

August 5, 2018

What Does it Mean to Be the Church?

Prayer

May the words of my mouth be meditations of our hearts and be always accessible unto Thee. O Lord our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

Sermon

So far this summer I've focused more on the Epistle readings for the Sundays than the gospel readings. I intend to do that again today. Because I think the message that Paul has for the church in Ephesus is one that we need to hear. That we need to take very seriously. And one that I think our church, the Episcopal church, is taking more seriously now than it has in some years actually.

In the Epistle reading for today, Paul's letter to the Ephesians he is trying to help them to know and to understand what it is to be the church. Sometimes we're good at doing church but not being church. And these folks at least had a good excuse. It's the first century, they just heard the good news. And the people that have heard it have come together and they are struggling to understand. Now that we have heard this message of forgiveness. Now that we have heard this message of salvation. What do we do? How do we live it out? What is it that's expected of us?

And Paul is dealing with a very diverse group of individuals. Some of them who have lived as Jews all their lives think they have a pretty good handle on what this means. It means living out the law. But living out the law with the assurance that forgiveness of sins that was attained through Jesus' life, death, and resurrection is what truly leads to salvation. But the reflection of that, the living out of that truth, is to

better able to live out the law as they have received it, as they have known it. As they have tried to live it out even though they have not always succeeded. They failed doing that.

But now they have the gospel, the good news. That in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, the son of God, their sins are forgiven. That their salvation comes not by their works but by grace. And that they are called to live accordingly and share that with the world. But the law which was not taken away and Paul makes that clear but was fulfilled by Jesus was still a good guideline. About how they are to be in relationship with God and in relationship with another.

We also have in this new community called the church a group of people who are Gentile Pagan's. They may have come from many different religions, but they have heard the gospel. They have heard that there is one God who created, who sustains creation. And by coming into creation in Jesus Christ has redeemed creation. And they have been invited to be a part of that. To live life anew with this new knowledge and understanding that this creator God, this sustainer God, is also their redeemer God. And they now have the opportunity to live in relationship with God and to share that with the world. And their learning about the law from their Jewish brothers and sisters. But they're still struggling to understand. Well, what does it mean? What does it mean to be this new thing called the church?

And in his letter Paul said something that I hope sounded familiar when it was being read. It just so happens that in the Episcopal church's wisdom they incorporated it into our prayer book. Matter of fact, it's in two places. It's in the baptismal service. It's also in the confirmation service. You might remember hearing this just a few minutes ago. There is one body and one spirit. There is one hope is God's call to us. One Lord, one faith, one baptism. One God and Father of all.

That was the foundation that Paul gave to this church in Ephesus as they are struggling to understand what now, we've heard the message. We've seen the power of the Holy Spirit in some of our members. But what do we do with that? How do we live that? And Paul puts it in language about being one body. Understanding that it is one spirit that binds us together. That leads us into living out our lives. As we go away from the community because this is a great gathering. And the church coming together in the first century was a great gathering. They came together to worship. They came together to learn. They came together to be inspired.

But that was only a very small part. That's doing the church. That's how we become able to go out the doors and go out into the world. And to share a gospel message, a good news to the people who have not yet heard, who do not yet know. And certainly, in the first century, that would be the majority of the people.

And so, Paul tries to get them to know and to understand that by being the one body. Being empowered by the one spirit they are able to go out and speak the gospel and live the gospel in such a way that those who hear it are moved. Moved to draw an era. Moved to want to know more about a God who says whether you have been near or far I came into the world for you. So that you can know my love. So that you can know that I want you to love one another.

And not just within the community. I want you to know that I want the love of God which you have received in your hearts. The spirit of God which you have received in baptism. And you are to take that out and to offer it to the rest of the world. To make sure that they know that they're invited. That they are included. That what Jesus accomplished in his life, death, and resurrection is not something that is only for a few or for many, but for all.

And being the church means going into the world and carrying that truth and carrying that good news. And showing it by how we live our lives as much as it is by what we have to say.

And so, Paul was encouraging his little church in Ephesus to do that. To make this good news your own but to remember that it's to offer it to one another. To ensure that they know that the creator and sustainer God is a God who loves them. And invites them to be a part.

That's our calling. That's what it is to be the church. And sometimes we get so wrapped up in doing church that we start to limit how we see who we are as the church. If we think of ourselves only as this congregation. If we think of ourselves only as part of the diocese. If we think of ourselves only as part of the Episcopal church. And that we are sharing just with one another this good news then we are failing. We are doing church, but we are not being church. Being church means going out there. Being church means acknowledging the love of God so much in my life that I can see it in yours and acknowledge it as well. And let you know that God loves you. That God loves the person that's driving by or walking by or working with me or is my neighbor. My literal next-door neighbor.

It is for us to share. And it's also recognizing that we are a very diverse group. Now if you look around you right at this minute, you may not see a lot of diversity. But as we go beyond the walls of this church. Throughout the Episcopal church, throughout the church. There is a great diversity of individuals. People who are trying to find their place. People who are trying to know and understand what it is to know God. To be loved by God. To be in relationship with God. And being the church means taking that out and sharing it. Of course, it's really helpful if we know it ourselves. Where we acknowledge it ourselves.

But once we acknowledge that then don't you want that family member, that neighbor, that friend that you work with to know that great love of God. To have that invitation to be a part. To be that one body, one spirit. To know that one God and father of all. That's what it is to be the church as we live out our lives.

I'm going to make the same mistake that I made at the last service to this service and to add something on. And is that yesterday I attended the forum for the diocese deputies that attended the general convention came together. And they shared with us what happened at our general convention. You heard about that. I warned you about that before it happened. That the news would not do justice to what took place. And I can say with some certainty that I was right. You only heard little bits and pieces, and it was about the most controversial things that might happen or did happen.

Yes indeed, we had a service at one of the immigration detention centers outside of the gates. But what they didn't tell you is that it wasn't a call to change immigration laws or anything like that. It was a call to be merciful and just. The very things that we promise in our baptismal covenant. It did not infringe on the property at all.

I warned you we would be talking about prayer book revision and we did. Very interesting thing that came out of the convention was not a prayer book revision. Matter of fact what happened was the church united said we don't need to revise our prayer book. Our prayer book talks about love. Talks about being baptized in the one's spirit. It's talks about and says so many things that we haven't even fully discovered yet. So, it's not a time for revision. Matter of fact they did almost the opposite. They memorialized the prayer book. Anybody know what that means? Yeah, I felt the same way.

They tried to explain it. What they did is they said this prayer book and the theology and the faith that it encompasses is a good and true to the faith prayer book. And it will be the standard moving forward. No matter where you are or where you go the 1979 prayer book will be the standard. They also said, we're going to have some trial liturgy's. We're going to have some things to address the diversity that is true within our church. And it's going to have some other liturgy's so that we can deal with who and where we are in this country.

As we deal with what we have learned and what we have come to know about humanity, about what God is calling us to. Because we truly believe that God continues to speak to us and lead us in understanding. Understanding one another. Understanding what humanity truly is. Understanding our creation. Understanding what it is to have racial reconciliation. To be part of one another beyond the diversity. And so those things will be available as well. But it will not take away that which we know and understand is our calling as Christians. And our calling as the church as it is held within the prayer book.

That's good news. Now when the 1928 prayer book was revised. There was lamentation and gnashing of teeth. Believe me I know that. See you have to understand that this prayer book is known as the 1979 prayer book. That's when it was adopted. I went to seminary in 1979. So up to that point everything I knew was the 1928 prayer book except for the tribes and what the people who are truly seeking to follow God. And that's the important thing to remember that these people came together. Praying for God to lead them. Expecting God to lead them. Knowing that their humanity would sometimes get in the way. Hoping and praying that that the humanity was the best of humanity that God included in the discussions. Compassion, caring, seeking mercy and justice. Those very best parts of who we can be.

When humanity slipped in hopefully that's what was there. To lead us to have a new understanding, a deeper understanding of who we are and what we were called to do and to be. And so, our prayer book isn't being revised although it continues to evolve, and it continues to develop. Just as our understanding of humanity and divinity continues to evolve as God continues to speak to us. As we continue to listen for the voice of God in the world. So that we might reach out to all. To the great diversity. So that we might authentically follow God in Jesus Christ. To be that part of the Jesus movement called the Episcopal church.

So, we need to hear the words of Paul to be reminded of who we are and what we are called to be. To be the church, that body of Christ that embodies the spirit of God. Going out into the world and issuing an invitation. Come. There is one God, one Father. There is one body and one spirit and one hope. That hope is in Jesus Christ. That is our truth and that is what we are called to share with the world.

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