

May 7, 2017

Invitation to Sharing Our Faith Dinners

PRAYER

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

SERMON

I'm sure by listening to the readings this morning you are aware that it is Good Shepard Sunday. And over the years I have preached sermons about Christians being sheep. About what it is to be the Shepard and I've decided that this year I'm not going to preach on either one of those. I'm going to try something a little different. Instead of preaching about the good Shepard, I'm going to try to do a little shepherding today. But it'd call you to do something that most of you perhaps all of you find uncomfortable. Ugh, I heard that. I'm talking about talking about yourself. About your faith, about how you came to faith. About the road, you have traveled with your faith. About how your faith has helped you, has guided you. Has seen you through difficult times. I want you to do this because this diocese and this parish is participating in a program that is nationwide with the Episcopal church.

On June 1st, we're going to be having dinners and they're called share your faith dinner. It's a very simple concept. It's takes something that Episcopalians are very good at. We can eat. (Laughter). We can cook, we can fellowship around a dinner table like nobody else I've ever seen. I've experienced it for many, many years. And we're combining that with something that Episcopalians hate to do. And it's that dreaded "E" word, evangelism. (Laughter). I did not plant him there. (Laughter). We, Episcopalians have this view, this vision of evangelism as being something that, that we ought not be comfortable with. Either it's we have experienced it at the hands of others where it's made us feel uncomfortable and we don't want to make others feel uncomfortable. Or we simply don't like to talk about our faith. Somehow, we've gotten to the idea that that's the realm of ordained ministers and not for us every day Christians, us every day Episcopalians.

And I'm trying and the Episcopal church is trying to lead you away from that. Because it shouldn't be true. If it is true for you, it ought not be true for you. The reason is because we all have moments that have brought us to faith. We have had moments of faith helping us through times that we know about. That we hold onto. But we don't usually think about it much and we rarely ever share that. We see them as a personal gift that we hold on tightly to. Or we simply lock them away somewhere. And when we do that we are not giving others the opportunity to learn from our experience. To share our experience. To be free to share their own experience.

Now when I say "evangelism" I'm not talking about going and knocking on doors. I'm talking about the freedom to share your faith with friends, with co-workers and not just out of the blue. Not corner them in their office and say, "Let me tell you about Jesus." Cause that is how we often see evangelism. But to recognize when someone is in a place where they could hear about not being alone in their difficulties. About a source of strength that is outside of themselves or their families. And these dinners and this sharing of faith is an effort to make us more comfortable with our stories.

Now most clergy are really comfortable with theirs. We have to share over and over again why we're called to ordain ministry before we're ever allowed to go to seminary. You don't just apply to seminary, you go through a whole battery of things. You talk to your priest. You talk to your bishop. You have a team at your church, a discernment team that you have a call. Each one of these is asking you why you are called to ordain ministry. And all they're saying is tell me about your faith journey. Where are you? How did you get here? What does it mean for you? Why do you think that you are called to ordain ministry? And this goes on all the way through seminary. And it goes on after seminary when you start to come back to your diocese and are about to be ordained. And then if you are a decent preacher then you share some of that with your congregation over the years because it is that faith journey that we draw from to share how faith is important today. It's what makes it relevant.

And so, over the years that I have been preaching the congregation if they were paying attention learned a lot about my faith journey. Where it began? How it has gone? Some of the difficult times, how it has strengthened me through certain situations. But we don't often share that with one another. We don't know. I might know who you are, where you came from. What you do for a living. But for the most part, most of us have not had a serious conversation about your faith journey. The trials that you've had, the triumphs that you've had, the times when your faith has strengthened you. The times when you've had doubts about your faith. How the Episcopal church speaks to your faith in its worship, in its liturgy. These are all some of the questions that are part of these Share Your Faith dinner. And evangelism is one reason these dinners are important and sharing your faith story is important. The other is it allows us to really do ministry with one another.

The other myth about the Episcopal church is that the ordained minister's minister and the congregations congregates. You are the ministers of the church. If you look in the outline of faith in the back of your Prayer book under ministry and ministers. The first ones that are mentioned are the lay folks. You are the ministers. And to be able to minister you have to be aware of how you have come to be who you are. How you have come to believe what you believe. How you have come through the difficult times. How you have celebrated with God the joyous times. What all those things mean to you. Because when we are aware of those things and then we see something similar going on in the lives of our friends, co-workers, people who may be struggling with faith. It's an opportunity to share, to minister to them. To share what it is to go through that as a person of faith and come out on the other side being uplifted, being whole, being healed. That's what ministry is about and I'm convinced that we do our best ministry from our brokenness. From the trials that we have gone through and to be able to share that there is always hope. That there is always life beyond the brokenness. There is always healing beyond that brokenness for one who has faith. No matter what road they've traveled. It's also important to know that they are not alone. To share with them that not only does God care about who they are, where they are, what they're going through. But as a representative of God's community the church. You too are aware and care about where they are, where they are going. And are not afraid to make part of their trip with them.

Let me tell you a little bit more about these dinners. June 1st, it's a Thursday. I have a list starting in the Narthex, that I hope you'll sign if you're willing to participate. Then we'll break up the groups. It asks if you are willing to host one, if you have a home. These are groups of about eight. Any more than that could take a while because amazingly enough. And I've been through a couple of these already with the standing committee and with another group. And once you start sharing your story. It recalls things. It bundles up. It's more than a two minute- yeah I did this, this is where I went, this is where I go. Done.

It's when one starts to share their story the feelings associated with what it was to go through this had been or that had been. To recall what it was to take those first steps of faith. When did I become a real person of faith? For some people it's well I've always been to church. I've always believed my way to the Episcopal church or I've stayed in the Episcopal church. It could be a very simple story like that.

For others, it's a quite different path of not knowing. Of not having that foundational stuff. Having the point of something almost miraculous happen in their life that have drawn them to faith. It's a learning that we don't all travel the same way, the same path. The same time frame. But that we can share that with one another. You know, my being in this place at this time sounds suspiciously like where you are right now. And this is how my faith helped me through that.

Yesterday we had a quiet day. Daughters of the King kind of sponsored it but it was opened to anybody who wanted to show up. And I choose to use that as an opportunity to take some of the questions from the sharing of faith dinners. And to answer them myself. This is something to think about, this is something to contemplate. This is something to be aware of. For your life. Some of them were pretty easy to answer. How did you first come to faith? I've answered that question so many times I am sure people are tired of hearing me say it. The last one I answered was name, describe a time when your faith saw you through a difficult situation. That gets very personal. And many times, that kind of a question leads to a revelation that you don't normally share with others. And it's not to make one feel uncomfortable but to make one recognize how God was there. But to remember that God was there.

I know that every one of you could find a number of reasons not to attend. You know, busy lives, family. By the way we are going to have at least one group meet here and have child care available for the time of the dinner. Probably we could have two or three groups meet in the parish hall and that would work fine. There are reasons, you could find reasons not to participate in this. And that's your decision absolutely. I'm asking you to find a reason to participate. To come and share your story. To strengthen the other people. To come and listen to their story so that they can be strengthened. So that they can become more comfortable. So that they can become better ministers and better evangelists for God's kingdom because that is what it's about in the church. To share stories of faith so that others can know that they are not alone. That God is walking with them. Whoever they are, wherever they may be. And that there is a community that is willing, it's individual members, are willing to walk with them on that path as well. When it's difficult, when it's joyful. Never alone, always with God. And hopefully with God's representative, you, me. Share your faith dinner. June 1st, Thursday. Time will be set, they don't always have to the exact same time. Although I think there's a suggested time. There's a signup sheet in the Narthex. Please participate and become more aware of your story and how you can help others with their stories.