not watching human pain, nor apparently always stopping human pain, as much as God is found hanging with us alongside human pain. Jesus' ministry of healing and death, of solidarity with the crucified of history, forever tells us that God is found wherever the pain is."

And just as the death of Jesus is not the last word, resurrection is, so goes it with the paralyzed man who has encountered God in Jesus. At Jesus' command he stands up – he rises- and walks. It is interesting that Jesus does not tell him to stay with the disciples. Instead he is told clearly to "go home." Following Jesus might mean going home, to our families, to our neighborhoods, to our old relationships, but as a new creation.

Jesus tells him to go home and to bring the mat with him, the mat where he had lain as a paralyzed man, the mat where he had experienced his pain. Now I might be pushing this story too far in a comparison to the death and resurrection of Jesus, so don't tell the bishop! But perhaps he is to carry his mat for the same reason that the Risen Jesus will still bear his wounds – the marks in his hands and feet, the wound in

his side. I think that reason is to stay, as Risen and Transformed people, in solidarity with the oppressed and suffering people of our world.

Following Jesus is a great adventure. An adventure that allows us to say with great joy: "Glory to God whose power, working in us, can do infinitely more than we can ask of imagine. Glory to him from generation to generation in the Church, and in Christ Jesus forever and ever. Amen."

LEADING IN JESUS' NAME

Come back with me to September 1961. I was six years old and it was my first day in first grade. We had 60 children in the class – not the grade, the one class. The teacher told us to take out our workbooks and open to the first page. On the page were drawings of two crayons. She told us to make the top crayon green and the bottom crayon red. That's easy. I have this brand new box of crayons in front of me so I went to work. I went to the top crayon drawing and made the front part and the back part of the crayon green – you know, the parts that are not covered by the paper wrapping. Then I did the same with the bottom drawing – making it red just like I was told to do. But I still had all these cool new crayons in my box. So I went took them and started making that paper wrapping on the drawings all sorts of colors. Yellow followed blue and then some brown and purple. I thought it looked great!

The teacher was walking up and down the aisles looking at our workbooks. Suddenly she said "someone in this class has not followed instructions." I thought "what fool couldn't follow those instructions? Make the top crayon green and the bottom one red." And then she picked up my workbook and held it up and said "this child did not follow instructions." I was mortified. And then she made me color over the paper wrapping with green for one and red for the other. And that just made it all look like mud.

My six-year old self made a vow that day. I would always give the teacher exactly the answer she wanted. And I did for the rest of my education, at every level, grade school, high school, college, and seminary. I always gave the right answer and I was rewarded for it, always getting the best grades. But there was a price for that. I never did anything creative. I never

thought outside the box. It was only as a young priest that my terror of giving boring sermons demanded that I use the imagination God blessed me with.

Let's turn to our Gospel for today. Remember how the four friends carried the paralyzed man to the house where Jesus was preaching – a house so packed that they could not get in through the door. If my young-self had been there that day, I would have said, "well, we can't get in. We either bring our friend lying on the mat back home, or sit out here and wait until Jesus comes out." I would have been horrified to hear one of my companions say, "I have an idea. Let's lift the mat up to the roof. When we get him up there, we can listen to where we think Jesus is. Then tear the roof apart and lower him down in front of Jesus." Talk about getting creative! It was not the usual answer, and it was risky. Not easy carrying someone up to a roof. And what a social risk! Remember this was probably Peter's house, a man known for a gruff temper. What would he do when he saw his roof pulled apart? And how would Jesus respond if he was in the midst of point two of a three point sermon?

But the plan worked. The paralyzed man walked home. And everyone was amazed.

Don't you wish you had those four friends on your vestry? We never know their names and we never hear from them again in the Gospels. But I bet Jesus wished they had stayed around. He could have used their creative problem-solving minds and their can-do spirit. In my short time in Western Massachusetts, many of you have already heard me preach about the Feeding of the 5000. You know the story: 5000 hungry people, and Jesus tells the apostles to feed them. The apostles say "we can't. We only have a few loaves and fish." At that moment I bet Jesus rolled his eyes and thought "where are those four people that tore the roof open that day in Capernaum?"

Jesus would not allow conventional thinking to stop him. Several times people in need of healing came to Jesus on the Sabbath and the nearby Pharisees would say "you are not allowed to heal on the Sabbath." And Jesus said "watch me." Sounds a little like our times: It's Sunday. Don't you know it's time for soccer? We can't go to Church on Sunday.

In the time of Jesus, rabbis would stay in one place. People sought them out for their wisdom. Jesus was a rabbi – a teacher. But Jesus broke the mold on rabbis. He did not stay in one place. He was constantly on the move, going out into the world. And he told his followers to do the same. Pack light and go. Christianity was unique at that time in history because it was the first truly missionary faith movement. We need to rediscover that missionary zeal.

It's Wardens and Vestry Day. You are our leaders. Bless you souls! I invite you and me to lead like Jesus and those four friends of the paralyzed man. Tap into the endless creativity that is our God. It's risky but we don't have a "play-it safe God".

George Cunnell, the Bishop of New Jersey, and much loved for his work in Western Mass, gave an inspired speech about this at the House of Bishops last week. In that speech he quoted the book by Ann Lamott, Help, Thanks, Wow! "If we stay where we are, where we are stuck, where we are comfortable and safe, we die there. We become like mushrooms, living in the dark. If you want to know only what you already know, you're dying. When nothing new can get in, that's death. When oxygen can't find a way in, you die. But new is scary, and new can be disappointing, and confusing- we had this all figured out and now we don't."

You and I, we are called to lead in Jesus' name in a new time. Our time is often called "post-Christian." It is a secular time – especially in New England. Church going is not the norm. For you who so faithfully pay the bills, it is a scary time. But we have this great opportunity to dig deep into our past and come out with the missionary zeal of Jesus, with the desire to be creative with our ever-creative God, to connect with a God that has the imagination to make giraffes.

Allow me one more bishop story. Rob Wright is the Bishop of Atlanta and, like me, a former New Yorker. When Rob celebrates a baptism, after he pours the water and anoints with oil, gives a candle to the godparents, and welcomes the newly baptized to loud cheers, he looks around and says "Anyone else?"

Now all of us who spend many hours preparing adults for baptism and time with parents preparing them for the baptism of their babies, might be shocked by that. And I'm not sure of the theology of that invitation myself. "But on the other hand, who knows? Maybe that is grace in action. Maybe that is the nimbleness that God is calling us to.

Thank God for you, leaders of our church. I'm going to stop talking and we are going to start singing. And let's go learn something new today. Let's open ourselves to God's future, which is as hopeful and creative and life-giving as God's own self, made known to us in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.

+Doug

Report from the House of Bishops: The Gift of Community

March 11, 2013

I'm in Hendersonville, North Carolina at my first House of Bishops meeting. The Bishops from every Diocese in the United States and our associated dioceses (e.g. Haiti, Taiwan) meet every March and every September. It is a blessed experience.

It has not always been so. Bishops with far more years in this than I, talk sadly about a time in the 1990s when "the House" was in constant conflict. Everyone took a side on the issues of the day and argued endlessly. But in the midst of that turmoil, wise leaders decided to intentionally build community within the diverse voices of the bishops. It took them years, but I am grateful to be in the House of Bishops that is a model of "unity celebrating diversity."

This is a gathering of high powered, confident people. But they know, really know, that they are not their opinions. They (we- somehow by the strange working of the Holy Spirit I'm in this group), know we belong to something far greater than our opinions on scripture, theology, and the issues of our time. We belong to the Body of Christ. And that grounds everything in a bigger truth than what I think. We are not the Body of Christ because we agree with each other. We are the Body of Christ because we care about each other.

You and I in the holy Diocese of Western Massachusetts talk about a community that follows Jesus in a mission of mercy, compassion, and hope. The bishops are trying to model that community. The way to peace is peace and the way to community is community. That is empowered by Spirited liturgies with powerful preaching and inspirational music. It is reflected in the welcome of the newcomer. I intended to hold back here and stay in the background as a "freshman." But over and over again, I'm encouraged to speak up. I see someone who has written ten books and I want to get their autograph, and they ask me "Doug, what do you think about this?" – and they **mean** it. In our parishes, we all want to be welcoming. By personal experience I can say our bishops are modeling that for us, showing us the way.

This meeting has something of everything. There are conservatives and liberals. There are Yankee fans and Red Sox fans, and fans of all those other teams. There are straight and gay. There are bishops from huge western dioceses and from New England where every church is within driving distance. There are bishops who want gun regulation now and bishops from dioceses where people will not allow any amendment to the Second Amendment. We disagree on a lot of things, great and small. But at the end of the day, we have dinner together, talk about our families (I think the stories about my kids are the best), and are united by a God who loves us no matter what.

I'm really blessed to be in the House of Bishops at this time. And I'm grateful for all those who sacrificed to make it this way. Come Holy Spirit and make all our parishes, all our worshipping communities, places of unity celebrating diversity. Our God is multi-dimensional, always creating, ever bigger than our own limited vision. May we together enter the life of that God, known to us in Christ Jesus our Savior.

+Doug

Momentum Sunday

March 6, 2013

It was three weeks ago we began the Season of Lent with ashes and the words: “Remember you are dust and to dust you will return.” And there are three weeks to go until the Easter Season – a time when we remember “Love is stronger than death, and unto that love you are returned.” So I should still be reflecting and writing about Lent. But I’m choosing to skip ahead to Easter for this blog entry because I have an Easter suggestion that would require some preparation.

The Sunday after Easter is often referred to as “low Sunday.” The large Easter crowds are gone. Perhaps the choir takes that Sunday off because they worked so hard during Holy Week. We might discontinue the adult education forums we had on Lenten Sundays. Church leaders take time to unwind after a busy season. I invite our church leaders to reconsider that plan. Make “low Sunday” into “Momentum Sunday.” Take the Spirit of Easter Sunday and keep it going. Easter is not a conclusion. It is a whole new beginning. Consider a sports’ comparison for a moment. Opening Day of the Baseball Season is glorious. After that day Major League Baseball does not shut down for a couple of weeks. It ramps up.

At the churches where I served, we celebrated the Second Sunday of Easter in a big way. We invited those who attended Easter services to come back on that Sunday and find out more about our faith community. I taught an introductory level class about prayer as an adult education forum that Sunday. The Choir was “on” for the liturgy. The Coffee Hour was special. Information was handed out about our many ministries and activities. It was a time of evangelization.

In an intentional way, let’s celebrate Easter for what it is – a season, not a day. I always found it interesting that the *Book of Common Prayer* offers us very clear directions concerning Lent. “*Dear People of God...I invite you, in the name of the Church, to the observance of a holy Lent, by self-examination and repentance, by prayer, fasting, and self-denial; and by reading and meditating on God’s holy Word.*” But we don’t get any instructions for the Easter Season. What are we supposed to do to observe a holy Easter Season? How do we celebrate and practice Resurrection? A few years ago I wrote an “instruction” for the Easter Season and we would read it at Easter liturgies. “*Dear People of God, I invite you...*” In a blog closer to Easter, I will include it.

For now I have to get back to Lent

The “Mother Hen” Image of Jesus Is for Our Time

February 21, 2013

Some Pharisees came and said to Jesus, “Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you.” He said to them, “Go and tell that fox for me, ‘Listen, I am casting out demons and performing cures today, tomorrow, and on the third day I finish my work. Yet, today, tomorrow and the next day I must be on my way, because it is impossible for a prophet to be killed outside of Jerusalem.’ 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, and you were not willing!” Luke 13:31-34

Herod, the vicious King who murdered his own son because he viewed him as a threat to his reign and executed John the Baptist because the prophet dared to speak the truth, is now after Jesus. When he hears this, Jesus enters a game of metaphors. He calls Herod “that fox” – not the lion that Herod called himself. But then Jesus likens himself to a hen, longing to gather her chicks under her wing. Foxes destroy hens. If Jesus views himself mightier than Herod, why didn’t he choose another comparison?

Why didn’t Jesus choose an animal that could defeat the fox? Jesus was immersed in the Scriptures and the Bible gave him many possibilities. The Psalms speak of horses – “mighty but with no power to save.” And Leviathan – the great sea monster that God made “for the sport of it.” Or he could have picked the mighty eagle in Exodus. Surely an eagle could swoop down and do away with a fox. How about the leopard from Hosea? Or best of all, the lion of Judah. But, no, Jesus went with a hen, gathering her brood under her wings.

It is interesting that the mother hen imagery for God never gained much traction in the church. We know by the art of the early church that the Good Shepherd image was very popular. Think of the many times the Holy Spirit is pictured as a dove. Like many churches, my beloved former parish had the resurrection symbol of the Phoenix on the altar frontal. And how many of our pulpits have eagles? There is a church on the outskirts of Jerusalem with a stained glass window of a hen with her wings outstretched and her chicks protected beneath her. But the image is rare. Maybe we just did not appreciate the power of this image Jesus so deliberately chose.

Perhaps it took until now to understand it. After the massacre at the Sandy Hook School in Newtown, Connecticut, stories began to emerge about the heroism of the teachers. Vicki Soto, was a teacher who loved helping children learn. Her many friends spoke of her enthusiasm for life, what a good friend she was, how she loved watching the movie *The Little Mermaid*, even as an adult. When a man with a gun entered her classroom and approached her students huddled together in a closet, she threw her body in front of them. Vicki took the bullets intended for her children and died at 27 years young. Story after story was told of other teachers, many who survived, who draped their bodies over the little bodies of their students, protecting them from what destruction might come.

We know from our hearts that is what love looks like. And Jesus goes further. He says that is what God looks like. And Jesus is on a mission from God – a mission to create a world of mercy and compassion and hope. Herod can’t create that world. More guns can’t create that world. But the Vicki Sotos of the world can. Maybe Vicki Soto and the teachers of Sandy Hook can help us understand God better. And inspire us to live out who we are – a people created in God’s image.

We are just a ten days into Lent. Just ten days since we heard the great truth “You are dust and unto dust you shall return.” But there is another truth. The truth of Easter. My favorite author, Richard Rohr, says we should be anointed on Easter morning with the other half of the message:

“Love is always stronger than death, and unto that love you are now returned.”

Ash Wednesday Sermon

February 13, 2013

“When you give alms, do not blow a trumpet before you” says Jesus. But the prophet Isaiah disagrees. Just a few minutes ago we heard Isaiah say “Shout out, do not hold back! Lift up your voice like a trumpet!” So what is it? Trumpets or no trumpets? Stay with me in this sermon for a few minutes and maybe an answer will be revealed.

Here is a story where someone should have listened to Jesus and stayed away from the trumpets. A church I served in the 1990’s, Holy Innocents in Highland Falls, right outside West Point, was blessed by the financial support of the J.P.Morgan family. J.P. Morgan had a summer home in Highland Falls and served on the vestry there for many years in the 1890’s and into the 20th Century. Legend has it that when he would ride to church in his horse-drawn carriage, a trumpeter would go before him down the streets of Highland Falls, loudly announcing his arrival. Not a good use of trumpets.

We may not be blowing trumpets about our religious practice but there is a more subtle way we could distort this holy season of Lent. We might do that by making this a season of self-improvement. Here’s what I mean by that. One of our Founding Fathers, Benjamin Franklin, without any religious motivation, did a very Lenten practice once. It is described in his unfinished autobiography. As we will do in a little while, he made a list of all his failings. Our list is quite a litany of sin: we will confess pride, hypocrisy, envy, false judgment, love of worldly goods, blindness to human need, waste of creation, and lack of concern for those that come after us. All that sounds so real to me. Benjamin Franklin had a similar list. He wrote them all down on one side of the page, then he listed the weeks of the year across the top of the page, and made a commitment to knock out one fault a week. Get rid of pride in week one; blindness to human need in week two; and so on. But eventually the always optimistic and pragmatic Franklin gave up. His path to self-improvement was not working.

Sometimes we are tempted to follow the Franklin path at Lent. We make an honest assessment of ourselves and then we get to work on the list. Now I am not against self-improvement. The older I get, the more I know there are things I need to work on – and quickly! But that is not what Lent is. Lent is about God shaping us into a New Creation. And the secret to being that new creation lies in the words we will use in the imposition of ashes.

“Remember you are dust and to dust you will return.” Those words sound so despairing! I remember as a young priest learning that some priests were experimenting with the Ash Wednesday liturgy and using other words. They would impose the ashes and say “Believe the Good News.” I jumped on that bandwagon. I would much rather tell people to believe the Good News than tell them (and myself) that we are dust, and to dust we will return. But this is only despairing if we forget what God can do with dust. We are told in the great mythic story of Genesis: “Then the Lord God formed man from the *dust of the ground*, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the 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.

Lent is an opportunity to look for the action of God in our lives, in the person of Jesus we meet our God who is oh so active. Healing. Forgiving. Liberating. Guiding. Comforting. Challenging. Everything and everyone Jesus touched was transformed in some way. Water became wine. Scarcity became abundance. The scared became courageous. Sinners were forgiven and received a chance to start over. The oppressed were set free. The broken were made whole. Call us crazy, but we believe that Jesus is still doing that. The great Methodist preacher, John Wesley, used to ask “how goes it with your soul?” It is not an abstract question. It is an invitation to reflect on God healing, forgiving, guiding, comforting, challenging, and liberating us and our world.

Lent lasts a long time. Something in me equates it with Advent. But Advent is only four weeks and it seems to fly by. Lent is six weeks and sometimes seems too long. But maybe it needs to be so long so I can stop making life all about me and start making about the God who gives me life – the God who is constantly recreating me out of dust.

Perhaps our God who recreates us out of dust can give us the courage to proclaim a New Creation for our world, our society. Consider this witness, a woman named Isabella Baumfree that God recreated. Isabella, an African-American, was born into slavery in New York in 1797. She escaped slavery in 1828 and lived as a free woman. In her soul she heard God urging her to proclaim the good news of God’s liberation for all people. She heard God renaming her “Sojourner” because she was to travel widely proclaiming this message. She said to God “People have two names. What should my second name be?” And God answered “Truth.” Sojourner Truth went throughout our country preaching freedom. When she was in Indiana, there was a threat that the building in which she would appear would be burned down. She was asked what she would do if that happened. Sojourner Truth said “Then I will speak upon the ashes.” God does great things with dust.

Let’s come close to ending this sermon with a prayer. It comes from a prayerful person named Jan Richardson and it is all about us and dust and God.

Did you not know what the Holy One can do with dust?

This is the day we freely say we are scorched.

This is the hour we are marked by what has made it through the burning.

This is the moment we ask for the blessing that lives within the ancient ashes,
that makes its home inside the soil of this sacred earth.

So let us be marked not for sorrow. And let us be marked not for shame. Let us be marked not for false humility or for thinking we are less than we are but for claiming what God can do within the dust, within the dirt, *within the stuff of which the world is made, and the stars that blaze in our bones, and the galaxies that spiral inside the smudge we bear*

I think that is worth blowing a trumpet. Our God who conquers death, our God who creates a new heaven and a new earth, our God who can make a New Creation out of you and me is here. Amen.

A sermon preached at All Saints', Worcester

by the Rt. Rev. Douglas J. Fisher

John the Baptist, Jesus and Us

January 26, 2013

I have always been fascinated with John the Baptist. He boldly proclaims the coming of God's Kingdom and he courageously confronts King Herod. He clearly had a deep influence on Jesus. Jesus does not start his ministry until he goes to John to be baptized. Some scripture scholars say Jesus does not begin to preach until John is imprisoned and can no longer preach. Jesus takes up his preaching mission. And Jesus preaches about life until John is executed by Herod. Then Jesus starts to speak about his own death. The lives of Jesus and John are deeply inter-connected.

Why then does Jesus say "Truly I tell you, among those born of women no one has arisen greater than John the Baptist; yet the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he"? There are numerous commentaries about this and wise reflections about Jesus bringing the Spirit – a Spirit John could hope for but not give. Recently I appreciated the difference between John the Baptist and Jesus in a new way.

In the past few months we have seen events that have shaken our world. The first was superstorm Sandy in October. For years now, many scientists have warned of climate change but were often ignored. The devastation of Sandy, coupled with major weather events throughout the world in recent years, showed us definitively that climate change is upon us. Predictions are made that we will be getting the "storm of the century" every few years. With you I feel an urgency to act now. The gift of our world that God has given to us is in danger.

The other event that has touched our souls is the massacre at Newtown, Connecticut. It has made us reflect on the violence of our culture and our addiction to guns. In the meeting of New England bishops last week, one bishop said "if nothing in our society changes after Newtown, that would be obscene."

Now let's go back to John the Baptist and Jesus. John the Baptist was "the voice crying out in the wilderness." He was a solitary figure screaming for social justice but it was a just a voice crying out in the wilderness. Some people were drawn to that voice, but nothing changed.

With Jesus everything changes. Water becomes wine, bread becomes his Body, wine becomes his blood, the hungry are fed, sinners are forgiven and begin again, the scared become fearless, the lame walk, the dead live. Jesus began a movement centered in compassion and mercy and hope that changed the world and will continue to change the world if we live in his Spirit. That is why the least in the kingdom of heaven are greater than John.

Climate change. Gun regulation and a culture of violence. We don't want to be just "voices crying out in the wilderness" and everything remains the same. We don't follow John the Baptist, as great as he is. We follow Jesus who *transforms* us individually AND society. We are not called to be on the fringes of society. We are called to be in the midst of society as agents of mercy, compassion and hope.

Right now The Rev. Chris Carlisle and I are working on a position paper that will be a theological/political reflection on our culture of violence and gun regulation. It will be something to ponder but hopefully something more than that. May it be a call to action so we may work in collaboration with others for the peace that Jesus says can be ours.

In a couple of weeks, our clergy will gather for a day to learn about climate change and a reflection on how we can be spiritually aware participants in God's creation. The day ends with specific actions we might take to be leaders in our communities as we face a huge challenge. We do this because we believe God's power, working in us, will make a difference.

Let's turn to Luke's gospel. In his account of the Resurrection, women go to the tomb and two men in white tell them Jesus is not here but risen. The women go back to tell the apostles, but they do not believe them "because their words seemed like an idle tale."

The transformative power of the Resurrection is not an idle tale. It has power in our lives and in our society. Our faith is not an abstraction. It is meant to change the world.

"May God's power, working in us, do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine." (Ephesians)

+Doug

Last week I had my “official”...

January 12, 2013

Last week I had my “official” picture taken as the Ninth Bishop of Western Massachusetts. For symbolic purposes it was important to me to have that picture taken out in a street in Springfield. Thanks to the good work of photographer Russ Rheault and my Executive Assistant, Cozette Haggerty, (who drove us around looking for the right spot and then kept my vestments from dragging in the mud) the pictures were taken. Symbolic actions should speak for themselves and not be explained, but I think it is worth a moment to ponder what went into my decision.

We are a Matthew 28 AND Matthew 25 people. Matthew 28 tells us to go forth and baptize all people. It is about evangelism. And we really need that in our church now. We need to invite people to church. Not for the sake of the church itself, not to get more people so we can pay our bills, but for the sake of God’s mission in the world – a mission of mercy, compassion and hope. We want to bring them (and us) IN, so we can send them (and us) OUT as a people on fire with the Holy Spirit, transforming the world (Matthew 25).

Recently a priest sent me her resume asking to be kept in mind for parishes in our diocese looking for clergy. Her mission statement read “to bring the Gospel from the altar to the street.” As followers of Jesus, isn’t that what we are all called to do?

My wife, Betsy, the vicar of St. Thomas’ in Dutchess County, says this prayer from the back of the church at the end of each liturgy. It is based on Paul’s first letter to the Thessalonians, the 5th chapter: “Go forth into the world in peace. Be of good courage. Hold fast to what is good. Render to no one evil for evil. Strengthen the faint-hearted. Support the weak. Help the afflicted. Honor all people. The worship is over. Let the service begin.”

It’s interesting that the Sunday gospels in 2013 are mostly from the Luke. Each gospel has its own perspective on the multi-dimensional and always fascinating person of Jesus. In Mark’s Gospel, for example, the disciples are always misunderstanding Jesus. They always get it wrong before they get it right. Jesus has to keep saying to them, “No, that’s not it. Go back and think this through again.” Mark’s Gospel has been called the “down and in” gospel. Go deeper. Go into your soul and then be ready to act “immediately” to the invitation of Jesus. Luke is different. It is the “up and out” gospel. The disciples are continually being “sent.” Until in Luke’s second book, The Acts of the Apostles, they are sent out to all the world.

I’m glad we are immersed in Luke’s Gospel this year. May we have the Spirit within us to take the gospel from the altar to the street. When the worship is over, may the service begin.