



ST BART'S

A SERMON by:

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Churchy-ness Is Not Next to Godliness

Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, July 7, 2013

The Seventh Sunday after Pentecost

Based on Luke 10:1-11,16-20

One of the recurring themes in our clergy staff meetings is that we need to take care not to be too churchy. Now this is a high order for people who dress like we do. Even on weekdays, we look different from everyone else, and almost everyone can tell that a good part of our lives is pretty churchy. There is one exception. Each year during the early fall around the time of the Jewish High Holy Days, there is always a cadre of young Orthodox Jewish men to be found along Park Avenue, respectfully but persistently asking passersby if they are Jewish. Feeling responsible for all Jews, their desire is to offer help for fellow Jews in preparing for holiday prayers. On several occasions dressed in full clerical collar and wearing my most earnest priestly look (I practice), I have been stopped and asked, "Are you Jewish?" Though I always just say "No," what I'd like to say is, "Seriously? Well, ah, no. But show me what you've got; I might consider changing!" Churchy-ness is more obvious to some than to others.

Earlier this spring the bishop asked me to serve on the committee to nominate a new Suffragan Bishop. I was about as excited as I would have been had he asked me to go camping with him. But because he is a really wonderful man, whom I happen to work for, I said, "Aw, shucks. Who me? You bet." Suffragans are assisting bishops—Bishop Roskam was our last one. Believing as I truly do that I have the best job in the church—a belief that is a touch arrogant, maybe a little self-serving, but undoubtedly also true, I can't imagine why anyone would want to be a bishop. But that's just between you and me.

At this point in the process we are interviewing a good number of people who have been proposed and are interested in being nominated—all of them smart, nice people. The Holy Spirit moves as she moves. At any rate, as we talk to them I look for signs of super "churchy-ness" and then try to run from it as quickly as I can. You know what I am talking about: the kind of stock churchy answers that we have heard all our lives but which really leave us empty and cold, and the presence of certainty about almost everything that anyone who is real knows is at best immature and at worst an outright ploy to demand us to straighten up, toe the line and get with the program. That kind of churchy-ness drives me crazy.

Everyone in the church today ponders the question of why our numbers keep dropping. The longer I live the more I am convinced that it has to do with this whole issue of churchy-ness. The deepest desire of my heart is that my experience of God and of those with whom I journey in search of God be real, not canned; unpredictable, because life is; not prescribed so as to end questioning; open, not tight and prohibitive, but capacious enough to live and breathe and have my being. Sadly, I think the church, even those of us on the progressive end, often find ourselves circling the wagons rather than throwing the doors wide open, trusting God to be present in the wind that blows through!

Almost certainly an example of Paul's authentic writing, the letter to the Galatians is an early example, I believe, of the church's dealing with this problem of real life versus some idealized version of what a life of faith should be like. Paul didn't always get it, and certainly those who wrote letters, like the letter to the Ephesians, in his name clearly did not. He was a complicated case, a passionate, hardheaded, arrogant sort. But he was also a man whose life had been radically changed by his experience of the Christ who lived beyond the grave. He had come to know that "a new creation," as he says, "is everything."

The specific issue with which he was dealing in this portion of his writing was the question of circumcision, not a topic we often preach about, certainly not in much detail. Paul wrote this letter probably around 60 of the first century; Jesus had been crucified fewer than thirty years earlier. They—these early Christians, barely at this point thinking of themselves of something other than Jewish—were forging their way, sort of making it up as they went along.

Circumcision was a mark of a devout Jew, the return to which at times of grave dispersal and despair, as in the Babylonian exile, signaled their return to God, to a covenantal relationship with God. It is not surprising that there was an argument about it. These new Christians, Gentiles they were, had no such historical reference for the practice and frankly were not terribly attracted to the notion.

Paul, the consummate Jew, bright, erudite in the law, proud of—some might say puffed up about—his remarkable mastery of and compliance with the law, surprised his fellow Jewish believers in Christ with his liberalism. Yes, it is true: Paul, far from a fundamentalist, was in fact a liberal with regard to his understanding of the grace, mercy and accessibility of God. His followers must have been astonished to hear him say, “Circumcision, uncircumcision—this is not the issue.” (I tried to do this in a Jewish accent but I sounded like a Southern mobster.) “You are missing the point, my brothers and sisters; Christ is alive and a new creation beckons us not to old rules, but to new relationships—relationships with one another, ourselves and with God.” Though this claim came much later in the gospel of Mark, my guess is that Paul had heard that Jesus had made an even more remarkable assertion: “The Sabbath was created for men and women, not women and men created for the Sabbath.”

Nothing mattered for Paul but the extraordinary gift of Jesus’ life on the cross. I believe he understood it in a way that I don’t, as substitutionary; but regardless, his grasping of that event was the seminal moment of his life, clarifying for him all other claims, signifying once and for all what was important, even critical, and what was not, what were in fact marginal questions that held diminishing interest for some but no power in the lives of real people in search of God.

The question for the church today is the same. Are we, as those who desire to follow Jesus, focusing our lives and our resources, our loves and our energy, on things that matter? Or are we caught in the same rat race that everyone else in the world seems to be running? Do we in the church focus on matters that truly matter, or do we waste our lives and our faith on meaningless prattle? The answers, of course, are complicated. We are involved in both; we waste our time on many things that do not matter *and*, yet, with God’s good grace we sometimes dare to set our hearts on a new creation, on a new way of being and loving in the world.

Earlier in this same chapter, Paul devoted some words to admonishing his readers about how to live with one another in a “spirit of gentleness,” an example of the new creation. If there is one thing in this world that I think we need a bit more of, it is gentleness. We often hear that word as meaning weak, not an attribute to which we might aspire. And, yet, in the hard charging world that is reality for most of us, gentleness can be utterly arresting, catching us off guard in a moment of humanity and humility that almost takes our breath away. Gentleness gives room for error and for question, for bold endeavors and for restarts in the face of defeat. Far from weak, gentleness invites the journeyer to trust her/his search for God, claiming that even the search is good and holy.

This weekend we have celebrated our Declaration of Independence, our beginnings as a country. One aspect of our lives as Christians is to negotiate our devotion to life as citizens of this world, and in most of our cases, citizens of this country. The line between jingoism and patriotism is always thin, and the chill bumps we may experience today as we thrill to the extraordinary music of modern American classics, as we sing “America the Beautiful,” and then a little later as some of us stay to sing our national anthem, reflect a different citizenship from the one of our faith. It is always worth gently remembering on this holiday weekend that God is borderless, unlike countries, which by definition exist by borders. And while the joy of one does not negate the truth of the other, our search for God, for a new creation in Paul’s words, is the real substance of our lives. Our first order is not to become more and more churchy or more and more patriotic but to become more and more the people of God.

In the name of God: *Amen.*

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