Both Sides of the Ledger

Sermons for a Traveling Year

Mark Edington

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Preface

New occasions teach new duties;
Time makes ancient good uncouth.
—James Russell Lowell, *The Present Crisis* (1844)

THE FIRST FEW STEPS into a new job are bewildering. New responsibilities bring new demands, and reveal mercilessly any misalignment between the knowledge and expertise one brings into a new post and its expectations. Old routines, both a means of efficiency and a source of comfort, are torn to pieces; and until new ones take their place, a great deal of time is eaten by locusts as one struggles to chart new paths toward accomplishing even the simplest and most mundane tasks. The known capabilities and steady certainties of former colleagues—and the reflexes one develops around these qualities—recede into the distance; new colleagues, with deep but different capabilities, are now to be depended on.

Add to this the challenges of living in a new country; sorting through the legalities of immigration and paying one's taxes; learning the graceful subtleties of a new culture; and spending most of one's time in transit between points on a map—and in the end you have, among other things, a new bishop who imposes on new friends the twin necessities of forbearance and forgiveness.

To those of us who are given the immense privilege of the pulpit of a church on Sunday mornings, the idea of working through the spiritual dimension of the changes our lives bring comes naturally. That does not necessarily mean, as most students in preaching classes learn (if they were lucky), that what we make of it in a sermon will be edifying to the listeners, or help further the cause of anyone else's salvation. And that is why preaching is, in the end, a privilege, and not a right.

But if you are new in a ministry of the church—and especially if you are a new bishop—then the pulpit is where you meet most of the people in your care for the first time; and it is the first place in which you are called to offer the vision of hope, and share the means of grace, that is at the center of the Christian gospel. So it is also in the pulpit that you do the work of acknowledging your shortcomings in fitting your shoulders to a new harness; and sometimes it is equally in the pulpit that you do the work of asking for the forgiveness for which your mistakes have indebted you.

The people of the Convocation of Episcopal Churches in Europe are a remarkably devoted, faithful, and creative group of Christians. I make bold to say that they are also, on any given Sunday morning, the most diverse collection of Christian people in any part of the entire Episcopal Church. And throughout all of the period covered by the sermons collected here, they have extended to me the gifts of ready welcome, endless patience, and gracious forbearance. I am deeply thankful to them, and each next Sunday I am all the more inspired by them.

When your task is to be the pastor of a parish, you come to see the opportunity offered to you by the pulpit as the chance of curating, week by week, a conversation among faithful people, of helping guide a community of Christians to think about, pray about, and talk about things that are central to their lives of faith together. Now that I am a pastor to many communities, and to the pastors who lead them, I am learning that the opportunity is the same, but the shape of it is very different. I am still learning its contours. In the good people of the Convocation, and especially in their faithful pastors, I am blessed with good and wise teachers.

Paris, France
The Feast of Saint John, Apostle and Evangelist

Both Sides of the Ledger

April 7, 2019 • Fifth Sunday in Lent

The Church of The Ascension, Munich

Text: Philippians 3:7: "Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ.".

THIS MORNING we are all presented with a stiff challenge, which is nothing if not appropriate for the closing weeks of Lent. You are presented with the challenge of listening to a preacher for the first time. I am presented with the challenge of preaching to a congregation I don't know at all for the first time, and to do so standing in a spot that I associate with a considerable amount of anxiety.

But all of us together are presented with an even more difficult challenge, one spelled out in the words that Saint Paul writes to the Philippians, and by implication, to us. I say they are difficult because none of us, no matter what we might say of ourselves, is eager to experience loss. None of us is easily disposed to giving up the things we have worked so hard to gain, or to sacrifice the few advantages we feel we may have in an unfair world.

But that is the upshot of what Saint Paul has to say to us today. And just to make it all the more pointed, the wise people who put together the lectionary offer it to us, this teaching on gain and loss, as a lens through which to watch the drama that plays out in the little house in Bethany.

My teachers in Scripture studies were all Jesuits, and they were immensely learned and extremely demanding in their expectations of us.

My New Testament professor used to speak of the Epistle to the Philippians as the "key in the lock" to the riddle of how it was possible for there to be a man Jesus who was the Christ of God; it is there in the second chapter of what Paul writes to the Philippians, the idea that Christ is that aspect of God that chooses to be emptied of the majesty, emptied of the power, emptied of the very divine otherness of God in order to take on our frail, human form.

The word you learn for this in Greek class is *kenosis*, emptying; the self-emptying of God is done on our behalf, to become one of us, because that is what it takes for God to save us.

If you think of it, that is the ultimate loss of privilege. It is the greatest conceivable reversal of a gain into a loss. And that is the starting point for Paul in thinking about what we gain, and lose—or, at least, what we must be prepared to lose, and what we should regard as gains—when we become disciples.

At the very least this kind of puts our Lenten discipline, whatever we choose it to be, into uncomfortable perspective. God, the god of all creation and all light and all love, gives over all that is powerful, all that separates divinity from the world of mortality, and takes on such humility as to become *just* like us, right down to knowing sickness, and pain, and betrayal, and death. That is what God gives up for us. And we gave up chocolate.

That's the background to what Paul has to say of himself in this business of gain and loss. He is saying that the shattering impact of the teaching, the life, the death, and the resurrection of Jesus forces each one of us—at least each one of us who pay attention—to examine the balance sheet of our lives, and to understand that we have put a lot of things in the wrong column.

Paul is a Jew. He knows himself to be of the chosen people of God. He knows that he is counted among those few who are the inheritors of Abraham. Their story is that they have been set apart, given distinction, for a high and holy purpose.

And Paul is a citizen of Rome. He is one of a relatively small elite who have the privilege of civil status in the most powerful nation on the planet, at least in his day.

So Paul is a man with two immense advantages, two great assets, one spiritual, and one political. He is one of the few citizens of the republic, and one of the few of chosen children of Abraham.

And he has suddenly realized that these privileges, these advantages, are nothing but liabilities for him now. Because they hold the risk of getting in the way of his relationship with the risen Christ. They get in the way of his seeing the world as Christ would see it, and not as people with privilege would see it—whatever that privilege might be.

Last week and this week our Lent has been illuminated by readings from the Gospels that can be understood as stories about reversals, as two ways of examining the one question of gain and loss.

This week the lesson is not in a parable, but in an account of an event in the life of Jesus. It is this curious moment of almost shocking intimacy in the house of Mary, Martha, and Lazarus. The extravagance of the treatment given to Jesus by Martha is underscored by the detail offered by the gospel-writer that she wipes the feet of Jesus with her hair.

If you are the sort of person ever on the alert for the potential failings of other people, there would be plenty here to work with. And Judas is just that kind of person.

A more righteous, a more just use could be made of this resource, he says. I have been feeling a little bit like Judas myself lately, with all the uncomfortable extravagance that goes into making bishops.

The elder brother in last week's parable of the prodigal has become the disgruntled disciple in this story. And in both stories we are meant to understand see that person is a stand-in for us, if we are not careful. Whenever we find ourselves reacting with resentment or anger at compassion shown to others, that is us.

It is as though somehow we feel that a gain for another must be a loss for us. Although we surely never regard our own small victories as losses for others. The only time we see things as a zero-sum game is when the game seems to be against us.

But Paul want us to imagine that the way we see our gains and our losses might just be reversed. The things we count as advantages—like the privileged status of Roman citizenship, or the chosen status of being Jewish—or maybe even the momentary elation of being ordained a bishop—those gains can be the things that count as loss, because they beguile us into forgetting how dependent we are on God. They can set us up for trouble.

And the times we feel we have lost the most—the times when we feel like relationships have been broken, and trust has been damaged, and hopes have been disappointed—if we see them through the lens of faith, they are where our gains are to be found. Because it is only on those moments, really, that we start to notice signs of resurrection, the assurance of God's abiding presence that comes as surely as the spring follows winter.

I started this sermon by saying that we don't know each other well, and what a challenge that is in preaching a challenging text. But I think I do know at least this about something we have in common; we have, all of you and me too, had a recent experience of loss. Of course, it isn't the same experience, and no two experiences of loss can be usefully compared.

But we also have this in common: we are all Christians, and if we take Paul seriously then we should start setting about the task of looking for the gains, looking for the possibilities, looking for the places where the love of Christ gets a new opportunity to break through to us in the midst of our loss. Because if we will just allow it to, the paradoxical love of Christ—the love that makes the last first and the first last, the love that exalts the poor and warns the rich—that same love will turn our mourning into rejoicing.

And here is one thing more we have in common. We both have a lot of work to do in figuring out where God is calling us next.

You will soon receive here an immensely talented priest as your interim rector, and together you will find new ways to live out the reconciling, abundant, joyful love of Christ with each other and with the people around you.

I got a new hat yesterday, but I have a lot of work to do in figuring out who the person under it is supposed to be, and how a bishop can best help every church sense.

It now falls to us to see anew these losses, and find within them God's renewed promise to us. I will be absolutely no good at this work if I spend my time in sorrow over all that I have lost and left behind.

And we here, all of us, we will not find our way into the future God has prepared for us if we fail to see the path toward gains and growth in what looks to be losses and difficulty.

After all, this is my church, too. And I have to be just as disciplined as a disciple as any of you to stay focused on the future. Because that is the direction toward which pilgrims on the way of love are supposed to be moving. *Amen*.

Confronting the Cross

April 14, 2019 • Palm Sunday
The Church of The Ascension, Munich

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MANY OF YOU have recently made the trip up to our cathedral in Paris to hear Bishop Curry preach, and I am going to depend on you to help those who were not able to go draw a mental picture of something you probably noticed when you were there.

I'm speaking of the spectacular triptych that stands behind the altar, a work of devotional art created by the painter Edwin Austin Abbey. I am a particular fan of Abbey's, not least because one of his largest and best-known murals adorns the walls of the Boston Public Library.

The triptych in the cathedral is a dramatic portrayal of the death of Christ, with his grieving mother on one side and the beloved disciple, John the apostle, on the other. The image is a combination of horror and brilliance, covered in gold leaf yet presenting us with an image of the crucifixion that lacks any sentimentality and spares no illusions. It is an elegant depiction of what is inescapably an execution.

I have been living at the cathedral for a little more than two weeks now, and you might think you would know the most dramatic and spiritually meaningful experience I've had in that time. But you'd probably be wrong—because it happened just a day after I arrived, and a week before we all gathered for the party.

It was a concert of the Paris Choral Society, at which they premiered a new work by the American composer Richard Burchard—a new setting of the Stabat Mater. If you know choral music at all, you probably know something about the text of the Stabat Mater; it is an anthem written in the thirteenth century, words in the voice of the grieving Mary as she witnesses the death of her son in the midst of jeering bystanders and passing crowds.

You have probably heard a few choral concerts in your time, and I have, too, but I was curious to hear how a modern composer would approach this difficult and painful text, so I went along to listen. The composer chose to begin the work with a text that is actually not part of the usual Stabat Mater, but which most of us know—the O vos omnes. "All you who pass by on the road, pay attention and see whether there be any sorrow like mine."

We can hear those lines as an appeal by a grieving mother for the dignity of our notice, for the basic respect of giving our attention to the unspeakable pain she is enduring. And following this, the work moved on through the twenty-one Latin verses of the hymn.

It was a powerful, complex new work, and an excellent performance. But it was, after all, a performance. The composer chose to end in a somewhat unusual way as well—with a last, short movement without any singing from the choir at all, simply an instrumental lament summing up the drama of the text.

I heard that last passage almost as a prayer in answer to the plea of the mother of the Lord that had begun the work. It drew me in, charting the whole range of the human response to the horror of this brutality.

But then, as the music continued, I looked up and noticed that a few members of the choir had turned their backs on us.

I couldn't understand what they were doing. Were they protesting the music in some way? Were they expressing their opinions on a new piece they had just premiered?

As I watched, one by one, each member of the choir began turning around—each one of them turned their backs toward us.

And then it dawned on me—they weren't turning away from us. They were turning to face the scene itself. They were turning to confront the cross.

By the time music ended, the entire choir, more than a hundred people, stood facing Abbey's scene of the crucifixion. In the space just three minutes, what had been a performance of an hour and half suddenly became a message. You must look at this. Do not avert your eyes.

We have a thousand ways of avoiding the message of this day. That is part of the reason why holy mother church, in her wisdom, brings this back before us every year. We do not want to confront this scene. We would rather soften it, or sing about it, or paint it in a stylized beautiful way, or wear it around our necks in one of a hundred million little crucifixes. We want to find some way to exert control over this image. Because if we do not, it may just demand that we take it seriously.

Maybe that is why we are afraid to proclaim the reality of this moment that lies at the very heart of our faith. We somehow stammer when we try to articulate it for what it is—the most profound act of God's love on our behalf, the reason why we Christians are called people walking on the way of love.

And if we are honest about it, as an old teacher of mine once wrote, we prefer to preach the Jesus we think people want to hear rather than what Jesus actually preached.

Because we have a sneaking feeling that if we preach what Jesus actually preached, if we lived as Jesus actually lived and loved as Jesus actually loved, the world will do the same thing to us that it did to him.

That is why we cannot turn away today. We must confront the fact that the cross is not an ornament, not a painting, not an abstract idea, not a piece of jewelry; it is a profound act of love from God on our behalf, a self-giving of our creator offered to save us.

And here is what is worse: it is *necessary* to save us. That is the awful truth we must confront today. We do not easily imagine that we stand in need of this act on our behalf, let alone welcome it. We do not think we are that desperately in need of some profound act of God's self-giving to keep us in relationship with God.

But that is a lie. It is a lie our culture wants us to believe; but it is a lie. The cross is not an aberration in the story of God's love for us. It is an expression, the highest expression, of God's love for us. And God's love for us is not any more, or any less, than what is necessary to save our eternal souls.

In this Holy Week, let us not avert our eyes from the disturbing sight that stands on the hill outside Jerusalem. Let us find within ourselves the prayerful discipline to keep our eyes fixed on the man on the cross, so as to understand more deeply the nature of the souls within us.

Let us come more deeply to understand that the cross is not just an icon of our faith, not just a radical miscarriage of justice, but a thing done on our behalf—done because without it, we would be lost.

Let us do this so that when Easter comes—as it surely will come—we will receive it with a joy that shows the world around us how deeply we understand what God has done for us. *Amen*.

The Missing Chapter

April 21, 2019 • Easter Sunday

The Church of The Ascension, Munich

Text: Luke 24:9: "...and returning from the tomb, they told all this to the eleven and to all the rest."

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THERE IS ALWAYS something new to learn in a text from Scripture, even one as familiar and as beloved as the story of the women who are the first witnesses to the empty tomb. I have been preaching on Easter Sunday for nearly twenty years, and I thought by now I would have come at this story from every possible angle. But in praying through this text over this past week, I suddenly found something in it I had never seen before.

It's not so much something that's there that I didn't see; it's something that isn't there, a missing chapter that yet must be true. And the truth of it is revealed in this line from the twenty-fourth chapter of Luke's gospel about what those women do when they realize what has happened: "returning from the tomb, they told all this to the eleven and to all the rest."

Let's think about that line not through the lens of exegesis but through the lens of forensics. Let's think about it as though we were police detectives.

The last time we gathered here, the last time we had a report on the activities of the apostles, we saw them gathered in a single room sharing a meal. One of them left the group for good then. Within twelve hours, another of them denied ever having known Jesus. Twenty hours after that last shared meal, Jesus had died on the cross—and the eleven disciples that were left had scattered in eleven different directions. All of them turned and fled.

That is what we know. And then we learn this: The women returned from the tomb and *found them together*, the eleven and a number of others who had all done the same thing.

This may seem like a small detail until you let it sit with you for a while. Each of these people had walked with Jesus, some of them for three years. Each of them had loudly professed their loyalty when Jesus was drawing the crowds.

And when the going got tough, each one of them turned and ran.

And somehow, by Sunday morning, all of them, together with all the shame of their failures, had somehow found the Treffpunkt—the meeting point. The situation ends as it began, with all of them together. Only Jesus and Judas are missing.

Before we get on to the rest of the story, take a moment and imagine what it must have been like in that gathering. We can make a pretty safe conjecture that they are all back in the same room where they gathered for that meal. It's the most likely place they would have thought to go. But now they are on the other side of all the drama, all the violence, all the hatred that was focused on Jesus.

And each one of them is on the other side of how they reacted to that reversal. Maybe, like Peter, they denied even knowing Jesus. Maybe a few of the other disciples heard Peter do that. Maybe a few of them didn't even show up at the hill outside the city to see Jesus executed. And those few who did, not one of them tried to stop it from happening. None of them intervened. None of them staged a protest or blocked the path.

And now here they are, together, all gathered in a room once again. What do you suppose it was like in that room, with all those people bearing their own sorrow and shame? What did they say to each other? How could they even speak to each other?

What do you suppose would have happened if the story had ended there? Would we ever even have heard of this group again? Do you think they would have stuck together?

Or would they have each gone their own way, ashamed to be reminded of their own failures by staying in the community they had made?

Now, what none of them know is that exactly at the moment this awkward reunion is happening, exactly at the moment they are sitting around looking at the floor instead of each other, just at that moment, in a garden outside the walls of the city, a stone is rolling away from a grave.

What they don't know is that at just that moment, the power of death and despair is being broken forever. What they don't know, these broken-spirited apostles, is that at just that moment there are two messengers in dazzling clothing waiting, just waiting, for the women to show up.

And that is why that room of discouraged, unhappy disciples did not disappear among the disappointments of history. That is why out of that room emerged all of the prayer, all of the worship, all of the care for the poor, all of the schools for children, all of the hospitals for the sick and the hospices for the dying, all of the demands for justice and dignity—that is why all that Christians have done, all that Christians can do, is possible.

So what is the lesson of this missing chapter for us? What are we meant to learn from what happened in that room very early on a Sunday morning?

I think it's at least these things:

First, no matter what, we cannot fail to keep meeting together. What happens does not come to the apostles one by one. They don't each get a text message. They get the news together.

Second: Even if we feel discouraged, even if we feel doubts—*especially* when we feel discouraged, *especially* when we feel doubts—at that moment God is acting in a way we do not yet know to change everything, everything.

At that moment God is acting through the transforming power of love to turn our wounds into our strengths, to turn our doubts into understanding, to turn our disappointments into courage, to turn our sorrows into joy. At that moment. At *this* moment.

And third—pay attention to this—the message that changes everything is going to come from about the last place we expect it to come. Not from the rector. Not from the wardens. Not from the theologians. Not from the bishop. Maybe from Paul. Maybe from Victoria. From a source, from a voice, we do not yet know.

So how is it this all happens? How is it that this little group of disappointed disciples goes on to start all that we know as the church today?

It happens because Resurrection is real, sisters and brothers. There can be no other explanation. In that room they were already dead before their own death, and they were brought back to life in the midst of their own life. Easter for us is not just about life after death. It's about life *before* death, about living fully into the abundant life and the way of love Jesus sets before us, about understanding that Resurrection is real for us here and *now*.

And there is one other reason. It's that when the women broke into this dark and depressed room with that news, when the fact that everything had already changed was made real to them, those disciples remembered that new commandment they had been taught the last time they had gathered together, before all of this had happened—to love each other as Jesus had loved them.

They remembered that he had said that when they did this, the world around them would look at them and know they were the people who followed him. Not because of what they wore, not because of what prayers they said or what songs they sang, not because of how beautiful their church might be—but because of how they treated each other. Because of how they loved each other.

So here we are, gathered in our room. And here is this message, breaking in on us. The tomb is empty. He is risen. He has been raised, just as he said. And, alleluia—so shall we be.

Let us pray:

O Christ the master carpenter,
who at the last, through wood and nails,
purchased our whole salvation;
wield well your tools in the workshop of this world,
that we, who come rough-hewn to your bench,
may be turned to a finer glory at your hand. *Amen.*

Answering the Question God Asks

May 26, 2019 • Sixth Sunday of Easter

The Mission Church of Saint Boniface, Augsburg

Text: John 5:6: "When Jesus saw him lying there and knew he had been there a long time, he said to him, 'Do you want to be made well?'"

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IF YOU read the gospel lesson carefully, you will note something a little strange about the encounter between Jesus and the man at the pool of Beth-zatha. We might say, to make this story a little more familiar to us, it is an encounter between Jesus and the man in the hospital—a hospital for chronically ill patients.

Whenever a writer of the gospels bothers to provide us with specific details in a story about the ministry of Jesus, we do well to pay close attention. We are told some specifics about the place—by the Sheep Gate in Jerusalem, one of the gates to the city, there is a pool. By the pool there are some porticoes—specifically, five porticoes. To the porticoes come people with disabilities and chronic diseases.

The pool is probably a naturally occurring spring or bath, because the text tells us that from time to time the water in the pool is agitated. And we are meant to understand the healing powers of the waters in the pool are thought to be increased when the water is stirred up by the activity of the spring.

All of this information is packed into the few brief lines we heard this morning. From this we make a simple conclusion: that the people for whom this story was first written were not familiar with Jerusalem, and so they needed it described to them. For them, Jerusalem was not only the city of the great temple and the capital of the Roman authority; it was a place of God's powerful presence, a place where the spiritual and the physical worlds lived in very close proximity to each other.

And here is another detail worth our attention: the man whom Jesus is addressing has been ill a very long time. Not just a for a while; not just for a long time; specifically, for thirty-eight years.

Being ill for thirty-eight years would be a long time for any of *us*—to say nothing of someone living in the ancient world. The tour guides will tell you that the life span of someone living in the Jerusalem of Jesus's day was thirty-five years. That's not quite right, because a very great deal depended on who you were in society. Everyone, rich and poor, Roman and Jewish, suffered from terribly high rates of infant mortality. Women died in childbirth far more often, and Roman men had a bad tendency to die on one of Rome's many battlefields.

Still, for a Jewish man in Jerusalem, to be ill for nearly four decades meant to spend most of your life both poor and suffering. For all that time, for all those years, he has just wanted to find a way to get into the healing water when the springs stir it up. And for thirty-eight years, he has never once had a turn in the water. Everyone else pushes in ahead of him.

What is interesting about this is that this man has actually forgotten what his problem is. That is what becomes clear in his exchange with Jesus.

For thirty-eight years he has been trying to get into the water, and failing every time. And what has happened to him over all that time is that the problem of getting into the water has become the problem he is most focused on.

If only he could get to the water, he would be able to get food for himself. If only he could get to the water, he could get a job. If only he could get to the water, people wouldn't treat him so poorly.

There is this thing he has become completely focused on, and it is all he can see in front of him. It is the water that he can't get to. That is what he thinks his most important problem is.

He has forgotten that his problem isn't that he can't get to the water. His problem is that he can't walk. His problem is that he isn't well.

Jesus comes into this picture and asks him a very simple question—or so it seems. Do you want to be made well? What is wrapped up in that simple question is a deep well of understanding. Jesus sees the man; he sees his age; he sees his situation; he sees what is separating him from the life he wants to have. The question Jesus asks contains and transcends all of that and comes right to the heart of the matter. Do you want to be made well?

But that is not the question the man answers. The question the man answers, the question he is focused on, is why he hasn't been healed yet. He is focused on a solution that hasn't worked, for thirty-eight years. He doesn't answer the question Jesus asks him because he's asking the wrong question of himself.

This seems to me a little bit like the relationship Jesus has with the church. Jesus comes into our midst, into our story, and sees the whole of our situation, our context, our history, our worries.

And we are ready with our answers. Our answers are things like, people don't join organizations anymore. Our children all have screens in front of them all the time. We are all too busy, and the world demands so much of us. Our church is sort of a mystery to the people around us, and a mystery to the Episcopal church itself. Being a church is hard.

Those are the answers we have. In just two months in the Convocation, I've heard those answers repeatedly almost everywhere I go.

But you know—I'm pretty sure that none of them are answers to the questions Jesus is asking us.

Jesus isn't asking us why people aren't joining our church, or why our children aren't more involved. Jesus isn't asking us why we don't come to church more often, or how the people outside here look on us. Jesus isn't asking us about how the particular laws in Germany pertaining to churches makes it hard for us to do what we do.

Those are the answers ready to leap to our lips; but they are not answers to the question Jesus is asking us. The question Jesus is asking us is: Do you want to be a disciple?

Do you? Do you want to be a disciple? Do you want to try to live as though you really trusted God? Do you want to walk the way of love, not when it means that you will be loved, but when it means that you will show love even when you may not feel loving?

Do you want to be a disciple? Do you want to share what you have found here with others, not because you know you're right and you think they're wrong, but because in it you have found a truth about the power of God's transforming love to overcome even our certainties?

Do you want to be a disciple?

We are so ready to answer almost any question *other* than that one. But that is the question we are being asked. You, and me, and St. Boniface, and the Convocation and the Episcopal Church, and the whole Christian world.

Said differently, we're being asked: What is most important to you? The things we have been trying to do over and over and over, that sometimes don't work all that well?

Or responding to the call of disciples to trust radically in God's love, God's message, and God's mission?

This past March I attended for the first time a meeting of the House of Bishops, the gathering that takes place twice each year of all the bishops in the Episcopal Church, from Taiwan to Europe and everywhere in between. One of the speakers that Bishop Curry invited to address us was a woman who is a leader of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, in fact the first woman to be elected to that ministry in her church.

Bishop McKenzie stood in front of a room full of Episcopal bishops and said, "You know, most of us aren't preaching Christianity in the church on Sunday. We are so worried about the church, and what we end up preaching is *church*ianity—the idea that somehow the church is the message and not the Gospel." She said this in front of a room full of bishops—the sort of people who have kind of made their whole lives about, you know, the church.

But I have a feeling she is more right than not. And I am coming to believe that if we actually listened, deeply, prayerfully, to the question Jesus is asking us, we might find ourselves resurrected in ways we can't even imagine.

That may be why we hesitate to risk it. We want some idea of the scale of what might change. We love our faith, but we also love the traditions that helped us find that faith. There are things we don't want to lose.

But still there is this question before us, the one for which we need to have an answer as ready as all the other answers we have. Do we want to be disciples? Do we want to take up our cross and follow, knowing that the only things that get resurrected are things that die? Are we willing to risk trusting that God has already figured out how to get us into the pool?

I hope so. I pray so. I hope you pray so, too. *Amen.*

Bricks and Words

June 9, 2019 • Pentecost

The Cathedral Church of the Holy Trinity, Paris

Text: Genesis 11:4: "Then they said, 'Come, let us build ourselves a city, and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves..."

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SOMEHOW I can't help but feel sad for all of Noah's grandchildren and great-grandchildren. They are the people in this story; if you go home and read the *tenth* chapter of Genesis, what you find is the names of Noah's sons, and all the children born to Noah's sons, and at least some of the children born to those children. Those are the people in the story we first heard this morning.

Now *if* you go home and read the tenth chapter of Genesis, or if you look it up on your phone—because I know you didn't turn your phone off, did you?—you might think that somehow the way the Bible tells the story is a little bit out of order. Because what happens is the whole story of the flood, and the ark, and the dove that comes back with the olive branch, and the new start that Noah and his family will make.

And then we get long lists of genealogies, the who-had-who stories of the Bible; there are three great tribes of people, each the offspring of one of Noah's sons, Japeth, Ham, and Shem.

But the story tells us the same thing about each of those tribes. Each of those lists of who-had-who ends in the following way: "These are the descendants of Japeth in their lands, with their own language, by their families, in their nations."

"These are the descendants of Ham, by their families, their languages, their lands, and their nations."

"These are the descendants of Shem, by their families, their languages, their lands, and their nations."

All of that—and then, in the very first line of the next chapter, what we heard this morning, we get this: "Now, the whole earth had one language and the same words."

Now, how did that happen? Maybe the writers of the story figured that they had to explain something to us—explain how it was that this one family went in just a few generations to tribes of people who spoke their own languages.

Any lesson from scripture that touches on the question of languages has to be close to the heart of our Convocation of churches. We have at least six languages in the Convocation, and we have people coming to us asking about starting churches from yet more language groups. I love our diversity and I especially love that people of so many cultures find something in the Episcopal idea of church, something in our way of being this part of the Jesus movement, that they want to be part of no matter what language they speak.

In the two months or so since being ordained here, I've already traveled in different parts of the Convocation and even back to Massachusetts for some last bits of sweeping up. And whenever people talk to me about that service—whether they were here with us or watching the live stream—the thing they comment about the most isn't the great sermon, isn't the beautiful cathedral, isn't the lovely vestments—you know what it is?

The thing people were most impressed by was that litany sung in five languages. That's what almost everyone mentions to me.

And yet, I have to confess—this job would be a lot easier if the whole earth had one language and the same words. Si le monde entier avait un langue et les mêmes mots.

So I have a lot of sympathy for those people marching across the plain.

They are people on the move. They are people who have learned how to build with bricks. They are people united—united in a great purpose. They want to build a tower to the heavens. It's kind of thrilling to imagine people united in such a great effort.

There's just one problem. It's the reason why they want to build that tower.

The story gives it to us plainly: This is to show what we can do. Let us make a name for ourselves, they say. Let's build a tower in the heavens to show how capable we are. Let's make this so high that we can see God eye-to-eye. We have some questions we'd like to ask about that flood. We have some helpful suggestions about how we might improve creation here and there.

We have technology! We have bricks! It's time for us to show God that we are equals in this relationship.

And that's the problem. It's not the ambition. It's the hubris.

It doesn't matter how many bricks you have. What matters is why you are building. It doesn't matter if you're building with bricks, or now, divided by so many languages, building with words. What matters is, what are you trying to build—and why?

God causes that worksite to suddenly fall apart because the people can't understand each other, and they leave off building the tower.

But we—we, who speak so many languages, we can figure out how to understand each other, how to build together. As long as what we're building is something meant to glorify God, and not us.

And here is the secret in this: Not even the language matters.

If we want people to understand what the way of love is about, if we want to share the joy we have found here in the transforming power of God's reconciling love, then it will be the words of our *lives* that do the speaking.

The words of our smallest actions, the words of our random acts of kindness, the words of our compassion toward the needy, of our companionship to the lost and least—those are the words that communicate God's love to others no matter *what* language you speak in this cathedral, or in this Convocation.

With words and water today we will welcome new sisters and brothers into the body of Christ, this amazing inheritance we all share. With words and will this morning, seven people who share this faith with us will stand up make a public declaration of their willingness to walk the Way of Love with us—and, who knows, maybe someday lead us on it.

Our words can build better, stronger, higher than our bricks ever could, if we use them for the purpose of building up each other in the body of Christ. Our words do the work of the Holy Spirit if we use them to speak the truth in love—to each other, to the downtrodden and the hopeless, to the powers of this world that aid injustice and abet hatred.

So let us build, for God's sake. No matter what words we use, no matter what language we have, let us speak with our lips and our lives the healing, redeeming, transforming power of God's love to change not just the world, but ourselves.

The church itself, born on this day by the coming of the Holy Spirit—if you get right down to it, that is why the church came into being. Not just to gather us, not just to comfort us, but to empower us to work not in defiance of God, but alongside God, in building up the kingdom, and proclaiming it while we work.

Today, we recruit new workers to join us in the task. Alessandra, Jolyne, Yuma, Grace, Angelina, Anaïs, Martin, Milena, Joyce, Xavier, Emily—welcome. We're glad to have you. We need your help. Let's get building! *Amen.*

Seeing Where We Stand

June 16, 2019 • Trinity Sunday

Saint James's Church, Florence

Text: Psalm 8: 5: "What is man that you should be mindful of him?"

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I WAS ORDAINED in the Episcopal Church, but my first job in ordained ministry was not in an Episcopal Church. It was in a church that was outside any denomination at all; it was simply a Christian church of the Protestant family. It was the university church at Harvard, a place known as The Memorial Church.

Working there forced me to admit that it was possible for there to be churches that were not Episcopal churches. And it also gave me an opportunity to learn a lot about the history of that place—not a place old by Tuscan standards, but even so the oldest university in America.

One of my favorite stories had to do with the building of Emerson Hall, the place where the philosophy department has its home. When the plans were made about a hundred years ago to build this new building, the president of Harvard, Mr. Lowell, wrote to the Philosophy Department to ask what inscription they would like to see placed on the building.

Of course the department took some time to consider this question, but eventually they wrote back to Mr. Lowell with their answer. They asked that a quote from the ancient philosopher Protagoras be carved above the main door: "Man is the measure of all things."

Mr. Lowell thanked them for their helpful suggestion, and went on building the building.

And when all of the work was done, and the scaffolding came down, and the Philosophy Department assembled in front of the building to see their grand new home, this is what Mr. Lowell had caused to be written over the door of Emerson Hall: "What is Man, that Thou Art Mindful of Him?"

Today is Trinity Sunday, the only feast in the entire calendar of Holy Mother Church that is dedicated not to an event in the life of Christ but to an idea—and what is even more complicated, a *theological* idea; the uniquely Christian claim that the one God whom we confess is revealed in three distinct persons, or identities, or functions.

By long tradition, in churches where there were at least a few ordained clergy, the task of preaching on Trinity Sunday was given to the youngest preacher, usually someone right out of seminary. In part this was probably because Trinity Sunday falls right at the beginning of the summer, right when clergy have just received their degrees and have been newly ordained.

We put them in the pulpit with all their new knowledge and we hand them the most difficult preaching task of all—the doctrine of the Trinity. Usually it does not go well. It is generally a humbling experience.

Yet here it is, this idea that is so central to our understanding of God and yet so difficult to explain. Maybe that is as it should be; after all, God should not be all that easy to explain.

Some of the greatest theologians in the long history of the church have devoted immense effort to unfolding the mystery of the Trinity. Saint Augustine wrote an entire book, fourteen chapters, trying to explain the Trinity in fourteen different ways; at the end of the book he sort of throws up his hands and admits that the mystery of God is beyond our understanding.

Yet we are not really very satisfied with that answer. Maybe the generations before us were comfortable living with mystery, with the idea that there were things beyond their understanding. But we are not. We have solved mysteries. We have explained nature's riddles. We have figured it all out, or at least most of it.

And that is the problem.

Last week we heard about those people who built that high tower to make a name for themselves. They had accomplished so much, they felt so sure of themselves, that they wanted to rise up and look at God eye to eye. They felt as though they were God's equal, and they wanted to prove it.

It didn't end well. They had forgotten their place.

We live in that same danger. We are so much more accomplished than those people marching across the plain, baking bricks and building their tower. We really do feel we are the equal of God, and we think we have the evidence to back up that idea. We have unraveled the genetic code, reached the outermost limit of the solar system, measured the heavens, and explained the fabric of the universe. We have conquered diseases and put the forces of nature at our service.

Or have we?

If we forget the place where we actually stand with respect to God, then nothing about what we say or do here makes any sense. If part of the challenge we face today being the church in this world is that the world around us imagines we are no longer relevant, one of the reasons for that is that our whole culture has imagined that we are God—that we are the measure of all things.

But if we look just a little closer, that proud claim of ours begins to fall apart.

We are destroying the planet God has given us in creation. Our victories against infectious diseases are turning into ashes in our mouths, as the tiniest of all creatures adapt to defeat our antibiotics. The powers we have harnessed with our minds are turned to violent purposes and destructive ends by our flawed hearts.

If we have set ourselves up as God, then it is little wonder people have a hard time believing in God anymore.

The idea of the Trinity makes no sense to us unless we begin from the position that God is God, and we are not. But *if* we begin there, then this seemingly complicated idea becomes a lot more sensible. In fact, it becomes essential.

Because if we are *not* God, then there is a God who desires to be in relationship us. That God is the *source* of love; that God *demonstrates* and makes real a love for us in the person of Jesus; and that God makes real this love for us today through the abiding *presence* of the Holy Spirit, this gift of grace in our lives.

None of that makes sense if we forget where we stand in this relationship. All of it makes sense if we remember where we stand; if we remember that in fact our standing at all depends on God being love, God showing love, and God loving us even today, this moment, through the working of the Holy Spirit in the lives of these people around us.

It is an odd gift, maybe, the gift of this feast day; it is the gift of gently reminding us of the place we are meant to have. When we put it that way, it sounds as though we have been reduced, somehow—made smaller than we think we should be.

But if we consider it prayerfully, if we consider the possibility that lies within it, very quickly the idea of the Trinity reveals itself as an idea about God that has a place for us *in* it. Not God's place, but the place God has made for us; the reason for, the focus of, and the means of experiencing the love that is the very presence of God among us. Thank God for this place we have; thank God for keeping us in mind. *Amen*.

Out of Our Place?

June 23, 2019 • Second Sunday after Pentecost

Emmanuel Church, Geneva

Text: Luke 8:26: "Then they arrived at the country of the Gerasenes, which is opposite Galilee."

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YOU HAVE NO IDEA how much I have been looking forward to this day. Of course it is wonderful to be in Geneva—but that isn't why. And it is a blessing to be for the first time in Emmanuel Church, this place of such history in the Convocation, and the host of this year's convention—but please don't be hurt when I tell you, that isn't why, either.

No, I have been looking forward to today since about January first, because by being here today you and I have both finally made it back into that blessed season in the life of the church known as Ordinary Time. For about six straight months now, life has seemed like one accelerating roller-coaster of planning, packing, moving, losing, organizing, disorganizing, shedding, farewelling, helloing, and oh, yes, celebrating.

It's all good, and it's all exhausting. And now, after all of that—after a Lent spent giving up one life for another, after an Easter season spent learning how to carry all my vestments around all the time, after a Pentecost spent confirming people in our cathedral and a Trinity Sunday dodging the Vespas in Florence that swarm like locusts, I am in Geneva, at Emmanuel Church, which has had a big circle drawn around it on my calendar like a finish line. Ordinary Time! Ordinary Time. Thank God Almighty, we are finally in Ordinary Time.

But wouldn't you just know it—we can't rest here. Just as we have arrived in Ordinary Time, Jesus has gone on before us to what is no ordinary place. And what he is doing there is no ordinary thing.

The Gospel reading this morning presents us with the disturbing account of Jesus' encounter with the Gerasene demoniac. It is a story that appears, in some form or another, in all three of the synoptic gospels.

There is a little bit of variation in how each of the authors tells the story, but the core elements are consistent: There is a man possessed by evil spirits. They have taken such violent control over his life that he is a danger to himself and to the community. The community fears him—even hates him—and shuts him out, casting him out into the wilderness.

And perhaps most important of all, the place where this is all happening—a place to the east and south of the Sea of Galilee—is a place where Jesus does not belong. It is not a place where any self-respecting Jew should be. It is a land beyond the pale, a land of Gentiles, an unclean land. It is, in fact, opposite Galilee—opposite to, opposed to, the place where the Jewish people know themselves to belong. It is so much not their place that one of the ways people make their living there is by raising pigs.

Now, this is a learned congregation, so you already know this story well enough to know that in the long history of the Christian tradition it has been a rich source of theological reflection. The great modern critic and theologian René Girard saw in this story an archetype of the scapegoat narrative, the core human flaw that forges the nexus between religion and violence; and Girard saw in the way that Christ breaks into the story a uniquely Christian answer to the question of how to break the cycle of scapegoating, violence, and sacrifice.[1]

That by itself would make a good sermon, but it is not this sermon.

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1 René Girard (trans. Yvonne Freccero), *The Scapegoat* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989).

And you probably know enough about how this story fits into the narrative of Luke's two-volume gospel to know that Luke sets this story into a sequence of stories to show with increasing force the things that Jesus has power over.

First, he forgives the sins of the woman who anoints his feet; he has power to forgive sins.

Then, he calms the storm; he has power over nature.

Here, he exorcises demons; he has power over Satan and all his forces.

And finally, at the very end of the eighth chapter of Luke, the leader of the synagogue will watch as Jesus raises his daughter from the dead. Jesus has power even over death.

All of that *before* the ninth chapter, where Jesus gathers the disciples and sends them out, giving them "power and authority all demons, and to cure diseases." Do you get it? What comes before is meant to give us a preview into what disciples do—or at least, what they are meant to do.

But it also is meant to teach us *where* disciples do these things. Not in safe places. Not in the secure confines of our own church. At dinner parties, and in the homes of the powerful, and most of all in places where we do not belong. Places where no decent Christian should go.

Disciples are meant to go where we are out of place. We are meant to be in dangerous places. We are meant to be in places that will risk our reputation.

All of which comes naturally to Episcopalians, right? Ha! right.

One of my wisest mentors sat me down when I was applying to be considered for ordination and told me, with no smile on his face—"The ministry will take you places you never thought you'd go." Boy, has that ever turned out to be true.

And I don't mean Geneva, or not just Geneva. I've been in hospitals and hospices.

I've been at conferences with the Secretary of State, and at the deathbeds of people with no family and no fame.

I've been in prisons and in palaces, in temples and in mosques, in gurdwaras and in synagogues. And the one and only time I've been in the back seat of a police car, I was wearing my collar. The ministry will take you places you never thought you'd go.

And you, dear friends—every one of you—every one of us—we are all ministers.

So we had better be ready. Because if we are willing to risk putting away our ambitions and our reputations, if we can find the way to set aside our righteous certainties and give up theologizing our cultural preferences, if we can do all that and simply follow where Christ goes—then we will end up out of our place, in places we don't belong, doing the work that disciples do: the work of compassion, the work of forgiveness, the work of creation care, the work of bringing back to life the things that appear to be dead all around us.

You will end up going into the sorts of places that make people wonder about your judgment, or your reputation. Places where decent people don't go. You may end up being among the homeless or the incarcerated. You may end up being among the mentally ill. You may end up being among refugees and asylum seekers.

And the same thing will happen when we make ourselves a place of welcome for the outcast and the ostracized. The same thing will happen the more progress we make in building the sort of church Paul is teaching those Galatians to make—a church with no divisions about race or class or gender or anything else. If we do that, we will be acting counterculturally. If we do that, we will be seen as violating the norms. If we do that, we will be seen as dangerous—or worse.

In the church in the United States, it took a very long time for the Episcopal Church to make itself a place of welcome for people of color—and when it did, there were people who turned against us.

The same thing is happening now that we are making our church a place of welcome for gay and lesbian and transgendered people. Those are the places we are not supposed to go. They are the region of the Gerasenes.

But we go there.

Now, lest you think this has a happy ending, lest you think disciples receive a lot of social approval and civic honor for doing what we are called to do, remember how the story ends. The man gets healed—the man who was outcast, who was reviled, who was made the bearer of all the torment and trouble of that community. *He* is thankful. No surprise there.

But everyone else—they want Jesus out of there, and fast. It's just one more place where there is no room for him in the inn. Thank you for visiting the country of the Gerasenes; please rate us on Trip Advisor, but please leave.

Just this past week, I sent a letter to an eager, enthusiastic group of Christians in Tbilisi who want to be a mission of the Episcopal Church. Tbilisi! They're not part of the world of the Reformation; they're part of the world of the Great Schism. Not only do we not have similar cultures; we don't even have similar alphabets. They are two thousand seven hundred kilometers from the nearest congregation in our Convocation. But they had written me a letter.

And do you know what? They want to be part of us. Do you know why? It's not because there is a shortage of churches on offer in Tbilisi. It's not because they saw the sermon at the Royal Wedding.

It's because they see in us a group of Christians who are willing to go where we don't belong, include people we're not supposed to include, honor partnerships we're not supposed to honor, and serve people we are not supposed to serve. Half of that community is made up of gay and lesbian people who are effectively persecuted in their own country. They see in us a group of Christians who extend themselves in love without really caring who notices. They see in us people willing to go wherever the Way of Love takes us, no matter what place it is.

So just maybe we are going to Georgia. Just maybe we are going to Gerasa. Just maybe we are going to where no right-thinking, reputation-protecting person would ever go. Just maybe we are going to extraordinary places in our extraordinary time, to places where we are out of place—because that is where disciples go. *Amen.*

Outward and Visible Signs

June 27, 2019 • Saints Peter and Paul (trans.) • Gathering of the Clericus

Text: John 21:15: "Feed my lambs.""

I MAKE A COVENANT with you that whenever we gather as a group of colleagues I will confess to you one error that has in some way taught me something about my part of the ministry we share together. This one came pretty early.

In my defense I want to begin by observing that no one really sits you down and tells you when you are new at this just how it is you are supposed to dress, and why, on most days. You simply do what all of us learned to do when you were new kid on the first day of school; you observe what others are doing with considerable acuity, and you do likewise.

So that is what I have done. I've been around bishops in our church in some way or another for pretty much my whole life, but I never paid much attention to them until I had to figure out how to look like one. I paid careful attention to the people who were assigned to me as mentors and as my coach. I looked at pictures. I studied the practice of others.

And that is how it came to pass that I went to a conference on the history of the Versailles Peace Conference that ended World War I organized by the American University in Paris, looking pretty much like this. Okay, different color shirt, but suit, collar, cross tucked in pocket. Indeed, if you go back and watch the video with the Presiding Bishop we watched yesterday, exactly like that.

It was a fascinating meeting and I was glad to be invited, and I was feeling even maybe a little confident about walking around in my new role when I got on Metro Line 1 to go back up to the George V stop and the cathedral.

I never sit down on the Metro, or at least I haven't yet, and so I was standing there with my hand wrapped around the post to stay upright. And a young man in a suit and tie noticed me.

He saw my collar, and my shirt, and my ring, and so he asked me, a little roughly—"Vous etês un evéque?"

"Oui, monsieur, je suis un evéque episcopal," came my reply.

He thought about that for a moment and then, in quite good English, he said: "I was wondering why you hide your cross?"

It didn't seem like it would be a very satisfactory answer to explain that I was new at this and had just been doing what I've seen others do. Not an answer that would fill anyone with confidence, not even me.

Now, I hope it will mitigate your embarrassment somewhat to share with you that in the course of the conversation that followed I learned that his name was Jean-François, that he is twenty-four years old, that he is Roman Catholic, that he lives in the sixteenth and that he is doing graduate studies in theology, and that he works for the Catholic television broadcasting service in Paris. In short, I managed to extricate myself somewhat from the situation.

But as I walked back to the cathedral something dawned on me that had never yet penetrated my thinking, or rather my unthinking way of just copying everyone else: Some people, even—maybe especially—people who don't go to any of our churches, depend on us to be Christians in the world.

What we share together, colleagues, is the life of sacramental ministry. All of us who are the children of the apostles, all of us who are the inheritors of the mantle of Stephen the deacon, all of us in our very different congregations and cultures have chosen to center our lives on offering, and living, a sacramental ministry.

And we have all taught it to confirmation classes so many times that it is practically impossible for us to forget; an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace, which conveys what it represents.

The water of Baptism. The bread and wine of Eucharist. The joined hands, the solemn vows, and the exchanged gifts of marriage.

Maybe because I have chosen to see the world through a sacramental lens, I see other sacramental expressions as well, The embracing earth of our memorial gardens. The spoken words of a sermon. The quiet, invisible attention of Altar Guilds. The guidance of teachers to children.

But what I realized in that moment was that someone on a subway train was sort of hoping that in that unlikely place, for them, in that moment, they were hoping I would be some kind of outward and visible sign. Hoping that I would show up as the thing I talk about, that I would step up to the mark and be what it is I so imperfectly try to offer, or to teach, or to explain.

That is what I see in you, sisters and brothers. You are the outward and visible signs of inward and spiritual graces. Your gifts and graces are as varied and as essential as the physical stuff we have been given in which to hold them—these flesh-and-blood, breathing, hoping, sanctified, mortal bodies.

You are the outward and visible signs, yes, for your own people, but even more for people who feel a hope they may not know how to confess simply by seeing you and watching what you do, how you move through the world both sharing and being the sacramental awareness that shapes your life.

So I give thanks not just for the witness that you offer in this complicated, challenging, difficult, fractious place, but for the sacramental lives you gracefully live and willingly share.

Because I believe that more than the loveliest vestments, more than the swankiest Wippell's swag, more than the most beautifully crafted liturgy or the most forcefully preached sermon, more even than all the sum total of all our divinity school tuitions, what others see in your sacramental lives is the best outward and visible evidence of the possibility, the necessity, the gift, of inward and spiritual grace. *Amen*.

The Leadership of the Least

June 29, 2019 • Saints Peter and Paul • Ordination of Stéphanie Burette, Deacon

The Cathedral Church of the Holy Trinity, Paris

Text: Luke 22:24: "A dispute arose among them as to which one of them was the greatest."

YOU CANNOT POSSIBLY KNOW how glad I am to be here and to see all of you here. And you probably cannot know *why* I am so glad to see you all here. It is because after three months' worth of long threads of e-mails involving the Dean and the new bishop, we finally, *finally* got Stéphanie to commit to a day and a time to show up here and get ordained.

There was her graduation from Yale in late May, and then her pre-ordination retreat. We thought about the first of June, but then her visa expired, and if she left the U.S. she wouldn't be able to go back in for her missionary training on June 16... and *that* lasted until, well, just two days ago. So if the ordinand before us looks a little jet-lagged, she has very good reason to be.

But now she is here, and even better with an expired visa she can't go back, so we finally have our moment, and our congregation, and our choir, and everything else, including, thanks be to God, Stéphanie. And that is why I am glad to see you all here.

We have been at this a long time. Stéphanie first appears in the files of the Convocation in 2012. She has wandered a long road since then, meeting with committees and commissions, being examined by doctors, spending three years at Yale taking exams and writing papers, taking the General Ordination Examination. We tried everything we could think of, every obstacle we could come up with, to make her think twice about this. But here we are, in this churchiest of churchy moments, the culmination of all those processes and programs and requirements and rules.

And do you know what? The best news of all today is that the church does all that work, creates all those hurdles and hoops for Stéphanie to jump over and through, and then doesn't get to have the last word. Because today what happens—after all of that—is that the church gets out of God's way, and lets the Holy Spirit do her irrepressible, insistent work.

In some ways, all these years we have been chaperoning a courtship. Just when we think we know God, just when we think we know how God works—or just when we think we know God isn't there at all—God called the heart of this woman. And Stéphanie—perhaps at first quite to her own surprise—began calling back. The draw of the Holy Spirit between these two became so dangerous that of course we in the church had to place ourselves in the middle between them to manage their relationship.

But today the church gets out of the way. Today we let them be on their own.

The people around Jesus were a lot like the people around us. They were social stratifiers. They lived in a culture with rigid social hierarchies and lots of ways to signal where you fit in that structure. Your religious status. Your financial status. Your social status. The social status of the people you were closest to.

It isn't surprising that we are still social stratifiers. One of the reasons we have prospered as a species is exactly that we have adapted into highly social creatures; we are acutely aware of the smallest gradations in social status, and capability, and power.

Every day when I commute to work, I leave the Metro at the George V station and the first thing I walk by is the Louis Vuitton store. There is always a line of people, stretching down the block, waiting in all kinds of weather just for a chance to be let in to look at the merchandise. Farther down the avenue, when you pass the hotels, it is always the most expensive cars parked right at the curbside. We want to signal our power, our success, our status.

Stéphanie, there is no line of people waiting to get into the cathedral. The people out there are still arguing among themselves just like those early disciples did about which one of them is the greatest. Not very many of them see an answer to that need in the Christian faith.

And there is a very good reason for that. Very little about what we do here gives any affirmation to that world of social climbing and ambitious posing.

What we preach here, what we have been taught by the one we proclaim to be Lord and Savior, is that this whole idea is upside-down.

First, Jesus says, when God looks at us God sees *no* rank ordering, no best-to-worst, no honor rolls and detention lists: We are all radically equal in the sight of God. That is an idea completely at odds with the way humans are designed to work. And that is why it is so radical.

And along with that comes the ethic that Jesus teaches to turn this world in to *that* vision: We disciples have to create among ourselves a right-side-up world. In the world we are called to create, the highest are the lowest, the least are the greatest, the youngest are the wisest, and the outcasts are the in-crowd.

That is the world we are called to build, at least within the church. And by God's grace, when we get it right in the church, which we don't do often enough, we begin to change the world *outside* the church, too.

It turns out there is a hidden gift in the long wait we had to endure to figure out a day for this to happen. Most people are ordained to the diaconate right after they graduate, in late May or maybe early June. These days some people are even ordained *before* they graduate, much to the consternation of us older people.

But it just so happens that by waiting this long we gave you a peculiar gift. You are ordained on the Feast of Saint Peter and Saint Paul. They, too, argued between themselves over who was the greatest. They had different visions for the church, each one of which, in isolation, would not have brought about the vision of the beloved community Jesus dreamed of for his people.

One thought the gift of the Way of Love was only to be shared by the people already chosen by God, people who understood that relationship with God is a covenant, not a casual thing. And one thought the gift had the purpose of expanding the idea of "chosenness" to be radically expanded to all encompass all people, everywhere, for all time.

In the reading you chose for us to hear from the Acts of the Apostles this morning, we see what happened when one of those brothers in Christ allowed himself to imagine the truth of the other's ideas. Peter's dream teaches him that God's love is neither defined nor limited by our imaginations; instead, it is our imaginations that are meant to be made wider by the transforming power of God's love.

Holy mother church, in her wisdom, decided which of them was the greatest. She decided that they were equal, and so we celebrate them together. The upside-down world of the beloved community even applies to our calendar.

So never forget that you were ordained on this day that lives right in the tension between the church as it has been and the church as it will be. Never forget that you were ordained on this day that rejects the notion of rank ordering even saints. That is not how the God of love, the God who charts the way of love even through the wilderness of despair, that is not how our God works.

Stéphanie, you are now called to be among us as a deacon in the church. There is a reason why all of us who take up the ordained part of the ministry of the church start in that role. It is because in this time you are called by God to stand in the space between the world God calls us to create here and the world as it is—the world where we fight over power, and land, and privilege, and access.

You are called to be among us to speak the needs of the world, to help us understand how we can better address the needs of that world that Christ came to save.

And at the same time you are called to be in that world on our behalf, preaching the Gospel's possibility of a different vision, a higher hope, a holy purpose.

So value this time, and give yourself to it fully, prayerfully, and fearlessly. Because for this moment you are by no means the least in the ministry of the church; Jesus has taught us that the leaders are the ones who serve. Be our leader, Stéphanie; lead us into the world God calls us to serve, and to the extent that God enables you, lead the world to the knowledge of God's love. *Amen.*

Choices and Consequences

June 30, 2019 • Third Sunday after Pentecost

Christ Church, Clermont-Ferrand

Text: Luke 9:51: "... he set his face to go to Jerusalem."

I COME FROM a long line of farmers who tilled the soil in the midwest of the United States. They grew fields of beans and maize, and they knew what it was like to work the land on sweltering summer days.

Because of this I can confidently say that I learned when I was young how to plow a field. My father had grown up on a farm in the western part of Michigan, and although we had a house set on a one-acre lot, he was determined that at least a quarter of our lot would be turned over to the purpose of a small farm, or a large garden, depending on how you looked at it.

My job was to prepare the soil using a hand-driven, gasoline powered rotary tiller. It had a reach of about a meter wide, which meant that it took about fifty passes back and forth to till the soil just once. And my father's view was that to do this right you had to do it three times: once to open the land, once with fertilizer, and once more a day after a good rain.

Only when that was done could you plow the furrows that would receive the seeds. That was where the plowing lesson came in.

When Jesus says that no one who sets his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God, he reveals that he knows something about plowing a field.

When you plow a furrow in a field, you have to set the blade of the plow in the earth and then pick out a spot all the way across the field—and keep your eyes on that spot as you move forward. If you do that, you'll end up with a straight furrow.

If you look back over your shoulder to see where you've been, or how much progress you've made, or whether someone is coming out with a water bottle for you, you will end up with a very wavy furrow. And that will mean wasted space—which to a farmer is the same thing as wasted money.

I thought about this teaching as I looked out at the endless farm fields on the train from Paris yesterday. Disciples don't look back. That is the first lesson Jesus teaches us this morning. There are lots of reasons why we want to; there are so many ties of fondness and love that bind us to the past.

But disciples are meant to be pressing forward toward God's call, always. We are not meant to spend any time idealizing the past, much less mourning it.

The last words of this little selection from Luke's gospel has the effect, and maybe the intention, of underscoring the gravity of the first words of it: "He set his face to go to Jerusalem." Jesus has picked out a mark all the way in front of him to head toward. He will not be distracted or turned aside from the objective he has set for himself.

We know from studying the single, two-volume work that is the Gospel of Luke and the Acts of the Apostles that this is a major turning point in Luke's story. The whole narrative structure of the Gospel of Luke pivots on the decisive moment Jesus sets his face to go to Jerusalem.

Jerusalem is where the God of heaven and earth will confront the powers of this world. Jerusalem is where all the barriers that we have managed to set up between God and ourselves will be finally thrown down, once for all. Jerusalem is where Jesus will accomplish the work of salvation, where the cross will be raised and the tomb will be emptied, where the Resurrection will give love the last word.

It sounds brave, even heroic. But it comes at a great cost. We are told that the people of Samaria would not receive him—not because of who he was or what he taught, but because he had decided on a course of action and was sticking with it. "They would not receive him, because he had set his face to go to Jerusalem."

So it is not just that disciples don't look back. It's that disciples say their prayers, and consider God's call to them, and then stick to a chosen path forward. We set our faces on the future, and that is where we are going.

And there will be people who will not receive us, people who will not agree with us, because we are not willing to look back. There will be people who will not come with us, because they would prefer not to keep their eyes fixed in the direction toward which we have set our faces—the direction of God's uncertain, unknowable, but grace-filled future.

There are consequences to our choices. We all learn that at a very young age, just like me learning to plow that field. And when we are disciples, our choices still have consequences—even when we make them for the best, most prayerful reasons.

We cannot be in discernment forever. At some point, we must decide. We, here, must decide what course we will follow. We must decide whether we will set our faces on the future, and set our hand to the plow—or whether we will keep looking behind us, forgetting that without the plow the garden will not grow. *Amen*.

Two Types of Turning

July 14, 2019 • Cathedral of the Holy Trinity, Paris

Fifth Sunday after Pentecost • La Fête nationale

Text: Matthew 5:44: "But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you…"

TODAY I PROCLAIM the end of a tyranny—the tyranny of the Lectionary. You must understand, as I do this, that even though I was raised in the Episcopal Church, baptized, confirmed, and ordained in the Episcopal Church, the first church I ever worked for in ordained ministry was a church that lived outside the lectionary.

I am sure that probably had something to do with the fact that the senior minister in that place was a Baptist, an American Baptist to be specific, and he placed a very high value indeed on the idea of Biblical literacy.

I always thought that the great gift of the lectionary was knowing that the faithful people in churches everywhere were thinking about and reflecting on the very same lessons every Sunday morning. But my first boss in ministry thought the lectionary was a crutch, one that took away from the preacher any responsibility to shape a message to meet the unique needs of a congregation from week to week. And it also meant that you could get away without knowing the Bible very well at all, if you had the decisions all made for you already about what readings would be heard.

When I left that place and went off to be a rector for the first time, I suddenly had to learn that if you wanted to veer away from the lectionary on Sunday morning, if you wanted your people to hear something else that you thought was better suited to their situation and their needs, you had to ask permission. Permission of the *bishop*! Can you imagine?

And so I did. I'll bet I had a reputation in the bishop's office for my bizarre requests for dispensation from the lectionary.

But now what do I do? Do I ask myself for permission? No, I'm the bishop now. So I have to ask a higher authority. I asked the Dean. And she said yes.

So the lessons today are not the readings appointed for the fifth Sunday after Pentecost. They are the readings appointed for July 4th—for Independence Day in the United States. Believe it or not, the committee that sets up the lectionary put together a set of proper readings for July 4th. I am sure they thought they were being helpful.

I am thinking a lot about words these days, not least because I am hard at work trying to learn a great many new ones in three different languages. The word I have been reflecting on lately is *revolution*—a word that appears in both French and English within about the same century; first in French, by about the late thirteenth century, and in English by the late fourteenth century.

In both cases the word first conveyed the idea of the passage of planetary bodies—the revolutions around the sun that made for the orbit of a planet, or the revolutions around the earth that makes up the orbit of the moon.

If you think about it, it's interesting that this word that first conveyed something about the natural order came in both languages to convey something about the disruption of one order and its replacement with another.

Even so: Still revolutions. Both languages carry this idea. Our nations still carry this identity, nations born from a revolutionary upheaval, a break with the past determined to reshape the structures of power around the fundamental concept of equality, of the dignity of all people, of the right of all people to have a voice in how they are governed.

Those are not unimportant ideas for us to reflect on today. They are not just historical themes; they are deeply Christian ideas. When Mr. Putin says in his interview with the *Financial Times* that the liberal idea is obsolete, that it no longer expresses the hopes of the majority of people, he might as well be saying the same thing about the core moral teachings of the Christian faith.

Our revolutions were not Christian revolutions, but make no mistake—the ideas that animated them and pushed them forward have their source and their power in a set of moral claims first set loose in the world by the Christian gospel.

So what happened to our revolutions? Why all this disaffection and disappointment? Why all this alienation?

We can leave the scholars to reach a conclusion about that, or the economists not to reach one. What matters for us, what matters for Christians, is the human aspiration that makes change possible, and that also tends to let it remain incomplete.

Yes, revolution is a means of change. Yes, revolution is a means of turning, turning from the old to the new, turning from the problem to the possible.

But for us, for those of us who approach the problems around us with a Christian perspective, revolution is not the only way of accomplishing change. It isn't the only way of making a turn.

It's the way we love best, perhaps, because our history teaches us that it's glorious. It's the way we're most attracted to, because we love taking stands on things, we love being prophetic, we love to be in the *avant garde*.

But that other way of turning is what's missing. It's our inability to teach it, to live it, to make it real in our lives and in the life of the society around us that is somewhere near the heart of this feeling that things are falling apart.

Because what is missing isn't a great enough revolution. What is missing is the other way of turning. What is missing is *conversion*.

I don't mean by this the kind of conversion that prompted the missionary movements of two hundred years ago. I don't mean by this the kind of prophets of doom in the *New Yorker* cartoons carrying around signs that say, "Repent!"

I don't mean the sort of conversion that zealots demand of other people.

I mean the kind of conversion that disciples are meant to seek in themselves.

As much as I like to make fun of the writers of the lectionary, I think their choices for our consideration on a day celebrating revolution could hardly be wiser. Because right in the midst of our celebrating the glory of revolutions comes this careful, gentle, disturbing reminder of the necessity of conversion—of the conversion of our hearts that God intends to work in us, if we really give ourselves to this faith.

Love your enemies. Bless those who persecute you. Love the people who don't love you—the people, let's face it, who are hard, or awkward, or dangerous to love.

Doing that doesn't require a revolution. We've had the revolution. And still we feel disconnected, still we feel disappointed, still we feel disenchanted. Because our revolutionary ideas have not been sustained, have not been supported, by the conversion of hearts that the vision of those revolutions turns out to depend on.

You probably know, or you think you know, the three vows that are taken by most monks and nuns in religious life. But if I quizzed you, you'd very likely get it wrong. Because the Benedictines, the oldest of all orders, requires its members to take three vows: Obedience, Stability, and Conversion of Manners.

Let's leave aside for another sermon on a different day our struggles as modern Christians with the concept of obedience. You probably thought I was going to say, poverty, chastity, and obedience; but as any Benedictine will tell you, poverty and chastity are understood to be just two parts of a larger, life-long soul-building project, this idea called "conversion of manners."

What monks mean when they say that phrase is the idea that this faith of ours is meant to change us. It's not meant to reward us, or comfort us, or somehow give a veneer of theological approval for the people we already are.

Our faith is meant to constantly, gently, firmly push us away from our comfort, from our complacency. God's love is never finished transforming us into disciples. When Jesus holds up before us this idea of becoming perfect, he doesn't mean we will ever *be* perfect. He means our work of converting our own hearts, our desire to be less our own and more fully his, is the work of our whole lives.

It is right that we give thanks today for the possibilities opened by revolutions that set loose on the world the ideals we treasure.

But while we do so, let us also remember to ask for the wisdom, the patience, the willingness, the courage to be changed ourselves—to know, to teach, and to share the kind of conversion of hearts that make real the dreams our revolutions give us fleeting glimpses of.

For the possibility of true equality means nothing unless we can bring ourselves to treat each other with equal respect; the hope of genuine human dignity means nothing unless we give even to those who hate us the basic respect that they rightly seek for themselves. And the dream of true *fraternité,* of a deep awareness of our interdependence each on all the others, will never be achieved unless we bring our hearts to treasure each other as brothers and sisters in God. *Amen.*

Awkward Choices

September 8, 2019 • Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Saint Augustine of Canterbury, Wiesbaden

Text: Deuteronomy 30:19: "Choose life so that you and your descendants may live…"

If you pay close attention to the preachers you hear, you will know that every one of us has a bag of tricks we carry around with us. Some of us keep just a few on hand, like those intrepid golfers who go out for a day on the course carrying just three clubs. Some of carry around huge bags of ridiculously elaborate tricks just in case an occasion comes up in which they might be helpful.

We all have our own bag of tricks—the rector does, and Father Douglas does; you will soon be helping to form a new curate for ministry, and one of the things I am sure he will be doing during his time with you is trying out different preaching tools, deciding which ones to keep for his back of tricks. I am depending on all of you to help him get it right.

Your bishop has a bag of tricks too, and it is no more honorable if I admit to you that I am pulling out one of my most familiar and well-worn tools this morning. Because there is something both wonderfully appropriate and deeply troubling about the Gospel lesson that happens to be appointed for today, this day when we are confirming Quentin and receiving Marta.

Appropriate, because there is no denying that it applies to their predicament this morning—and, by extension through them, to all of us.

And troubling because we have from Jesus this morning a very hard saying indeed, one that is a little hard to hear as "good news." It is about division, and disagreement, and strife.

So the trick is this: in order to get us to that gospel lesson, I'm going to flee in the opposite direction, into the safe embrace of the words of Moses in the closing chapters of Deuteronomy, and especially this relatively comforting challenge: "Choose life, so that you and your descendants may live."

Division we don't much like. But choice—choice we like. If you think about it, having choices is a kind of measure of our success in the world's terms. The more choices you have, the greater your prosperity.

Or so it would seem. Some of you know that I spent some years of my career running a behavioral science laboratory, working with scholars from a range of disciplines in the social sciences. One of the research findings that had the greatest impact on my thinking had to do with choice and welfare.

The experiment was a simple one: in a grocery store, customers would walk in one day and find one of those tables with samples where you can try what's in the jar. On some days, there would be twenty-four different kinds of Wilkin and Sons jam available for people to sample; on other days, there would be only six jars, just a quarter as many. The same was true on the shelf; twenty-four choices on one day, six on another.

The question was—is there any difference in terms of how many people successfully choose a jam to buy, and leave the store with a jar?

Now, before I tell you what the end was, I'll tell you the middle. Far, far more people stopped at the table with twenty-four choices to try than stopped at the table with six choices. But here is the funny thing: in the end, quite a few more people left the store with a jar of jam on the days only six choices were available. In fact, ten times as more people.

So, if one measure of welfare for you is having a jar of jam in your life, then it turns out you are better off having fewer choices than a huge range of choices. And that may be true in more things than jam.

In our culture we associate choice with freedom; our ability to choose is a reflection of our freedom, and the more choice we have the more freedom it feels that we have.

The funny thing is, the more choices we have, the less free we are—because the harder it is for us to choose. The more choices we have, the more protective we are of the freedom we think we have, and the more reluctant we are to accept the limits on our freedom that comes from making a single choice out of the infinite range of possibilities. But of course that means we end up with nothing, other than a kind of empty and meaningless freedom.

When we choose, we absolutely give up some of our freedom. The economists I used to work with had a very apt phrase for this idea, the notion of opportunity costs. It's the idea that making a choice involves an inevitable tradeoff; you cannot both have, and eat, your cake.

That is the hard edge of what choice means. And brothers and sisters, this is no more abstract theory; this is the stuff we live with every day. We have no choice but to choose every day, no choice but to make choices.

One of the things it means to be human is to have no alternative but to navigate across the landscape of decisions every single day of our lives. Some of them are big and some of them are small, and many of the ones that turn out to be big seemed small when we first met them.

This is the deep wisdom that the writer of Deuteronomy knows. You have to choose. We all have to choose. So for heaven's sake, choose what God is offering you. Choose a life that fulfills the promise God planted in you. Choose to embrace the person God made you to be—which surely is a person God has made to fully embrace the potential of others, too.

Choose life. Choose the possibility of good.

The gift God gives us is sovereignty over own will. As the rector taught last week, the wisdom of the church knows that there are at least seven big ways that we can misuse and squander that sovereignty. But even so, God will not take it away from us.

God will not treat us as children who cannot yet be trusted with something. God doesn't change the rules and take away our freedom in order to keep us on the right path. Neither does God abandon us to the worst things our choices can lead us to. God runs after us all the time, trying to get us back on track, and the end, with no choice left, God chooses the cross to block our path toward losing ourselves forever.

So what if we do choose well? What if we do choose to at least try to stay on that path? What if we do choose the path of life and light, the path that follows our loving, liberating, life-giving Lord?

It's all good, right? We know we're on that path when everything gets easier. We know we're on that path when people affirm us more and more often. Or as the preachers with private jets in America will teach you, we know we're on that path when we get rich.

Well, none of that is true. If it were, many, many more people would probably choose to join along with us.

But this is the deep wisdom Jesus sets before us this morning—and especially before Quentin and Marta. This choice, the choice of discipleship, this is not easy. It will lead to some awkward moments. It will lead to difficult conversations. It will lead to trouble.

Because the world around us, the culture around us, is afraid of anyone certain enough about their path to make a clear, confident, certain choice. When we choose to be disciples, when we choose to walk the Way of Love, it is a costly choice.

We have chosen, and Quentin and Marta are choosing, to live lives guided by a constant awareness of God's presence in this life we share. We have chosen to be found on the side of justice and dignity of every human being. We have chosen not just to believe that the long arc of history bends toward justice, but to live in a way that bends the arc.

When we make this choice we may find that people we love, people we care about, people we deeply admire, cannot understand why we have made this choice. They will tell us we are selling out our freedom. That we are reducing ourselves by clinging to old ideas.

But what we know is that it is serving God and God's hope that gives us perfect freedom. What we know is that giving ourselves over entirely to the choice for living fully, living lovingly, expands our horizon and elevates our sense of fulfillment.

And we know this, too: When we make this choice, we may give up some ease of life, but in return we gain the amazing, incalculable gift of these people, this remarkable and beloved community of companions along our way.

So Marta and Quentin, we welcome the choice you are making today. We give thanks for it, because it affirms the choice we have made; and we pledge that we will support you in your part of the work you are now taking on, to build up God's kingdom here and now, and to show all people they are welcome within it. We thank you, and we thank God for you. *Amen.*

Victory and Vulnerability

September 14, 2019 • Holy Cross Day

The Council of Anglican and Episcopal Churches in Germany

Text: Philippians 2:5: "Christ Jesus... though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited...."

PERHAPS THIS MAKES ME a bit odd, but I have long loved the story of the Israelites skirting the land of Edom. It was one of those tales that captivated my attention way back in Sunday School days. The first lesson it taught seemed to be that if you complained about the food in God's restaurant, the dessert would be a lot worse.

But even more fascinating to a young boy attentive to the balance between provocation and punishment was the God's way of dealing with these obstreperous people. The serpents aren't just a feature of the landscape in the scenic route around Edom; an exasperated God sends them in response to the reviews the Israelites are writing on Yelp.

And then Moses prays, and just as quickly as God sent the serpents, God sends the *solution* to the serpents. It is—here's the really interesting part—another serpent. More specifically, the solution is this: You make a copy of the thing that is assailing you, preferably out of bronze, and then you hoist it up on a pole so that you and everyone else can look at it when it is tormenting you, and—hey, presto—problem solved.

What a fabulous thing to be able to do! Before I was even in the car on the way home from church, I began to wonder: Could I make a bronze model of Mrs. O'Meara? Mrs. O'Meara was my fourth-grade math teacher. How hard is it to make something out of bronze? That sent me to the "B" volume of the *Encyclopædia Britannica*. I had a pleasant daydream about reveling in the accolades of my classmates for coming up with a way of protecting us all from the terrors of long division.

Wouldn't it be great if it really worked that way? What particular torment of yours would you cast in bronze and hoist on a pole, if you could? Maybe I should ask: Whom would you make an image of in bronze and hoist on a pole, if you could? Someone from your parish, perhaps? A head of state with curious blond hair, perhaps? For all I know, I might well be on the list of things some of you might want to cast in bronze for a hoisting. And that's okay; some of you might be on my list, too.

I suppose the wisdom of those who have crafted the lectionary of the Church of England in appointing this text for today is to connect the image of the serpent raised to alleviate the pain of serpents to the image of the Christ raised on the cross to alleviate the venom of sin and death.

There is a danger in that parallel, of course, because of course the man raised on the cross is without sin. But he surely does die, or else the resurrection would be a sham and our faith would be misplaced. That he is raised is the truth we know, and the hope we live.

I am still very new in this ministry, and new in this culture. I have been struck by how greatly more secular is European culture than the culture of the United States, which at least remains generally sympathetic to the idea of faith and the work of faith communities. It is not too much of a stretch to say that in some parts of Europe the depth of secularization results in a perspective that is by no means neutral, but plainly hostile, to both the claims of the faith and the work of the church.

To say it in the terms of the focus of this day, the work accomplished by the cross once for all humanity—this treasure we have received of an intervention on our behalf to offer us the possibility of justification before God despite our waywardness, to assure us of the possibility of eternal life in the eternity of God—that work seems of questionable, even laughable relevance to much of the world around us. The cross offers an antidote to the bite of a serpent people no longer feel inhabits their lives or their world.

We know better than this, of course. We know that the human condition of sinfulness does not change simply because the culture beguiles us into thinking otherwise. If the serpent's bite has in our day taken the form of a pervasive spiritual acedia, it is our task as disciples to ask how best to cut through that indifference and apathy with a message of urgency and possibility.

But this is where our point of contact in the second chapter of Philippians, the great kenotic hymn, comes and stands confronting us. If that is our task—and I believe with all my heart that it is—then are we fit for purpose?

In an earlier day the great numbers of the faithful people of God felt overwhelmed by their powerlessness in the face of war, and disease, and poverty, and the violence that attends state power. And what we did, and did very well, in reaching out to them was to build great institutions, and glorious buildings, and elaborated structures of power, all of which did an excellent job in giving our people a sense that their souls, at least, were safe and secure within the fortress of God's church.

Today, the great numbers of people still feel overwhelmed by their powerlessness.

They feel powerless in the face of the pace of technological advancement, a kind of "progress" that opens fundamental questions about what it means to be human.

They feel powerless in the face of faceless, complex institutions, so much so that they are desperate to tear them down if only to feel empowered in their capacity for destruction.

They feel powerless in the face of a culture relentlessly measuring them in terms of wealth, or influence, or celebrity, and eagerly willing to take advantage of their vulnerability or weakness.

And what do we have to offer to those people, people so overwhelmed by powerlessness that they have lost track of their souls?

Right now we are offering them great institutions, and glorious castles, and elaborated structures of power. All of the things toward which those good people have developed a reflexive suspicion, or an even an active hatred. And not surprisingly, we are not getting very far doing the thing God has called us to do—which is, and always has been, more about people than about the privileges of institutions.

My old thesis adviser, Sarah Coakley, has written critically and constructively about the tradition of the church in interpreting the hymn to the kenosis of Christ in the second chapter of Philippians.[1] In her own synthesis, the idea of kenosis sets before all of us who claim the name Christian, and all of the institutions we build, a rigorous test.

It proceeds from the claim that the power given to Christ to make real the victory over sin and death arises not from a God so many of the collects teach us to address as "almighty," but rather from the profound vulnerability of Jesus—a vulnerability made devastatingly real in the brutal fact of the cross, that place where the blind power of this world is met and transcended by the power-in-vulnerability of God's love.

This God is not a God of coercion. This God is not a God who will demand of a lost and frightened people that they come to our churches to pay him homage. This God is a god who comes to us and enters fully into our vulnerability, in order to transform our fear into faith.

The cross we proclaim today, that subversion of an instrument of shame into a sign of victory, is the place where that is made real. For centuries we have built buildings for ourselves following this pattern, in the fabric of our cruciform churches. But how shall we now be cross-shaped disciples?

I am nearly the newest of all of you, and it seems presumptuous of me to include any exhortation section in this sermon.

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1 Sarah Coakley, "Kenosis and Subversion," in *Powers and Submissions: Spirituality, Philosophy, and Gender* (Oxford, U.K. and Malden, Mass.: Wiley-Blackwell, 2002).

But for my own part I am persuaded that for us to answer God's call to reach out into this world, and this culture, at this moment—that thing that the incarnational emphasis so distinctive of Anglican theology calls us to do—we are going to have to lay down our longing to proclaim the victory of the cross only, and instead enter much more fully into its vulnerability.

Once, we reached out to the needs of our people by building grand structures of concrete and canon law to give them a sense of safety and security. But now, just maybe, we are being called to enter fully into their sense of vulnerability and precarity.

This is, after all, what Christ does for us in the incarnation. And for the centuries that we were creating grand devices and indulging haughty desires, whether as a church enjoying the protections of being established, or as a church enjoying the benefits of being the home of the establishment, we tended to forget that the God we proclaim is a God who willingly and consistently enters our lives vulnerable and undefended.

Perhaps it has been in forgetting this simple and unsettling reality that we have caused the cock to crow at the dawn of this age.

We might as well admit that the prospect of giving up all of the comforts and assurances of our privileges—our institutions, our castles, our few bits of remaining social deference, our place in society, our costumes and collars—all of that fills us with no small amount of fear, and a deep sense of loss. We are afraid, in some way, that we will lose not just our place, but ourselves.

But wasn't that what Jesus said we would end up doing anyway?

What if that is what it takes to move from cross-shaped churches into which the people around us are uninterested or unwilling to venture, to cross-shaped *disciples* able and willing to enter into the vulnerability and fear of the people around us—who are, after all, just as much the people for whom the work of the cross was done?

The late American theologian William Placher offers us this thought to pray on today:

"The God who loves in freedom is not afraid and therefore can risk vulnerability, absorb the full horror of another's pain without self-destruction. God has the power to be compassionate without fear; human beings now as in the time of Jesus tend to think of power as refusal to risk compassion. But God's power looks not like imperious Caesar, but like Jesus on the cross."[2]

May the God who calls us to follow in the way of the cross give us the courage to risk the same vulnerability willingly accepted by Jesus, so that we might share with others the victory won through the cross for us.

We adore you, O Christ, and we bless you, because by your holy cross you have redeemed the world. Amen.

2. William C. Placher, *Narratives of a Vulnerable God: Christ, Theology, and Scripture* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994), 18.

Closing the Chasms

September 29, 2019 • Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Saint Paul's Within the Walls, Rome

Text: Luke 16:26a: "Besides all this, between you and us a great chasm has been fixed..."

I HAVE A QUESTION FOR YOU: Which side of that chasm do you think you're on? As you listen to that story about the rich man and poor old Lazarus, where do you think you fit in the story?

What Jesus says seems to be pretty stark: There is a chasm. And not just that: It is a chasm that cannot be crossed. You can't build a bridge across it, you can't fly over it, you can't jump across it. You are either on one side, or the other.

Which side do you think you are on?

Don't think for a moment that this is just some sort of cosmic chasm. This isn't Jesus giving a prediction about the black hole ripping apart an unlucky, high-flying star that learned about karma the hard way.

Jesus says that the chasm in heaven is the reflection in our spiritual life of the chasm that exists in the life we have right here, and right now.

It's the chasm between people who have opportunity and the people who live in despair.

It's the chasm between people who are hopeful, and people who are without hope.

It's the chasm between people who have access to health care, and people who have no hope of seeing a doctor.

It's the chasm between people who have families, and communities, and colleagues, and classmates, and those who are alone, and have no connections to others at all.

It's the chasm between people whose rights are protected by laws, and people who are trafficked like property.

It's the chasm between the rich and the poor—between the extreme concentrations of wealth in our day and vast areas of poverty in every corner of the world.

When Jesus told this parable to the people around him, the rich people he was thinking of lived—do you know where they lived?—they lived right here in Rome. They were the richest, the most powerful, the most unapproachably wealthy people on the planet.

The very wealthiest Romans in the days of the Empire woke up every morning to find a crowd of people in their front yard, hoping to receive a little handout at the start of the day. If you could afford it, you gave out a little bit here and there to everyone who had gathered, and when you did they became your entourage as you walked through the streets of the city.

The larger your entourage, the greater your influence. The greater your influence, the more power you had—and the wider the chasm between you and the people who had no money, and no home, and no name.

I'm sure that wealthy Roman, who was probably in the senatorial class, thought what he was doing was providing for the welfare of others. After all, at least they got something. Wasn't that better than nothing?

But does that sound to you like the way a Christian should behave? Do you think just maybe in what Jesus was saying, there might have been a little bit of a critique of how wealth worked in the most powerful city of the day?

Now, we could read this lesson and think that the purpose Jesus has in view is to teach us that what it means to be a Christian is not to be poor, but to be rich in the right way.

That is surely what some preachers in America will teach about this lesson this morning. They are the preachers who have their own private jets at the airport.

Or we could read this parable as the people around Jesus likely heard it—as a kind of reversal-of-fortune story that held out hope in the hereafter to the poorest of the poor.

The only problem with that is, that reading also gives us a way to be a little too easy with the world around us. After all, if the whole awful business of chasms and divisions is just going to be flipped upside-down in God's kingdom, why should we bother fixing anything here?

I think it might just be possible that Jesus had something else in mind in telling this parable to us disciples this morning. I think just maybe we are supposed to understand that deep within this story is the job description for Christians. Within this story is a message for what the purpose and work of a disciple actually is.

That is no small thing. It is especially appropriate for us to think about this morning, because this morning we are bringing on board a new disciple—Elizabeth. Elizabeth is about to be baptized. She doesn't know it, but she is about to take on a new job—actually, the most important job she will ever have. But it's going to be up to us to teach her just what that job is, and how to do it.

So what if the message Jesus is offering to us this morning isn't about the hope of being on one side of the chasm, or the danger of being on the other? What if the message is about what disciples are meant to do? What would that be?

I think it's this: Christian people, all of us, all of us who claim the name disciples—do you know what we do? We have the job of closing chasms. To be a Christian means to be a person who devotes as much as you can of your energy, your talents, your gifts, your skills, your time, and your substance to closing the chasms that separate people from each other.

Our job is to close the chasm between hope and despair. Our job is to close the chasm between poverty and wealth. Our job is to close the chasm between doubt and faith, between disease and healing, between loneliness and community, between the pollution we create and our planet's health, between the madness of nationalism and our common humanity.

Our job is to work to change the structures of power and the systems of consumption that humans build, and that end up creating these gaps. If we are Christians, then we have signed up for the job of using every resource we have to close the chasms around us.

And what if we can't close them? What if the systems that open those chasms seem too powerful, or too entrenched, or too stubborn, or just too stupid to give us a chance of changing them?

Well, when that happens, we could give up. We could just say it's too much for us. We could just list it in the Prayers of the People and hope God will somehow be alerted that there's something we God to do.

But I don't think that's the message of the parable Jesus teaches us this morning. I don't think that's what Bishop Curry would say. You know what I think he would say?

I think he would say that when we run up against a chasm we can't yet figure out how to close, our job then is to *fill* it—to fill it with love. To risk jumping right into the middle of it proclaiming that God is alive and at work in the world, and that the work that God is doing is the work of bringing together, of binding up wounds, of closing the chasms that separate us.

Our job as disciples is not to make sure we end up on the right side of an unbridgeable divide. That wouldn't benefit anyone other than ourselves.

No, our job—Elizabeth's job—is to work, and to struggle, and to laugh, and to pray, and through all of that to change the systems that open those chasms that separate us, one from the other.

And when we can't, then our job is to fill those gaps with the love of the God who loves us enough to close the gap between *us* by entering right into this life of ours with us.

That love, God's love, transforms everything it touches. And we, Jesus's disciples, are both the beneficiaries and the bearers of that love in this broken-apart world.

So come on, Elizabeth. Let's get to work. *Amen.*

Immigrant Attitudes

October 13, 2019 • Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost

All Saints', Waterloo • Fortieth Anniversary of the Founding

Text: 1 Peter 2:9b: "... in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light."

THERE IS an awful lot competing for the small amount of time in this sermon, a great many things I want to talk about with you. For so many reasons I am delighted to be here—and not a little bit intimidated, too.

It is the fortieth anniversary of this wonderful parish, and that by itself is a tremendous cause for celebration and reflection. You have the blessing of being a young church, a place where the six people we will receive today can still meet some of the people who made this all happen, who can be connected in living memory to the founders.

Our church makes a lot of being old. We have in the Convocation what I'll bet is the oldest church building in the entire Episcopal Church; it's a thousand years old. Old things give us a sense of confidence and certainty—but young churches show us that God is still alive and at work in the world.

I grew up in an All Saints' Church, so I have a particular fondness for any church that delights in that name, and—truth be told—All Saints' Day is my favorite feast day of the church year. The very first place I lived in other than my hometown in the middle of America was Brussels, and I have the fondest memories of that time as a college student.

And then of course there is the event that took place within these walls just about exactly a year ago this coming weekend. It is a little odd to come for the first time to a place where your life was changed forever—some time after the change happened.

So there is a lot on my heart this morning as I've prayed about this time with you. I did all my homework, I read everything Sunny sent me, I read up on the history of Waterloo, I even went into the sub-basement of the Cathedral and found all of the old records we have about the founding of All Saints.

I have the preacher's predicament of too much material.

But then I read through the parish website and I found what you've been telling the world about this day. Do you read the website? This is what it says: "Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost: Immigrant Attitude."

Immigrant Attitude. That got my attention. Maybe because for the first time in my life, I am an immigrant. I have a new and much keener appreciation for the experience of dislocation and alienation that goes with leaving the place of your birth and moving to a new country.

And that has been the Christian story for two thousand years. From the moment Mary Magdalen leaves the garden and the empty tomb, we are an immigrant people. So what does it mean for us, for us disciples, to have an immigrant attitude?

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There is something of a paradox here, reflecting on how disciples need to have an immigrant attitude when we are taking a moment to celebrate forty years of having this community, this home, to gather in—to call home. By definition, immigrants are people who aren't at home.

But of course, the truth is—we could be here four *hundred* years, and we will still be immigrants.

Most of us are, in a very specific way, immigrants. I would guess that only a small percentage of the people of All Saints are people who were born in Belgium.

But we are immigrants in more ways than that. The Episcopal Church is an immigrant to Belgium. We are not native to this place. We are latecomers. We are aliens.

And here is something even more challenging. We are immigrants in our own culture.

From the time of Charlemagne, Europe *was* Christendom—the realm of Christianity. Those days are well and truly over. We are aliens in our own land, immigrants in a culture we fashioned. Today, we are people of faith in the midst of a culture that is radically secularized—to the point of hostility toward the claims of faith and toward the communities faithful people make.

If you come to worship in an Episcopal Church in Belgium, you are an immigrant no matter *where* you were born. We are all equally aliens.

So what should our attitude be?

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The readings we heard this morning are not the readings they'll be listening to in every other church in the Convocation this morning. They are the lessons appointed for the occasion of the anniversary of the founding of a church—the very thing we are gathered here to do.

And wouldn't you just know, there are some helpful clues for us about what our immigrant attitude should be as we move forward toward the next forty years as witnesses and workers on the Way of Love here in Waterloo.

First, there's Jacob. In the story we heard this morning, Jacob is a little more like a refugee than an immigrant; he is on the move, getting out of town just in time and headed toward his uncle's house. He's in the no-man's land between one safe place and another—and he is living pretty precariously.

We get "precariously." We know about feeling precarious. But Jacob manages something that should teach us how to be disciples. Even though he doesn't feel safe, he doesn't ever lose his capacity for wonder—his willingness to open his eyes to visions, and his ability to see God at work around him.

And that is how his unsafe place becomes a place filled with awe and the presence of God. The immigrant attitude of Jacob is to set aside fear in favor of wonder.

Jesus in the temple has a different kind of immigrant attitude. First of all, he shouldn't really be an immigrant there. When he was much younger, it was the place he felt most at home in. Remember that story? When he hangs around at the Temple after his parents have started home after a pilgrimage festival?

But what he finds in the Temple today is a wide distance between the high principles of the faith and the daily practices of the religion. He's suddenly become an immigrant in his own home. The covenant of love and faithfulness that God made with Abraham has been reduced to empty observance and profiteering.

And so Jesus makes a dramatic show of what it means to live by principle. It's terrible liturgy. But it's profound and authentic witness to God's truth.

The immigrant attitude of Jesus is the crazy idea of demanding that the place he's in live up to its highest values. Jesus in the temple teaches us, those of us who are immigrants by virtue of being disciples, that we should dare to imagine living by principle and not by profit. And we should dare the place in which we live, *wherever* it is, to do the same.

So our immigrant attitude is to be on the eager lookout for wonder, because that's where God is most at work.

And our immigrant attitude is to dare to live by our principles, rather than by our culture's compromises.

Well, okay—but being an immigrant is a little like being like an uprooted plant. It is the experience of being disconnected and cut off from the people you belong to. These days we are so focused on the things that make up our individual identity; to be an immigrant is to lack the most essential aspect of identity—a community of belonging, a group that would claim you as its own.

This is the last part of our immigrant attitude. It's the part about belonging—not just about where we belong, but *to whom* we belong.

We learned in seminary that the first letter of Peter is in fact probably not a letter, but the text of a sermon that was preached in the early church on the occasion of a service of baptism. The message of that sermon is to teach the faithful people of a young church that they have become part of something much larger than themselves.

They know themselves to be the people on the margins of society—the servants, the slaves, the poor, the problem children. Those are our ancestors in the faith. Those are the outcasts who built the church we have inherited.

They didn't really belong to the communities they lived in. They weren't citizens, they had no money, they counted for nothing. They weren't part of anything that mattered.

And the immigrant attitude they are taught—the immigrant attitude *we* are taught—is this: No matter where you come from, no matter what you have or don't have, when you become part of the church, you take on a new identity. You become part of a great people doing great things.

It is an identity more important than your gender, or your nationality, or your race, or your orientation, or your language, or your alumni club—or even your denomination. When you become part of the church, you become a *disciple*. You take on an identity that for the rest of your life will transcend and shape all the other ways you define yourself.

And there is one last thing about this. We all come into this place being taught by our culture that we belong to ourselves; that we answer to no higher authority, no greater purpose, than ourselves.

But when we become part of this community of immigrants, we don't belong to ourselves anymore. When we join up with these people, we become God's own people. It is God's love we witness to in the world; God's justice we work to bring forth; God's hope that lights our path; and God's kingdom we intend to build.

This sounds wonderful. But it's actually hard. We are not all that comfortable with the idea of belonging to something greater than ourselves. We're taught that that's somehow a compromise, or a loss of our freedom. The kingdom of God may sound like a nice place, but one thing it is not is a democracy.

Still—that is what we are called to be. That is what it means to be part of a church. Forty years ago, a group of faithful immigrants who knew they belonged to God and to each other put together their sense of wonder, their determination to live by their principles, and their hope to become part of a larger people, and they built this church. That was their immigrant attitude.

So today, as we thank God for their beginnings, may we also ask God to renew in us the gift of their attitude, so that we may take up their unfinished labors and move onward to where the God we belong to is calling us to go. *Amen.*

Giving up the Exceptional

October 25, 2019 • St. James of Jerusalem

Convention of the Convocation

Text: Acts 15:19: "Therefore I have reached the decision that we should not trouble those...who are turning to God."

EVEN IF this is supposed to be the bishop's annual address to the Convention of the Convocation, it still says "sermon" in the program, and I am still a preacher. And so of course the first thing I went looking for was a text in the readings for today, this feast day for James of Jerusalem, because I am an old-fashioned text-and-title preacher.

I thought about leaning on James's own first words: "My brothers and sisters, listen to me!" But that seemed almost pleading. And I looked long and hard at Paul's confession of faith to the church in Corinth, that formula of the faith he learned from James and the church at Jerusalem; but every time I read those words over, the text I kept thinking you might expect me to preach to was this: "For I am the least of the apostles, unfit to be called an apostle..."

I have always loved the subversion of expectations in the words of those neighbors of Jesus— "Is not this the carpenter's son?" Who does he think he is, anyway? But then there is that perplexing moment of Jesus doing some expectations-management. I am not in my own country, but I am in my own house, and so perhaps that doesn't bode well, either, for my outcome.

So instead I will base all that is to follow on the decision of wise Saint James, when he finally speaks at the end of the debate at the *first* convention of the church. I edit brother James only slightly, for reasons that will become clear: and I take as my text this simple instruction: "We should not trouble those who are turning to God."

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I have been spending a lot of time over the last six months listening, and learning. It would be fair to say that my learning curve has approached a vertical slope from time to time, and so you will perhaps forgive me if I share my excitement with you about what I've learned, even though most of you know all of this already.

I have learned that the Convocation of Episcopal Churches in Europe has the greatest concentration of diversity, no matter how you define diversity, in the entire international Episcopal Church. I have learned that about an hour from now, our Convocation from West to East will be more than three thousand kilometers wide.

And I have learned that the Episcopal Churches in Europe do their work and ministry in this vast space with a total budget of €2,873,203. That is what all of us together have to work with to offer the witness and ministry of the Episcopal branch of the Jesus movement in Europe.

Of course the vast majority of these resources we spend locally, in our parishes and missions. We choose together to devote some of it to our shared mission and ministry across the entire Convocation: €258,588. And the Convocation receives just a little less than that amount from sources outside our parishes and missions—from endowments managed on our behalf, from gifts, from grants.

So this is what we have to do what it is we do together as a Convocation.

And I've learned that we devote these resources very carefully to the things we do better together than we could possibly do separately.

We spend sixteen percent of what we share together doing this—running the Convention, and the work of the Council of Advice between Conventions, and the work we do to be part of the larger governance of the Episcopal Church.

We spend pretty much the same slice—fifteen percent—on the work of our commissions:

The Commission on the Ministry of the Baptized, which works to help all of us discern and give voice to our vocations;

The European Institute of Christian Studies, which works to provide the education and formation opportunities all of us need to be prepared for those vocations;

And the Youth Commission, which makes sure the young people of all our congregations have access to activities and formation experiences.

We spend more of our shared resources, nearly a quarter of all we have, twenty-three percent, on supporting our congregations and our clergy. The largest way we do this is through direct grants; many of your congregations have received, and benefited from, those resources.

But these are also the resources we spend supporting congregations searching for a new rector. It's what we spend on background checks for candidates, and on providing consultants to congregations in the midst of a search or conducting mutual ministry reviews.

And it's what we spend on the Committee on Mission Congregations, which in some ways functions a bit like a Standing Committee on the Future of the Church. It works to support our existing missions, to give us a clear strategy for planting new ones, and to imagine new ways that communities of faith might become part of the life of the Convocation.

This is also where we use some of our resources to provide support to clergy and their families for the work they do. It's where we provide for retreats for our clergy to gather in prayer, and for the spouses and partners of our clergy to do the same. And it's where we've set aside some resources to provide coaching and support for parishes and clergy who want to find ways to refocus their mission and ministry or develop particular gifts with which the Holy Spirit has equipped them.

We spend exactly the same slice of our funds, twenty-three percent, on the entire operations of the Convocation Office. This is the rent, the lights, the heat, the files, the archives, the processing of people moving through the ordination process and parishes searching for new priests, and our Convocation administrator, who manages literally hundreds of reimbursement requests each year, keeps our books balanced, and pays our bills.

The last twenty-three percent goes to the two ordained members of the Convocation staff. Our Archdeacon, who works harder and more invisibly than virtually anyone else in the entire Convocation, and to me. When I came here last year as a candidate and visited with people on the walkabouts, just about the only thing I heard no matter where I went was: Things have been so much better since Walter Baer came. Walter makes our processes work, makes sure the website is kept fresh, makes sure our parishes in search have a person to guide them, and makes sure the new bishop does not do anything too crazy.

The nine percent in this piece is what allows me to travel on visitations to our congregations and represent us in various Anglican and interfaith gatherings.

That is our whole picture. It is not a big picture; and it is a very lean picture. I am proud that we are setting an example for the rest of the church about thrift in our stewardship; we ask nine percent from you, when the standard across dioceses in the Episcopal Church is closer to thirteen percent; and we give nine percent of our total budget to the Episcopal Church, when the standard across the church is for dioceses to give fifteen percent. It might be suggested that getting to a point of tithing would be a good goal for us and a good example to set for the whole church; but I leave that for your consideration.

So, I've learned about the resources we all have together to offer to Europe our vision of the Christian gospel, and about the resources we chose to share together to do the things we do better together than we could do separately.

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The question I study is: Does the way we prioritize our shared resources align with the Strategic Plan we adopted two years ago? Do our budget priorities look like our strategic priorities?

Just to remind us all, here are the six objectives articulated in our Strategic Plan:

- Be vibrant congregations, which more fully proclaim and live the Gospel of Jesus Christ
- Develop new communities, where possible in association with ecumenical partners, including indigenous language churches
- Foster ecumenical and interfaith relationships and projects
- Be a progressive and prophetic Christian witness to secular post-Christian European Societies
- Engage European policy-makers, along with other churches, in the promotion of justice, peace, and the integrity of creation;
- Achieve financial stability and sustainability for the Convocation and its constituent churches.

What do you think?

I think we do fairly well. Actually, I think we do really well.

I also think it's difficult to map the way the Convocation works onto some of these objectives.

We certainly are providing resources into supporting all of our congregations to be healthy and strong. We do that directly by providing grants; we do that by supporting our clergy; we do that by providing formation opportunities for youth and adults.

We certainly direct our shared resources into developing new communities. The Committee on Mission Congregations has worked to develop a set of clear guidelines for where, when, and how we start new missions, and that means we will be doing this work in ways more clearly aligned with our part in God's mission in this time and place.

We are certainly a progressive and prophetic witness to the Christian gospel. We do that every Sunday in our parishes, and every moment we engage in work outside the church to show the world what it looks like to walk the way of love. And in the year ahead a new Communications Committee within the Convocation will work to help us tell that story more effectively in all of the communities we are present in.

We face hard challenges in strengthening the financial stability of our parishes. One of the ways we do that at the Convocation level is to build our own budget on a level of assessment from all of you much lower than what prevails in the rest of the church.

But we are a do-it-yourself church in a culture where there is a kind of expectation that the church is something provided for you. Nothing about the Episcopal Church in Europe is provided for us by anyone other than ourselves. So when we talk about stability and sustainability, what we are really talking about is stewardship; we are talking about taking the responsibility ourselves to provide for ourselves, and increasing the number of people who take that seriously within our communities.

Very early in my ministry, I find myself thinking that some of these goals are better served at the local level than at the Convocation level.

The leaders in our parishes are likely much better placed to know, and to be able to communicate with, the civic leaders throughout Europe who have influence on issues that are the legitimate concern of all Christians. Mark Barwick, whom we still claim as one of our own, nurtures the sort of relationships with decision-maker in the policy sphere that represent all of us well and effectively.

And while we certainly play our part in the institutional forms of ecumenical and interfaith engagement at the Convocation level, I have the view that more of substance gets accomplished through the work of individual leaders like Chris Easthill, serving as a member of the national board of ACK in Germany; Helena Mbele-Mbong, serving as a member of the new Standing Commission on World Mission, established by last year's General Convention; and Walter Baer, serving as a member of General Convention's Task Force on the Coordination of Ecumenical and Interreligious Work.

So I think our Strategic Plan is having a clear influence on shaping our work, and I think our budget, small though it is, is effectively resourcing our Strategic Plan.

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All of that is good. What I'd like to invite us to reflect on together, as we do our work today under Canon Stephanie's leadership, are some words and ideas that are *not* in our Strategic Plan, and yet which I think may have something to do with God's mission and work here in Europe. And if I'm right about that—if these things are where God is calling workers into the vineyard—then it will be up to us whether, and how, we want to follow.

There are four missing words, and one final suggestion.

The first missing word is "Climate." It's true that our Strategic Plan reminds us of the importance of the "integrity of creation"; but we haven't yet put any organization or substance behind that idea, or made any clear sacrifices in the way we do our work.

For thousands of young people raising their voices in the streets of the cities we serve, this is *the* defining moral issue of our day.

Here's where that came home to me: Hearing from Walter Baer in late March that thirty-four bishops had signed up to attend my ordination in April. As Judy solemnly reminded me—"they're not coming for you, dear." But indeed they came, from New York, and Boston, and Washington, and Atlanta, and Lisbon, and Madrid, and Spokane, and Bogota. And Brussels.

One evening when I was looking for a distraction from writing the sermon I should have been working on, I began working on trying to come up with an answer to a troubling question. How much carbon is going to be put into the atmosphere with all of those flights bringing all of those people to our party in Paris? And because we live in the age of the internet, it turns out to be possible to answer that question. And here is the answer: 42,380 kilograms of carbon.

Now, that is an embarrassment—pure and simple. The good news is, you can do something about this. You can go on line and find social entrepreneurs who will support projects that either reduce or remove an equal amount of carbon from the atmosphere, that you can help to pay for. These are known as "carbon offsets." The price of a carbon offset for 42,380 kg of carbon turns out to be about €600.

So, that's what I did with six hundred of the Euros people graciously gave as gifts in the lead-up to my ordination. I'm glad to say that our gathering in Paris was a carbon net-neutral celebration—at least so far as the bishops who traveled there.

And here is my question: what if we were to say that we want the Convocation to be a carbon net-neutral enterprise?

I wish we had a gathering of people with devotion and wisdom about practical ways we can address the crisis of our climate to raise the awareness of all of us in the Convocation. I'd like to see us move toward being a carbon net-neutral Convocation. I am working hard to reduce the bishop's travel budget, but with some of the money I save I plan to make sure that my travel has a neutral carbon impact by buying offsets. And I hope we can do the same for all of the travel that we pay for.

Here's the second missing word: "Race." Our Presiding Bishop has called us to a deeper, daring, and reconciling conversation about race, and about systemic racism in our society and in our church. He is leading our church in doing this work, and I think we need to follow that lead.

Let me say this right up front: I am deeply aware that the European experience of race is not the same as the American experience of race. The experience of slavery in the United States, that original sin of America, set in place the deep foundations of white supremacy that we are now unearthing in difficult conversations.

I realize that this was not Europe's experience. But I am afraid we are in some danger when we dismiss this conversation simply by saying, this is all about America and not about us. Because while the sources and structures of racism may be different, the sin of racism exists in Europe as surely as anywhere else.

By almost any measure, our Convocation comprises the most diverse collection of people anywhere in the entire Episcopal Church. On any given Sunday morning, the people in our pews have probably at least half of the Anglican Communion covered. I hope that we can find ways to follow the lead of our Presiding Bishop in ways that are suited to our context, our congregations, and our communities, because I am persuaded beyond any doubt that God calls Christians everywhere to confront the harm that racism has caused, and to stand squarely for the radical equality of all people.

The third missing word is, well, two words: "Refugees and Migrants." I don't know whether to laugh or cry when I hear political leaders in the United States whipping up fear among the people by bloviating about an "invasion of illegal immigrants." Germany alone has accepted more refugees seeking asylum than the United States, and the European Union as a whole has accepted nearly three times as many.

I am immensely proud to be the bishop of a gathering of churches doing so much to provide compassionate and effective outreach to the least, the lost, and the last. I know how hard many of the people in your communities work to engage in ministries that help people who are displaced or refugees. Many of our congregations do this work.

I wonder whether it is now time for us to find some way to create a community of practice across the Convocation of people involved in these ministries. They are an example for the entire Episcopal Church of how to translate our words into work.

Creating a community among the leaders of these excellent ministries, in Rome and Frankfurt and Paris and Waterloo and in other places I haven't even learned about yet, would help us to do three things:

- Create a supportive community for people involved in this work;
- Provide a resource of expertise for people aspiring to begin similar ministries in their own communities;
- And raise the awareness of the whole Episcopal Church of the work being done right here on the front lines of ministry to people who have fled places torn by violence, instability, and chaos.

There's one last word that, at least for me, is missing from our Strategic Plan. That word is "Youth." Yes, we have a budget line for Youth, and yes, we have a terrific and committed group of people led by the irrepressible Caireen Stewart who plan and deliver the events we offer to our young people. And yes, our own Caitlin Mahoney has been invited to serve on the planning team for the next Episcopal Youth Event next year.

But somehow I think we have to make this a centerpiece of our work together as a Convocation. I come from a diocese that made ministry to young people one of its three most important goals going back now nearly twenty years, and the fruit of that investment is now showing forth in the form of young people who become young adults engaged in the life of the church and as leaders in their communities.

All of our congregations work and sometimes struggle to provide adequate spiritual sustenance to families trying to raise children in the faith, and to leaders who volunteer to lead church school programs. We as a Convocation need to do more to support these folks, to bring them together, help them find a resource in each other, and honor the important work they do. To speak in hard practicalities, I'd like to see us double what we presently invest in our young people, so that the Convocation can be a resource to all of our congregations.

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I will end with a small suggestion, that comes from having spent a fair amount of time these past six months studying, not only the Convocation, but the rest of our church.

For at least thirty years now, at least since the time of Bishop Rowthorn, we have done our work on the basis of the Constitution and Canons that we now have. That document gives shape and structure to one of the things most distinctive about the Episcopal Church, our commitment to the shared governance of the Church.

Much has changed in our church over the past thirty years, and much has changed here in the Convocation as well. We have fully grown into structures that were in some ways aspirational when we first wrote them down; we have grown in other ways that our present documents could not possibly have anticipated.

Over those same years, the Episcopal Church itself has changed. New forms of governance are emerging that reflect both changed circumstances and a desire to share more fully the authority and responsibility of ministry in our church.

I think it may now be the time for us to convene a group of people whose task it would be to review our Constitution and Canons from top to bottom, and to propose revisions to these documents that would equip us better for the future of mission and ministry God is calling us into.

This group could be a place where all voices, lay and ordained, parishes and missions, could be represented and heard. It could go out and survey ways the rest of the church is responding in adaptive ways to the challenges of the future. It could take counsel with key groups of stakeholders across the Convocation. And by including people from the Presiding Bishop's office, it could help us to find the greatest possible benefit in our unique relationship to the senior leadership of our church.

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There is a great gathering in Jerusalem to debate nothing less than the future of the church. It is the first Convention of the Church. Paul is there. Peter is there. The argument is over a simple, profound question: We are exceptional people. We, the people of Abraham, the people who have been given the Torah, the people who made a covenant with God—we are an exceptional people.

Should we, or should we not, demand of all those who come to join us that they join in our exceptionalism in order to join the Jesus movement?

James, the first person to be the bishop of Jerusalem, listens to all this. And at the end of the debate he is the one who speaks. And what he says is: No. No, they don't have to be exceptional in the way we think we are. No matter where they come from, no matter what nation, what tribe, what experience, what language, the freely offered grace of God in Jesus Christ is for them, too.

Now, my brothers and sisters: We all say of ourselves that we are no longer expatriate communities. And that is true. We are no longer churches gathered by little communities of American expatriates. By God's grace, that is not who we are anymore.

But here is our danger. We are *exceptional* communities. We are communities of exceptional people.

Some of us are exceptional because we came from one place we knew as home, and chose to make our home here. Some of us are exceptional because we come from this place, but chose to make our community of faith in a church that comes from American origins. *All* of us are exceptional because we choose to be in Christian communities in a secular culture—because we dare to be known as Christians.

And the message Saint James of Jerusalem has to offer us, is: Beware of our exceptionalism. Because if we are not careful, it can become a barrier to entry to our churches, rather than a message of welcome.

We must beware placing on people who come to us the demand that they have the same exceptional path in life that we have had. That they have had the same experiences, learned the same languages, endured the same transitions, made the same choices.

Because when we do that, we forget the choice the earliest church made. The church we have inherited is a church that welcomed all people regardless of their histories, regardless of their backgrounds—regardless of whether they were exceptional, or not.

So as we gather together over the hours to come, as we pray and reflect and talk together about God's mission in this place and our hope to be caught up in it, let's remember the responsibilities that come with the gift of our exceptionalism. Let us find ways of increasing our circle, of welcoming those with different stories, of including all who come to us drawn by this countercultural message of ours about this Way of Love—which for us has become a way of life. *Amen*.

Stories, Heard and Told

November 3, 2019 • All Saints (transl.)

The Cathedral Church of the Holy Trinity, Paris

Text: Ephesians 1:15: "I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all the saints…"

We mark today the last of the seven great feasts of the church year. The new year of the church is just around the corner; it starts on the first Sunday of Advent, and then the first big feast of the church year comes with Christmas. The second is not long after—just twelve days after; and then we have to wait until Easter, and then, forty days later, the Feast of the Ascension. Ten days later, we get to the feast of the church, Pentecost; just a week after that, we get our own patronal feast, Trinity Sunday.

And then what seems like an eternity, weeks and weeks and weeks, before the last of them all: All Saints. We start with the baby in the manger, and we end with the hosts of heaven. There is a kind of beauty to that arc for me.

At the risk of self-revelation, All Saints is my favorite feast of the church year. That probably has something to do with the fact that I grew up in an All Saints Church, so I remember this day as a day of particular joy.

And it may have something to do with the fact of being ordained. The dean is much more pious than I am, so she probably doesn't have the same struggles I do with the other feasts of the church year; but it is so hard to disentangle Christmas from the culture. By the time Epiphany comes, everyone is too burned out from the joys of Christmas to really pay much attention, and we miss out on one of the really great parties the church wants to give us.

Easter *should* be the favorite feast of the whole year for anyone who is ordained, because it is the feast built on the highest claim of the whole Christian faith. But for most of us who are ordained, Easter Day is a finish line after a marathon of planning and worrying and rehearsing and editing.

So for me, it's All Saints. It's almost as though it's the one major feast we have that sneaks up on you unawares, when you just think you're coming to church in early November. There aren't All Saints displays in the Galeries Lafayette. The culture hasn't taken it away from us, and the calendars of work and school make it so we're likely to be here.

And here's the best part of the whole deal, for me; All Saints is the day we remember the unbreakable link between the church militant and the church triumphant, to use some old language. Between ourselves, still trying to live by faith, and those we remember and pray for who set an example for us about what Christian community, Beloved Community, is supposed to be all about.

So it may be strange, on this happy feast day, to confront you with questions. But if the point of Christmas is the baby in the manger, and the point of Epiphany is the manifestation of that baby as the hoped-for Messiah, and the point of Easter is the victory of the cross over sin and death for all people across all time, and the point of Pentecost is the empowering presence of the Holy Spirit in the Body of Christ, the church—then the point of All Saints is to ask you two questions.

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The first question is: Why are you here?

I don't mean by asking you this to demand of you a statement of belief, or a testimony to your faith.

I mean by this question to take you back to the very beginning of your experience of faith in God. How did that happen? What is the beginning of the story that ends with you sitting here today?

My guess is that very near the beginning of that story there is a person, another person of faith. It might have been your parents; it might have been a family member. It might have been a person who shaped your early life in a positive way.

But somewhere, somehow, my guess is that your answer to this question—why are you here—comes down to, not an idea, not a doctrine, not a beautiful building, but a person.

Think about that for a moment. Who was that person?

My grandparents came to America from England about a hundred years ago, and in the living room of their house there was a place known as the God's Corner. It was a small place in the corner of the room with keepsakes and photographs of family members they kept in prayer.

During World War II, the four of my five uncles who were off serving in the war had their photographs there; the fifth, my Uncle Pete, had been disabled by polio. And when my Uncle John's plane crashed in the Pacific and his blue star turned to gold, my grandmother simply put a small cutting from an evergreen in front of his picture.

My grandparents were people of quiet, steady faith. There was nothing even remotely evangelical about them. But they lived easily and moved gracefully in a kind of borderland between this material world and the world of God's divine, intentional, loving possibility. It was as real to them as the wooden table in the dining room where we gathered every Sunday.

They had no illusions that God needed them to offer a reminder about their boys in the war, or their loved ones back in England. It was more that by engaging in simple acts of devotion, they were joining in the work God was already doing, and continuing to be connected, through the Spirit, to those they were apart from.

What I remember about them is not what they said about Christianity, or the Nicene Creed, or the doctrine of the incarnation. I remember that they listened to me, that they heard what I was wondering about and exploring, and made me feel by listening to me that I was beloved.

And because they listened to me, because they gave me that sense of having all my questions and all my wonderings welcomed and affirmed, I was able to connect up their treasuring what I shared with them with this life they shared easily and effortlessly with God.

If you look in the first few pages of the prayer book, you'll find the calendar of the church year, with the seven great feasts in it on page 15 and then the listings of saint's days month by month.

Saints have always had something of a vexed place in the Anglican Church; when we struck out on our own as a church, the veneration of saints was strongly oppressed as a remnant of Romanism.

But the faithful folks in the pews felt deeply bound to the possibility of holy people, and no less a figure than John Donne somewhat daringly wrote a poem longing for the chance to give thanks for angels and saints; and eventually an attenuated list of Anglican-approved saints made it back into the rotation.

Even so—for the most part, the folks in the front of the prayer book are stained-glass saints. They are the great heroes of the faith, the ones churches are named for and statues are made of.

But none of them have ever made any of us feel especially beloved. None of them have heard our stories as we told them, or given us a sense of feeling beheld and welcomed.

All Saints is, narrowly, a celebration only of the great and the good who make it into the calendar.

But it seems to me we do well to expand our vision, to include in the compass of today all of those people who are the reasons why we are here today—the examples of faith, the people who listened, the ones who showed us how our story was connected to the story of God's loving presence and purpose, and gave us a sense of connection to a world that is not limited by the measures of the measurable.

The people who were the beginning of the story that has us today still seeking, and still sensing, the holiness of God.

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So here is the second question: Have you been that beginning of the story for someone else?

Let me tell you a secret: You may never know the answer to that question. You may already be, and don't know it.

One thing is certain: To be that sort of person doesn't mean to be out on the street corners evangelizing passersby and getting them to come into the American Cathedral.

No, what it means is to be a person who invites other people simply to tell you their story—and then to listen, and hold gently, what they offer you in return. A person who gives others a sense of the possibility that they are beloved. Because when we do that, we introduce people to how God feels about them. And we invite one more person into the Community of the Beloved that the whole church is supposed to be.

If we really did that, you know, All Saints would end up being the most subversive, the most dangerous, of all the Christian holidays.

Because unlike all the founding stories and abstract ideas that form the basis of all the other feast days, All Saints basically argues that people just like you can be the means by which other people find access to the possibility that God is right in this with us—that the sacred is possible right in the midst of our lives.

Who knows what those Ephesians said to Paul? Who knows what stories they shared with him?

What we know is, Paul listened to them. "I have heard of your faith in Jesus and your love toward the saints...." And of course what Paul meant by that was, love toward all the people in the church, because of course there was no calendar of stained-glass saints in the front of the prayer book yet.

And then Paul repeats back to them what he has heard, and really what he does is hold up to them all the idea that he loves them—which makes it easier for them to connect to the idea that God might love them, too.

We proclaim the outrageous idea that the world is still the place where the holy work of God is done, and that we meet up with that work, we become part of it, because of people just like us. The saints among us are those agents of grace, helping us to believe that we, too, are beloved. *Amen*.

Right Answers to Wrong Questions

November 10, 2019 • Twenty-Second Sunday after Pentecost

All Saints' Church, Brooklyn, New York

Text: Luke 20:27: "Some Sadducees, those who say there is no resurrection, came to Jesus and asked him a question…"

YOU HAVE probably figured out, on the basis of what you have read about your guest preacher this morning, that I dwell in a part of our church that speaks a number of different languages. This morning in the Episcopal Church in Europe, at least six different languages will be heard across our Convocation, and very possibly more.

So I have brought along what I thought might be something interesting to share, a slightly different translation of the gospel we heard this morning. It's a somewhat more contemporary version of the story. I'll give it to you in English; it goes like this:

Some investment bankers, those who say there is nothing real beyond the world of money and wealth, came to Steven and asked him a question. "Teacher, we know that Jesus taught that the poor are blessed and the meek will inherit the earth. Now, after the financial crash in 2008, practically all of the growth in wealth went to the richest people, and none went to the poor and meek. What evidence is there that these poor people are actually blessed, as Jesus said?"

Okay, maybe that's a little bit of a loose translation. But it may be a closer parallel than you think.

Let's talk about Sadducees for a minute. All we really know about them from the record of scripture is that they were a small group of people with pretty bleak views. They didn't believe in the possibility of resurrection; and they rejected the idea that the oral tradition of Jewish teaching had any authority. The only thing they thought mattered was the written word of the Torah.

But there's more we have learned about them. For one thing, they were from the upper classes of Jewish society. They were the most educated, the wealthiest, and the most influential people.

They were the families that managed the most important institution in Jewish life—the temple. The sons of these families were the temple priests, and they set the rules for who and who did not have access to the most significant place in the life of society.

So the Sadducees were not some strange cult that had fringe ideas; they were the most significant people of their moment. They had the power, they ran the places of power, and they were the arbiters of what was important and what was not. They were influencers. They conferred social status.

And so the idea of a place where God's authority had more significance than their own, a heavenly realm that was not a place where their influence held—that was just plain rejected out of hand.

Or to say it in other words: the gospel lesson appointed for our hearing today is really describing in a quite accurate way our own moment in history as the church in our society. We are living in the Sadducees' world.

We are living in a society, in a culture, deeply shaped by the wealthiest, the most powerful, the most educated—the influencers. We are living in a society that discounts the possibility or the presence of the spiritual, and that values only what can be measured, stored, put in a database, or monetized—and denies the importance or meaning of anything else.

The Sadducees come to Jesus to challenge him. They're not that interested in what he thinks about marriage and how it works in heaven; they're convinced there *is* no heaven. They're trying to prove the truth of their own convictions by tangling Jesus up in a game of prooftexting.

And that is our situation. This Gospel lesson isn't about a long-ago dispute between Jesus and a forgotten sect of ancient Judaism; this gospel lesson is about what our culture, what our institutions of power and influence, come to say to *us*—the body of Christ, the church, the beloved community.

Just a little more than hundred years ago, in the worst months of the first World War, the great German sociologist Max Weber gave a lecture at the University of Munich and declared that as a result of social, economic, and scientific progress, the world had become disenchanted.

He didn't mean that the world had become sadder; he meant that the possibility of the spiritual, the idea that there is such a thing as the sacred right here in the frame of this life of ours, no longer held a claim over the minds and hearts of modern people. The spiritual dimension of our lives had been reduced to strictly contained and controllable realms—literature, maybe, and art, but certainly the private sphere.

That is the question our culture comes to us with. And our culture is just like the Sadducees; it is convinced it already knows the answer to the question.

The Sadducees came to Jesus asking about marriage in heaven, but they came already prepared with their answer. Their answer was that there is no heaven, because there is no afterlife.

The world comes to us asking—how can anything be blessed, or beloved, or sacred? And the world comes prepared with its answer: its answer is, there is no sacred in this world because there is no spiritual realm. And if nothing is sacred, then our faith is just an exercise in tradition, sort of like singing the national anthem before the Mets game—and nothing more meaningful than that.

I keep up with things back home chiefly by reading the *New York Times* online, and I am still thinking about an essay by Frank Bruni I read a couple of weeks ago. The essay tried to make out a simple case: That the democratic candidates might find themselves doing better in the middle of the country if they dared to talk about the place of faith in their lives. Not a specific faith, not a particular kind of belief—just anything to show that they are people with a spiritual dimension to them.

What was a lot more interesting than the essay were the thousands of comments that followed—the vast majority of which took the form of: religion has no place in our politics; the separation of church and state should mean that no one in public life talks about their religion, or perhaps never even has one; religion causes all the problems in society, and besides it's all just obscurantist and old fashioned.

Let's leave aside for a moment the obvious point that the framers of our Constitution had no desire to deprive anyone in public office of the right to religious observance. What I want to draw out of those thousands of comments is the Sadducees' mocking question.

Where I live now, the idea of the separation of church and state, of the separation of religious belief from the public square, isn't just an idea about neutrality; it's about hostility. I have come to think of it as a fear of faith—a rejection so reflexive and so absolute that just like those Sadducees, it comes at us already knowing all the answers to the questions.

I'm telling you this because—at least if all those comments responding to that essay by Mr Bruni are any indication—that is all going to come to be true here, too. We here are headed toward a time in which what we do here in places like All Saints is fenced off, and quarantined, and kept at a distance from the places where decisions are made and work is done.

Because after all, the truths we proclaim here are truths outside the grasp of Google. They can't be monetized or give a great return on investment. Because they are truths about the power of love—and that is not a thing that any person, any community, any nation can turn to its unique advantage. So it isn't interesting. It's even threatening—because just like Jesus, it speaks of an alternative power structure where the powerful of this world have no control.

Now that may sound a little challenging—maybe even a little depressing. But remember—when the Sadducees come with their mocking question, Jesus has an answer.

The answer he gives makes it clear that they are asking the wrong question. It's easy to be certain of your answer if you control the question. But then you might end up failing to get to any truth other than your own. That's what Jesus sees.

Is there an afterlife? That's the wrong question. The right question is, when the living God makes a covenant that encompasses the past, the present, and the future, are you prepared to do what it takes to take up your part in it?

And when the world comes to us asking us: Is there a spiritual life? That's the wrong question. The right question, the question we, the Body of Christ, must learn to ask in return, is: What is sacred for you? What is the thing so precious, so profound, that it makes you stop in wonder and awe?

We won't win by arguing. We won't convince the skeptics and the cultured despisers by playing their game along with them. We won't even win with clever sermons.

What will work is an answer that invites the skeptics and the doubters to ask the *right* question: What is sacred for you? Where does your sense of the possibility of the holy get the best of you—quite literally, the *best* of you?

Our task as disciples is not to offer the world better answers; it's to help those who come doubting or wondering to ask the right questions. And then our task is to listen to *their* answers, treasure *their* stories, and help those who come see within them the abiding presence of God's transforming love already right there in their own lives. *Amen*.

Sovereigns and Selves

November 24, 2019 • Christ the King

The Church of Christ the King, Frankfurt

Text: Colossians 1:17: "He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together."

I HAVE nothing to teach a parish named for this feast day about the peculiar history of this observance. You already know that this feast is one of the most recent additions to the calendar of Holy Mother Church, having come about by the invention of Pope Pius XI in 1925. You do not need me to teach you how the pope's creativity was spurred on by what had for half a century been known as the "Roman Question."

And you surely don't need me to recall for you how the idea of this day, the theme that subtends this feast, was quickly fastened onto by churches of the Protestant tradition, especially those that—like the church in Rome—were in some way implicated in the power of the state. The Anglican church and the Lutheran church, both state churches in the places in which they first emerged, quickly adopted the observance of this day—perhaps the most recent expression of Christian unity in the Western church, and certainly the most quickly achieved.

Europe has a deeper sense of history than the United States, so there is nothing original in the observation that the emergence of this idea in the early twentieth century is a sort of irony, in that it marked the final break between the claims of the church to govern worldly matters and the power of the nation-state.

So in a way, your patronal feast—which is not even a hundred years old—was a little like raising the flag of the faith on a field we were leaving. It was a reminder to a secularizing world that the Christian vision of God's sovereignty is not confined to the walls of the church or the lives of the baptized.

This is the day of all days that our faith should take us directly into the world of secular power; not the lovely charm of Christmas Markets, not the grocery-store reminders of Easter, but a march into the halls of political and economic power to restate each year the vision of the faith for a world governed by love and guided by the idea that every human has equal dignity.

I have no doubt that in many pulpits today, both in Europe and in the United States, the sermon that will be preached, or perhaps inflicted, will take on a comparison between the vision of sovereign leadership offered by the example of the risen Christ and the quality of leadership now on offer in our national capitals. I dare say Germany would come out considerably better in that examination than either the United States or the United Kingdom.

But as a preacher, I have to say I think that theme is almost too easy. If you spend your time in the pulpit simply articulating a widely held grudge, you are probably not using the time for a good purpose.

So instead I want to risk talking about something much less likely to win easy agreement or even to be a word of comfort. I want to ask what it would really mean for us—for the Convocation, for this parish, for you—to live as though Christ really were the sovereign to whom we owe our first loyalty.

Many of you have already heard me make my case for why I think the Episcopal Church—not the Anglican tradition, but specifically the Episcopal Church—is uniquely suited to offer a Christian witness in Europe today. I say that this is true because we are uniquely three things at once: We are liturgical; we are progressive; and we are democratic in our governance.

These things are not accidental; they are the product of long history and deep intention. Anglicans have always understood themselves to be a continuation of, not a departure from, catholic tradition.

We have appealed to both scripture and reason as we adapted new forms of governance for the church; and in the American form of Anglicanism, of which we here are an expression, that has meant a clear privileging of the voice of the people in shaping the *sensus fidelium*, the mind of the faith.

Here in Europe, and especially in eastern Europe, these three things together make a compelling case for us. Our liturgical traditions make us recognizably a Christian church. Our progressive understanding of Christian theology is connected to our commitment to democratic governance. And our commitment to democratic governance is deeply meaningful, and magnetic, to communities of faithful people long denied the possibility of a voice in their own governance, in any realm.

But among us, among my own sisters and brothers in the faith, let me acknowledge the danger of our distinctions.

The Episcopal Church is indeed a wonderful, messy, cantankerous, democratic church. We are a people blessed by the idea of democratic governance, both in our lives as citizens of the state and as members of this church. We know that there is a direct line throughout history between Christianity's radical claim of the equality of all people in the sight of God, and the emergence of democratic order as the fundamental principal of political order. There is a reason why democracy has set down its deepest roots in cultures shaped by the long history of the Christian message.

That is not a claim about Christian institutions, which are as prone to error as any human institutions. But it is a claim about the connection between the ideas central to the truths we hold as Christians and the principles that have guided the formation of political order in the west.

The problem is, we quite naturally fall into the trap of thinking that God's realm must be ordered like our realm, if only because our ideas have been—or at least used to be—so significant in shaping this realm. And to see things that way is to look at it through the wrong end of the telescope.

You see, the Kingdom of Heaven is not a democracy. We proclaim Christ as our king—not as our chancellor, and not as our president. Christ reigns, not by our consent, but because of God's righteousness. We get a choice of whether to live our lives in accordance with God's covenant; we don't get a vote on changing its terms.

We are citizens of republics. But if we proclaim Christ as our King, then we proclaim as well that we are willingly subjects in that kingdom. And that is a very different thing.

Are you really prepared for what that would mean? Are you really willing to do what Christ asks of us—to live by the rule of love, to love others as we love ourselves, to share what we have, to live in hope and not in fear, to place generosity before prudence?

Are we really willing to take on fully the idea that we are not in a business relationship with God; we are utterly dependent on God, that all things—including all that we are, and all that we have—belongs to God, and not to us? Our gifts, our talents, our hopes, our skills, our money, our buildings, our church?

Are we really willing to live as though we took seriously the terms of our baptismal covenant—to proclaim the good news of God in Christ?

Do we really think it's good news, if it means accepting the discipline of respecting the dignity of every human being? Never objectifying them, never exploiting them, never seeking our own advantage over others?

If we dare to take it fully on board, this day—the day we willingly acknowledge that God is god, and we are not—demands more of us than any other day in the Christian year.

Because today is the day we are reminded, not of the happy expectation of the Messiah, not of the sweet story of the baby in the manger, not of the exciting escape of the refugee family to Egypt or the story of the precocious Jesus teaching his elders in the temple, not of the healings or the miracles or the teaching, not of the passion and crucifixion and resurrection—not of any of that, but of the terms of the deal that comes from all of that.

Christian life is not a bonus added on to what we already have; it is a covenant that demands something of us. It requires that we take full responsibility for the gift we have received of this free will of ours, and recognize that no matter who we are we do not use it for God's intended purposes unless we take on some pretty serious self-examination—and accept the necessity of realizing that we are not, in fact, always right, not ever. In the kingdom of heaven, that is God's role, not ours.

So today is the day that prepares us to run when we see the star, knowing that it will lead us to the cradle that holds the God of all heaven and earth. Today is the day that prepares us to stand unafraid at the foot of the cross, knowing that our own death will be overcome by the victory of the empty tomb.

And today is the day when we receive perhaps the greatest gift God gives us in our walk of faith, other than and alongside the gift of faith itself—the gentle reminder that the first virtue to be sought by those of us who gladly claim ourselves subjects of Christ the King is the virtue of a quiet and prayerful humility. This is our day to remember that the idea of submission to God—which is, after all, the literal meaning of the Arabic word *islam*—is the posture of Christian disciples, too.

Because only from there can we understand our true place in the plan of salvation; only from there can we grasp the depth of our need, or the breadth of God's love on our behalf.

I wonder who comes to mind when you think of people who have lived as though Christ really was their sovereign, who really did live their lives—at cost—consciously seeking to align their lives with the law of love. I think of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, or Dorothy Day, or Jean Vanier, or—for those of you who grew up in the U.S.—Fred Rogers. They were people who confounded the systems of power we create by being absolutely, firmly, calmly clear in their commitment to a higher purpose, and unwavering in giving their whole selves over to a higher claim.

And not in spite of that, but because of it, each in their own way changed the world through the power of love.

Christ reigns in glory at the right hand of God. He will come again to restore and reconcile the world to the very heart of God.

The question is not whether we are willing to consent to that; our consent is neither necessary nor required.

The question is whether we will accept this as our rule of life, and live our lives—*change* our lives—in ways that make clear to the world around is God's claim on us.

As one year of grace ends and a new one begins, may God give each of us grace to be willing subjects in, ready witnesses to, and eager builders of, that kingdom. *Amen.*

Reflex—or Routine?

November 28, 2019 • Thanksgiving Day

The American Church in Paris

Text: John 6:29: "This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent."

IT IS A GREAT HONOR indeed to stand in this pulpit and to be welcomed in this place, and I am grateful to the Senior Pastor, a friend of many years, for the risk he has taken on today's preacher. And in the presence of an ecumenical and interfaith gathering, I must also acknowledge—it would be more accurate to say, I must confess—that as the Episcopal bishop now living in Paris I feel no little bit convicted by that anthem the choir just sang.

At least Dr. Herr arranged it so that we didn't all read that Psalm aloud, so that the full weight of the irony of my being here would be unavoidable. "O how good and pleasant it is / when kindred live together in Unity"—that is how that Psalm begins; and I stand here before you as the descendant of a rather fussy and uncharitable man who could not abide the horror of the idea that a prayer service for Americans in Paris using parts of the Episcopal prayer book was being read by Dr. Seeley while dressed in a black gown.

One hundred and sixty three years later I read through this history and am grieved, and not a little embarrassed, that our separate communities on either side of the Seine arose from such pettiness and trifles. My first years in ordained ministry were spent in a church that came into being before the existence of denominational divides in America, and which —for all those years—has never signed up with any one tribe or other; and believe it or not, in the days I worked there, not so very long ago, the form of divine service on Sunday morning was, yup, large elements of the *Book of Common Prayer* being used by ministers in black gowns.

If only the Episcopalians here in Paris in the late 1850s had been a more tolerant bunch, we still might be doing that today.

So I stand here only by virtue of the magnanimity of this place and its pastor, and the blessed tendency of time to soften the hard edges of what we once imagine to be our desperately important divisions. I am very grateful to be here.

The apology I need to offer as a Christian to Rabbi Cohen is much longer, and so to make sure I get us all home in time for dinner I had better begin.

Let me start here: I wonder how thankful you are feeling right now, in this moment. I wonder how thankful you are feeling these days.

I don't know about you, but gratitude for me these days is hard work. I am relatively new to this job; I am at a long distance from family and friends of many years; I am finding my way in a very different place, and culture, and language. I am trying to solve the nearly insoluble problem of how to live here and keep the Internal Revenue Service happy. And almost every day I wake up and wonder what it will mean today to be in this place carrying the label "American."

Perhaps you might recognize some of this, too. If so, we both have a lot in common with that crowd trying to get some answers out of the rabbi in that reading from the Gospel of John.

Let's remember the context of the story. Before the little scene we just heard, Jesus has been teaching somewhere along the shore of the Sea of Galilee, probably near Tiberias. There is something viral about his message, and a lot of people—a lot of people, who, like us, are carrying around a lot of worries and a lot of anxiety—are following him around.

They are not just there for an inspirational message. They are not just there because sermons are pretty much the only form of entertainment for Jewish people in the ancient world. They are there to see whether this guy will deliver. Whether he will make a change for them. Whether somehow he will release them from all the worry, all the hunger, all the feeling of uncertainty that comes from living under the boot of a system that rules by brutality, where violence is random and dignity is a luxury.

Who can blame them for wanting some relief?

Somehow, when all the teaching is done and a great crowd is hanging around the rabbi waiting to see what will happen next, somehow everyone gets fed. It doesn't start with much, but it ends with almost embarrassing abundance.

And when that happens, things turn into a little bit of a frenzy.

The text tells us that the crowd starts agitating for Jesus. They want to make him a king. To say it in different words, they want to seize him and make him make more loaves and fishes.

Jesus, seeing this for what this is, does the wisest thing possible. He does *not* decide to join in the Democratic primaries. He runs, as fast as possible, in the other direction.

What happens next is a little confusing. Somehow, Jesus and his closest followers get separated. We don't know if those disciples finally gave up looking him and decided to move on, or got exasperated and decided to cut their losses, or just what.

What we do know is, those disciples get in the only boat available and head to Capernaum. The winds turn to a gale, and the lake turns into a sea, and just as the boat is about to be swamped, Jesus appears to them walking across the waters of the storm. And the next thing we hear, they have landed at Capernaum, and yesterday's crowd, having seen that the boat is gone, catch up with them after the journey of a morning—at just about this time of day.

You can always tell that the crowds around Jesus are a little embarrassed when they ask dumb questions. This morning, the best question they can come up with is: "Rabbi, when did you get here?"

That's probably not the question they most want to ask. They already know the answer to that question. Jesus got there sometime between the tumult of the clamoring crowd yesterday afternoon and their all meeting up right here in Capernaum about eighteen hours later.

No, what they really want to know is—can you do that thing with the bread and the fish again? I mean, thanks for yesterday, and if we keep with you—what do we have to do to keep this arrangement going?

If you listened to that story carefully, you sort of get the feeling that this is a dialogue of people using the same words and talking completely past each other. When the people talk about bread, they are talking about food. When Jesus talks about bread, he is talking about the stuff that sustains souls. That is not the uppermost thing on the minds of those eager people.

They are—in other words—pretty much like the hundreds of thousands of people we share this city with. Like the millions of people we share Europe with. They want to find some way of immediately feeding their hunger for food, or fame, or wealth, or security, or followers, or influence, or power.

When Jesus talks to them about sustenance for their souls, they think he's talking about something else. They think maybe this is the same thing as the manna that they've heard about in the old stories in church. What they don't seem to remember was that even the manna only lasted a day. Jesus is trying to get their sights set on something that will last a little longer than tomorrow.

At the core of this disconnected dialogue is the difference between a reaction and a virtue, between a reflex and a routine.

For the crowd around Jesus and the crowds outside our doors, the reflexive response to the satisfaction of an immediate need is short, sharp, and superficial.

I'm hungry; here's the food; thanks. I'm thirsty; here's a drink; thanks. I'm lonely; here's some easy intimacy; thanks. The thanks last about as long as the satisfaction, and perhaps not even as long. It's a reflex, and nothing more.

In her excellent commentary on the Gospel of John in the *Jewish Annotated New Testament,* Adele Reinhartz teaches us that the most significant way in which Jesus and the crowd are talking past each other is in not understanding what Jesus is offering. The crowd asks what they have to *do* to get more bread. But Jesus is trying to teach them that the invitation set before them isn't about doing something; it's about participating in the life of God through the discipline of faith. That is the life given by the bread of God; it is taking part in the life of God.

That can never be done through a mere reflex. That kind of life takes routine. It takes discipline, it takes practice, it takes the kind of patience and quiet determination that separates sprinters from marathoners.

To say this in different words, it's the difference between etiquette and ethics. *Giving* thanks is good etiquette. But *living* gratefully—that is a matter of ethical choice for faithful people.

So rather than the laundry list of reflexive thanks we tend to stammer through as we go around the table today, imagine what would happen if we took on board as deeply as possible the idea that everything we have, everything we know, is a gift. That we are entitled to nothing, dependent for God on everything, and richly blessed in all things. That, as the poet Marjorie Saiser has written, it isn't the feast we have to give thanks for; *we* are the feast, all of our memories and all of our hopes, all of our gifts and all of our mistakes, all of the love we have given and all of the love we have received; all of that, all that we are, is the result of God's abundant goodness.

What would happen if we took that aboard deeply, and prayerfully—and then made a discipline of living as though it were really true?

I suppose what would happen is that we would finally understand what Jesus was really talking about at noon that day in Capernaum. I suppose what would happen is that we would greet each next child of God not with suspicion, not with calculation, but with thankfulness. Imagine how confused, how disoriented—how disarmed—they would be.

I suppose what would happen is that little bit by little bit, our lives would begin to take shape around our gratefulness to God, and that would mean we would act in the world like grateful people. We would do for others because of what has been done for us. We would walk the way of love because it had been cleared before us. We might even show up here more often to do what grateful people do—return thanks to the giver of all gifts.

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I will end where I began, a hundred and sixty three years ago, when the two communities who built these two spires went their separate ways. We might see that moment as a failure of gratitude to overcome attitude, a moment when division and discord seemed somehow righteous.

It cannot be an accident that those two communities of Americans abroad fell so easily into division because their whole country was at that moment falling into irreconcilable tribes. They were only doing what practically everyone was doing at the time—finding a reason to disagree, and break relationships. If the world around us is like that crowd in Capernaum, our country today is like that unhappy and fractious group of Americans in 1858, taking sides over black gowns.

The edition of the *Book of Common Prayer* that Dr. Seeley would have had on his prayer-desk for the Sunday services here in Paris had been published in 1845. The Episcopalians were especially put out that he was using their service of Morning Prayer, but omitting parts of it. It's too bad that all of them did not take more to heart the words of a prayer they would all have been saying together before they parted company. It was found on page 23 of that prayer book, and here is part of what it said:

> *Almighty God, giver of all mercies, we, thine unworthy servants, do give thee most humble and hearty thanks for all thy goodness and loving-kindness to us, and to all people. We bless thee for our creation, preservation, and all the blessings of this life...for the means of grace, and for the hope of glory. And, we beseech thee, give us that due sense of all they mercies, that our hearts may be unfeignedly thankful; and that we may short forth thy praise, not only with our lips, but in our lives; by giving up ourselves to thy service, and by walking before thee in holiness and righteousness all our days...*

They said this prayer together; and yet they could not find a way to take on the discipline of gratitude.

People grateful for what God has done for them do not easily fall out of community with each other.

People grateful for what God has done for them do not treat other children of God as property.

People grateful for what God has done for them do not appeal to violence, physical or verbal, to assert their interests or their causes.

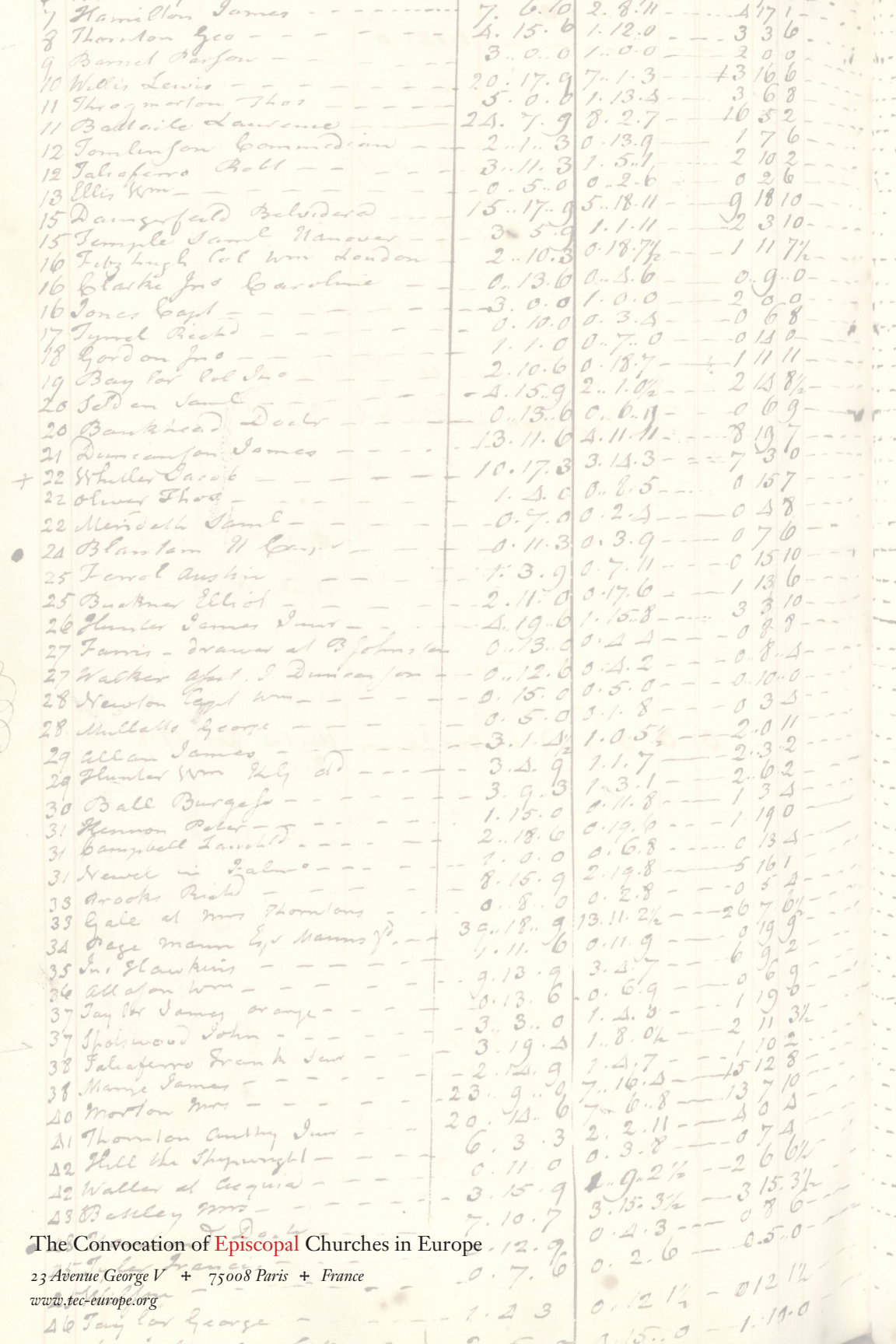
And people grateful for what God has done for them are the people who bring the transforming power of God's love to bear on healing the wounds of the world.

Those ancestors of ours were so swept up in the divisions of an America falling into conflict that they fell into conflict, too.

May we, in this day of division and strife, find the grace to realize the depth and breadth of the gifts we are, and the gifts we have received; and the discipline to become, and the courage to be seen, as people of gratitude.

Let us pray:

Thou hast given so much to me,
Give one thing more; a grateful heart. *Amen.*



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