

March 24, 2019

Re-Spect – To Look Again

Prayer

May the words of my mouth be meditations of our hearts and be always acceptable unto thee. Oh Lord our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

Sermon

I've found that most people think that when a preacher gets up in front of them on a Sunday morning, that through the week they just naturally came up with some profound thing to say about the lessons. Or about what's going on in the world and it comes naturally and easily to them. I would like to share with you, that's not always the case. The good news is that, when it's not the case, and one has struggled with what to say on Sunday, God can be very gracious, and on Saturday, give you someone in your life that helps you think of the readings or the lessons in another way. And give you something to share with your congregation. That's exactly what happened this week for me. Now whether you think that what I have to say is profound or helpful, we'll save that for after the sermon.

The Old Testament reading is one that is truly profound, and one that is very relatable. We've all heard it. We've heard sermons on it. It is one of the images that really stay with most of us. The burning bush. We all have said, "If only I could have a sign. I need that burning bush experience where it takes away all the doubts. Where it takes away the questions about what God is calling or wanting me to do." Every person I have ever known who struggled with the idea of going to seminary has wished that they had that kind of moment. I know I did. It would have been so easy if God had simply appeared in a burning bush in West Virginia.

Some people think that God's not real sure where West Virginia is. I understand that. That's all right. But that would have been so helpful. "Greg take your shoes off, you're on holy ground." A bit scary, but it would have been a nice introduction, right? That's what Moses got, an introduction. "I am the God of your fathers, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Come close, I have something to tell you. I have something that I want you to do. I am going to send you to Pharaoh of the Egyptians. You know him well. You were raised in his home. I'm sending you there because of the Israelites that are in Goshen. I am sending you, because you are going to face Pharaoh, and you are going to lead the people of the Israelites, the Hebrews, out of Egypt, and into the promised land."

Now, let's remember who Moses is. He is an Israelite, even though he didn't know it most of his life. He simply was raised up in Pharaoh's house. He had quite a following himself, but he did not know the Israelites were his people. The Hebrews were his people. He wasn't introduced to their faith, wasn't introduced to their history. And when he left Egypt, he found his way to Midian. He found his way to Jethro. He found a life that he was happy with. There was none of this, "You are a chosen one from your birth", even though Moses's mother may have thought so. And so, here he is being introduced to God really for the first time. He is seeing God, hearing God, for the very first time.

It's not just a, "Howdy, how you doing?" This is, "I have chosen you to go to the people, and lead them to the promised land. Moses's response is, "Excuse me, I'm not sure you understand that I don't know

what you're talking about. I think you've probably have chosen the wrong person, and there is somebody more qualified." And if you think about it, wouldn't it have made a lot of sense to raise up one of the Israelites who were already in Egypt, give him a strong following, or her, lead the people out, because they knew the history. They knew all the faith, the things that they held on to, the covenant with Abraham. They had embraced that. Not Moses. But Moses was the one God chose. So, he introduced himself. "Well, who do I say sent me? If you're going to make me do this ..." And that's kind of how he was seeing it. "If you're going to make me do this, then who do I say sent me?" "Well I am. Yahweh. I am who I am. I am who I will be. I am the God of the fathers Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. I am the one who has heard the cry of my people and am responding to it. And you will be my representative."

Now, we all have calls. We all have moments of being introduced to God. Most of us have been introduced to God when we are children, and it can be a very simple, and sometimes simplistic way of being introduced to God. But as we grow, as we mature in faith, we grow a little bit stronger, and we begin to have experiences that others will tell us, and then sometimes at some point, we begin to identify for ourselves as those God moments. Moments when we are being introduced to God more deeply. Not a caricature of God, not the old guy sitting on the throne with the white beard and the white hair. But moments where we are introduced to God as one who loves and cares for us. We are introduced to God, who is present not only in us, but in the people around us. Where we are asked to see beyond the surface. Where we begin to hear a call to reach out to others, because they are God's people. They are God's children. And we are called to be with, in relationship with God's children.

Now, yesterday we hosted, Saint Jude's hosted a meeting that had representatives from congregations throughout our diocese, and they come together for what's called Congregational Enrichment Venture. We had two speakers, both good speakers. First was about stewardship. I decided probably you didn't want to hear me talk about stewardship. We've done that. We do that a lot. But we had a second speaker, and Henry Harrison is a relatively young priest. I mean, he looks like he's 14. There was a time when I thought I looked like I was 14 when I was a priest, but that time is long gone. Now I see the priests, and they look younger and younger all the time. I'm not sure what that says about me getting older and older all the time.

He shared with us his beginnings, and what he wanted to share with us was his view, theology, understanding of how we are introduced into our communities. Communities that we're already familiar with, or we think we're familiar with. What the introduction and how important a relationship is when a church is in a community. The word he used that really struck me was the word respect. We all have an idea and understanding what respect is. We know when we're giving respect. We usually know when we're receiving respect. We also know when we're not receiving respect, when we have an understanding.

He redefined it by breaking the word down, as the re-, which is to repeat, to do again, and the -spect, as in spectacles, to see, to look at. To look at again. And that's what he was ... In my understanding of what went on yesterday afternoon, that's what he was trying to get all of us to think about and to engage in. To look again at our communities. And not just as communities, but to look again at the people that we pass on the streets and in the stores, the businesses, day after day. To truly see and begin to comprehend and understand, and build a relationship, to be introduced to, if you will. The people who have been around us all this time that we have passed on the roads. That we have passed in the stores, that we have passed in businesses. And to see them for who they are. Not who we think that they ought to be. Not who they appear on the surface to be, but who they are.

Now he gave some very interesting examples of having a church in Athens, Tennessee. Very small church, small community. Church that was, for all intents and purposes, dying. But he was this young, energetic ... And he really was young at that point. He was 27? 26? And he wanted to change the whole atmosphere of the church, but what he found out was he needed to engage, and they needed to engage with their community, and to see people. Some of it was quite accidental. Some of it was of just not him doing anything, but others making the initial move to actually serve him. But some of his stories were about seeing people who couldn't get around, couldn't get a job because they had no transportation. Couldn't get the medicine and such that they needed because they didn't have the transportation.

What churches often do when they see a problem like that is go big. "Well, what we need in this community then is mass transit." Right? "We're going to help everybody. We're going to fix everything one swoop here. We're just going to take care of it all." But that takes a lot of committees. That takes a lot of meetings. That takes a lot of time. That takes a lot of money. It takes more than that little congregation he was serving had. So, how do we re-look at that? How do they re-look at that? They look at the individuals who needed to get some place, and they identified in their congregation people who had transportation who could take them some place.

It was about introducing one-on-one solutions to individual problems. It was about forming a relationship where members of this congregation could take care of one of the little problems in their community, and that began to grow. Shared another example of a member of the congregation who would run ... I never got that. I don't run. That's pretty obvious, I understand that. You can laugh if you want to. But she would always see an individual in a business where they had a had a little foyer or something where you could get out of the weather, kind of like we have right out front. She would see that this person there, and would stop and talk to him from time to time. Then there would be several days when he wasn't around, and then she would be running, and she would see him again. They would talk again.

What they realized was that he was being arrested for trespassing, and when he was in jail, she wouldn't see him. When he wasn't in jail, he was trying to find someplace where he could sleep and be safe. Again, the question, "What can we do?" They could look at it as a problem of homelessness for their community, and try to take care of it all, or they could begin a relationship with the individual, find a way to take care of a person, which is what they did, to start. They went to a parishioner who had a shed, for all intents and purposes, across the street from the church, and they said, "If we come in and fix that up, can ..." Rex was his name, wasn't it? "Can Rex stay there? Can he sleep there?" That's all he needed, a place to sleep.

The guy said, "Sure, use it." So he fixed it up, and all of the sudden, he now had a place to stay. He wasn't getting arrested for being homeless anymore. They had begun a relationship with him, and as it often goes with homeless folks, they know each other, they talk to each other. Others started showing up. There was also a house that was sitting empty. "So what if we ..." And they go to the owner, "Fix this up for you. It's not going to cost anything to fix it up. We'll fix it up if you'll let us use it to house some of the other homeless in our community." It's another little set. Guy said, "Sure." Just sitting there. They fixed it up. Now, several others had places to sleep and to be. Now, I'm not suggesting that we do any of these. What I'm suggesting is that we need to re-look at our community and start seeing the people around us. We need to start seeing what the real needs are. Not the needs of the community as a whole, but the individual needs of the people that we're passing on the streets, in the stores, in the businesses, in our community. And to at least be open to the idea and understanding of being moved by

this relationship to help the person. To see what we can do. Not just the individual, what we can do as a congregation, and see where that leads us.

All I'm asking right now is to look. Look again. Who is the person that you see time and time again dealing with the same issue or the same problem? Is it an issue or a problem that some of us, or all of us, could help take care of? Offer that to God. Offer that to our community, our congregational community, and see where it leads us. Engaging with the community that you've been a part of for over 50 years seems like a ridiculous thing. "Well, we are in the community. We know the community. We live here. We do all the things here." But what if we look harder? What if we look deeper? What if we look at the individual? What if we identify a problem, and what if God calls us to address that need? Isn't that what being the church is about?

Gregory Hein, Rector