

February 26, 2017

The Church Has Left the Building

PRAYER

May the words of my mouth be meditations of our hearts and be always acceptable unto Thee. O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. AMEN

SERMON

As you know, starting Thursday afternoon and going through yesterday about noon, the diocese met in convention in Dothan. Beautiful weather, beautiful church, smooth convention. It was for the most part a delight to be there. Could have done with a little less of the pollen but I apologize if I have to keep clearing my throat.

It really for me and I think for a lot of people, in our diocese and really in the Episcopal church, a kind of an exciting time to be an Episcopalian. And that's not always been the case. I've been ordained for thirty plus years and some of those years were more difficult than others. But right now we are in a good place. And we have good leadership both in the national church and in our diocese.

Michael Curry has made, our presiding bishop, made it kind of popular and make it okay to stand up and say, "I love Jesus and I'm proud to be an Episcopalian." There were times when it was like, "I know Jesus and I'm an Episcopalian." (Laughter) Now is not that time. Now is a time where we are getting more and more excited, I'm getting more and more excited about being the church. And about being the Episcopal branch of the Jesus movement in our country.

And it was evident in our convention. All the directions that we are going are good directions. Our budget is up a little bit. That's always a relief to the bishop and others. See he got it. (Laughter) But it's also in the things that we are doing. The things that we are funding. We are beginning a school for ministry. And in that school for ministry we will be teaching individuals who are called to become vocational deacons. Leaders of outreach ministry from our parishes and in our parishes. But it will also include for the first time a training by vocational priest for small congregations that can't afford a seminary trained priest to come full time. To raise up from the congregation someone who is called to ministry but they don't have to go away for three years to seminary to become a priest. Where they can serve the congregation from which they

were raised up. So they can then come back and continue to be a leader, and an ordained leader in that parish.

We're also starting a school for missions. And it's for people from the congregation to learn how to grow the church. And not in numbers. Not to just bring people into the church or into the buildings. But about doing the dreaded word that Episcopalians have such a hard time saying or hearing. Prepare yourself, here it comes. (Laughter) Evangelism. But let's look at it the way it should be looked at.

Evangelism has been hi-jacked. We have a vision of what is evangelism. I dare say most of you think of the old figure of the person standing on the street corner with a floppy Bible. I have one of those by the way. I could do that. And telling you that you have to repent, and you have to believe the way I'm telling you to believe. And you have to be saved not knowing whether I feel like I've been saved or not. And that's one image of evangelism and Episcopalians well that's just tacky. And we don't do tacky in the Episcopal church very much. That's how it seemed.

The other image is the people that brazenly come knocking at your door and want to tell you about Jesus. Now I have a confession to make that I take a certain pleasure in wearing my collar to answer the door when those people start knocking. (Laughter) Because it always throws them off for a heartbeat or two. Because they're really not sure who or what I am. And I take an even greater pleasure in telling them that I would be happy to hear what they have to say about Jesus if they give me equal time. And I want to go first. (Laughter)

Those are the images of evangelism that we have been saddled with for a very long time. I think at this convention and I think throughout the Episcopal church over the last couple of years we have presented with another image. And that image is evangelism as presenting Jesus to the world. Presenting Jesus to the people that we encounter. Presenting Jesus to all the things that we do. It's not about sitting in the church and waiting for people to come to us but to share that we are faithful Christians and we do what we do in the world because of that fact. Because we are Christians.

I think the readings for this morning are just perfect for this. Because in both we have someone being called up the mountain. In the Old Testament reading, we have (clears throat) Excuse me! We have Moses being called up to the mount. And he is presented with the commandments. He is presented with those things that outline the chosen people of God should look like, how they should live, how they should act. But it wasn't Moses sitting up on the top of the mountain, Mt. Sinai, waiting for everyone else to come up there. It wasn't for

them to have that same mountaintop experience. Once he received what needed to be done, he was sit back down. He went down to the people. He went out to the people. He shared with them what God had shared with him. That was his role. That was his task. That was his responsibility.

In the Gospel reading we have the transfiguration story. One of my favorite stories. And the time is right. The time is coming for Jesus to start to head to Jerusalem for the last acts of his Earthly ministry. And he takes his three closest, what seems to be his closest disciples. Peter, James, and John. And he takes them up Mount Tabor. I've been there. That's a climb. And he takes them up there and while they're on the top of the mountain something happens. Jesus we are told is transfigured. Now sometimes people want to change that word to transformed. When I think of transformed I think of becoming something that wasn't there before. Becoming something different. This is transfigured.

What the disciples saw was not a Jesus that was not there all the time. It was a Jesus that let the divinity of God show through in a special way at that particular moment. It had always been there but now it was clear it was for those disciples to see, to know, to understand that they had been in the presence of God. And not only in the presence of God but two figures. Two of the greatest figures of the Old Testament joined Jesus on that mountaintop with those three disciples. They have Moses the great law-giver, the first covenant. And they have Elijah, the great prophet of the Old Testament and they are speaking with Jesus. And Peter is overcome.

Peter says, "This is great. This is wonderful. We want to stay here. Let me build you three booths. You each have your own little lodging place and we will stay up here. Because this is just wonderful. I've never felt so close to God." And then the cloud comes over them. And they get a little nervous, actually they get scared. They throw themselves on the ground. They hear a voice, "This is my son, the beloved. With whom I am well pleased. Listen to him." And then Jesus comes over and he touches them. And they look up and he's the only one they see. The same Jesus that they traveled around with for three years. And what does he do? He leads them down the mountain.

It's not for us to sit up here and wait for the world to hear about it and to come and find out what's going on. No, no. We've still got things to do and you've got a task to do. You got to go back down. We got to finish the trip. We got to finish this pilgrimage. We have to go to Jerusalem. We have to face passion and death and resurrection. And then you can share this story. You can share then what you saw, what you experienced, the closeness of God. Who I am in my wholeness, in my fullness. Share it after the resurrection and people will

begin to understand. You'll be able to share with them that you were in the presence of God. That the kingdom of God had come near. And invite people to come, be a part. That's when it will really hold its strength. When you go back out and all this has been accomplished. And you go out to the people and share with them this good news. This gospel. Invite them to be a part.

That's what we are as the church. We're that community, we're those people that witnesses have come out of the building. And come out to us and say let me tell you about this story. Let me tell you about hope. Let me tell you about God's promise. Let me tell you what God has done. Let me present to you Jesus and then you can decide. You can make a choice. That's what we're about. That is what our diocese is trying to be more intentional about. Trying to help us to learn how to present Jesus to the world. In a better way, a more efficient way if you will.

The little prop that I'm sure you noticed I was carrying around there for a few minutes. This was handed to us, I guess it was Saturday that they handed it to us. It's a bumper sticker. Sometimes it amazes me that Episcopalians are so into bumper stickers. But that's okay. In this one, I thought what it said speaks to where we are. And the Episcopal church we don't go anywhere without that. That points out who we are. And it said, I know you can't read it from back there. Well maybe you can. I couldn't read it from back there. It says – the church has officially left the building. (Laughter) Okay.

That's what we're called to do. Leave the building. We come here. It's important for us to come to the building. Because we worship, we learn, we share. We have fellowship. But it's when we go out there that we present Jesus to the world. And I'm convinced that as we present Jesus to the world in the things that we do. In the relationships that we make. That we are helping the world to be transfigured.

I think that is one way of looking at our role as the church. As the citizens of the kingdom of God. That as we present Jesus to the world. As we hold up justice. As we hold up mercy. As we hold up the love of God. That we are helping people see who they are supposed to be. Transfigured. Showing that which has always been there. See in creation, we hear it in Genesis. God creates the heavens and earth. And what does he say about it. What does he say about the heavens and Earth. They're good. We don't always experience the heaven and earth as good right now. Made the plants and animals. He said, "That's good." Created it good, we don't always experience it that way.

God created the male and female. He created them in his own image. He created them. And he said, "They're good." Talking about us. The image of

God. We are created in the image of God. We are created good. And unfortunately some of the woes of the world begin to hide that goodness. We are afraid to show the goodness with which we were created. Because it seems to make us vulnerable. Because it seems to show a lack of strength, or courage. To love and care for people as opposed to making sure that we get what we need and not worry about everyone else. I believe that as we present Jesus to the world. The one who said you are salt and light. You're here to change the world. The one that talks to us about making choices. To not hate our enemies but love our enemies. To pray for those who persecute us.

We are called to love one another as God loves us. We are called to present that to the world in who we are. And how we live our lives. And we do that in this church. I see it all the time. When we send volunteers to go and deliver meals for Supper on Saturday. Yesterday we had about 25 that showed up to give meals to those who are hungry in our community. And they were presenting Jesus to those people. Every month we have someone deliver a meal to Opportunity Place. And they are presenting Jesus to those people. They are reminding them there are people who care, that there is goodness. We are called to that goodness. To be a part of that goodness. But it can't be done while we sit in the building. This is not the church. This is the church. We have to officially leave the building.

I'm sure they were trying to get the Elvis Presley thing going on. (Laughter) Elvis has left the building. The church has got to leave the building. And it helps if we are trained to do it. Where we feel more comfortable in doing it. But the important thing is that we gather together. We remember who we are. We remember whose we are. We remember what we're called to. And then we make that decision to go out those doors and present Jesus to our community. And present Jesus to the world. When we do that, the world is transfigured. It is changed little by little. We have fulfilled our role as a church. May God give us the strength and the courage to go out the doors. To present Jesus in every relationship in that we have. And in every encounter that we have. So that God can transfigure this creation. And the goodness with which God created it may show through to every human being.