



ST BART'S

A Sermon by

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What is the Church?

Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, February 28, 2021

The Second Sunday in Lent

Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16; Romans 4:13-25; Mark 8:31-38

Come, Holy Spirit, and kindle the fire that is in us.

Take our lips and speak through them.

Take our hearts and see through them.

Take our souls and set them on fire. Amen

What *is* the Church? On a day when we gather together for our Annual Parish meeting, it seems like a good moment to reflect on that question. Now, if we took a survey on the streets of New York City, there would be a number of people who'd be quick to tell us that Church is a gathering of narrow-minded, judgmental people who believe their operating assumptions about how the world works are right, and everyone else's are wrong. It's a place where guilt is cultivated, theological and social prejudices confirmed; a place where a spiritual arrogance is raised up and fear is made to feel at home.

Is the Church merely a gathering of people who gather to reaffirm one another's theological and social prejudices? Is it only a place where people convince one another of their rightness in the face of competing evidence? Or can it be something more?

- What if the Church was a place where people found a higher level of love and acceptance?
- What if Church was an educational experience where you got better ideas about how to successfully live the one life you've been given?
- What if Church was an effective vehicle for channeling your efforts to make the world into something just a little better?

These are the high and holy aspirations of this congregation. And we are all connected to St. Bart's because we believe Church actually *can* be something more than what so many others have seen and experienced from the Christian faith. Many of us—most of us—have come from faith traditions that were narrower and more restricting. Some of us would describe ourselves as “recovering evangelicals” or “lapsed Catholics.” We've happily gravitated to a place where a broader and more inclusive gospel is offered.

More than a few of our members have found St. Bart's to be the very first church to which they could, with integrity, fully commit themselves. And allow me to say what a great privilege it is to serve such a congregation as your Rector.

In “The Outline of the Faith, commonly called the Catechism” found in the back of *The Book of Common Prayer* (an under-used resource if ever there was one), the Church is defined as “the New Covenant.” The Church is described in the Bible as “the Body of which Jesus Christ is the Head and of which all baptized persons are members.” It is called “the People of God, the New Israel, a holy nation, a royal priesthood, and the pillar and ground of truth.”ⁱ

Well now, that would be a lot to try to fit onto a single sign, wouldn't it?

If we look through another lens, the historic creeds, the Church is described as “one, holy, catholic, and apostolic.” What does that actually mean? Again, the Catechism states:

- “The Church is *one*, because it is one Body, under one Head, our Lord Jesus Christ.”ⁱⁱ
- “The Church is *holy*, because the Holy Spirit dwells in it, consecrates its members, and guides them to do God's work.”ⁱⁱⁱ
- “The Church is *catholic*, because it proclaims the whole Faith to all people, to the end of time.”^{iv}
- “The Church is *apostolic*, because it continues in the teaching and fellowship of the apostles and is sent to carry out Christ's mission to all people.”^v

And what, exactly, *is* that mission? “To restore all people to unity with God and each other in Christ through prayer, worship, proclaiming the gospel, and promoting justice, peace, and love.”^{vi} Restoring all people to unity with God? Promoting justice, peace, and love? This isn't just some kind of 1960's fantasy. This, this, is what the Church was meant to be from the very beginning of time.

“(Jesus) called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life?” (Matthew 8:34-36)

When the Reverend Dr. Joseph Fort Newton left the pulpit of a Baptist church to join The Episcopal Church in 1925, he wrote a beautiful explanation of his decision to become an Episcopalian. I've shared his story before, but after having read a number of “love letters” to the Anglican tradition, I think his is one of the very best.

Dr. Newton wrote, “Something deep in me responds to the sweet and tempered ways of the Episcopal Church. Its atmosphere of reverence, its ordered and stately worship, its tradition of historic continuity, linking today with ages ago; its symbols which enshrine the faith of the past and the hope of the future; its wise and wide tolerance; its old and lovely liturgy—like a stairway, worn by many feet, whereon men (and women) climb to God—and, still more, the organized mysticism of its sacraments: all these things of beauty and grace move me profoundly.

“More vital still, if possible, is the central and strategic position which the Episcopal Church holds in the confused religious situation of our time. It is the roomiest church in Christendom, in that it accepts the basic facts of Christian faith as symbols of transparent truths, which each may interpret as his insight explores their depth and wonder.

“Midway between an arid liberalism and an acrid orthodoxy, it keeps its wise course, conserving the eternal values of faith while seeking to read the word of God revealed in the tumult of the time. If

its spirit and attitude were better understood, it would be at once the haven and the home of many vexed minds torn between loyalty to the old faith and the new truth.

“After all, there is one church of Christ. It may wear many names, but its faith is one, and finally, soon or late, it will be one fellowship, drawn together by creative desire or driven together by sheer necessity of facing the forces of destruction in our day, which, if they have their way, will end in materialism and futility.

“(Everyone) should labor where (they) can do (their) best work in behalf of our common Christian enterprise; and I look forward to happy and fruitful service in a great and gracious fellowship.”^{vii}

Everyone should labor where they can do their best work, and that is what draws so many of us to this “great and gracious fellowship.” Now, I realize Dr. Fort Newton’s description of the Episcopal Church may be a bit time-worn. The “sweet and tempered ways” he describes were not much in evidence when we were fighting over the ordination of women or struggling with the acceptance of gay, lesbian, and transgendered people. There’s nothing perfect about the Episcopal Church or St. Bart’s, for that matter.

But his positing of the Episcopal tradition “midway between an arid (theological) liberalism and an acrid orthodoxy” still seems just about right to me. And I do believe that “if its spirit and attitude were better understood, (the Episcopal Church) would be at once the haven and the home of many vexed minds torn between loyalty to the old faith and the new truth.” Who wouldn’t want some of what we’ve experienced as part of this community of faith?

I spend many of my hours trying to articulate precisely that to people who might make a spiritual home with us if I could explain properly what dwelling with us might actually be like. And, like all of you, I know so very many people who seek after a deep spirituality, but who are reluctant, sometimes absolutely unwilling even, to consider anything resembling the institutional Church.

The reason, of course, we have institutions, which in our generation have all fallen under great suspicion, is that there are some things too important to rebuild every decade. Poet Robert Frost famously wrote, “Something there is that doesn’t love a wall, that sends the frozen-ground-swell under it.” Something there is, also, that doesn’t love an institution, something that seeks to question its relevance and topple its hierarchy. It’s hard to love an institution. Institutions are often old and cold and still.

And still, we need institutions to preserve the things we value.

- We need institutions to preserve our democracy.
- We need institutions to preserve great works of art and music.
- We need institutions to preserve knowledge and higher learning.
- We need institutions to maintain finance and business.
- We need institutions to promote medicine and research.

And we need the institution of the Church, to continue in its mission, “To restore all people to unity with God and each other in Christ through prayer, worship, proclaiming the gospel, and promoting justice, peace, and love.” Whenever we do this, we are fulfilling our high calling. And, whenever we fail to do this, we have lost our way. As Christians we come, not to be served, but to serve.

It’s a cross that hangs in the midst of all of our celebrations: a stark reminder that there can be no feast without fasting and no victory without sacrifice. We come to this cross knowing that when God revealed his stunning love for us in the form of his only son, the world responded by beating

him and taunting him and, as he suffered from thirst, they nailed his arms and legs to a cross and left him hanging there to die. There really isn't any way to dress that up.

So, what does it mean when Christ asks us to take up our crosses and follow him? I believe it means that the Church is called to pick up all our brokenness, all our imperfections, all our lies, our addictions, our fears, our illnesses, our dysfunctions, our inabilities, our "un-reliabilities"—all of it, all of it—and offer it to God. When we take up our crosses, we become aware of our own fragility and mortality. The death of every other human being in our lives invites us to ask questions about our own lives and our own choices.

For what might we die? In your own life, what would be worth giving your life for? Your child? Your spouse? Your work? A friend? Your Church? When we go to take up our crosses, we come to understand the nature of our own sacrifices. Poet Mary Oliver, of blessed memory, wrote,

*To live in this world
you must be able to do three things.
To love what is mortal;
to hold it against your bones knowing
your own life depends upon it,
and, when the time comes to let it go,
to let it go.*

We are all in the process of letting go. In fact, detachment is the principal requirement for living the Christian life. We are constantly being called to let go of anything we cherish more than our God and our neighbor. The cross strips away everything from our lives which is non-essential and transforms us into people called to live, not out of our fears, but out of our hope.

What is the Church? William Willimon, a United Methodist bishop and theologian, wrote an essay where he imagined what Jesus might write to mainline churches if he were to write a letter today. One reader notes, "It contains some thought-provoking ideas, including Jesus' noting that when preachers stop talking about him, their preaching tends to get moralistic and trite! Hear him further."^{viii}

"You know me, I love to make the old wine new. If you will stick with me, I shall give you a future, new wineskins and all that. I am the Lord of Life, not death. I shall move you from mordant decline to life. I've still got plans for you. You'll be smaller, but small can be good. Ask the Mennonites. You will no longer be in charge of the nation, if you ever were.

"Remember, the national church thing was your idea of church, not mine. Get back to the basics like worship, service, and witness. Don't mourn the downsizing of your bureaucracy. Your marginalization may be providential. I promise you renewal, not restoration. I think you tend to be open-minded to a fault. Latitudinarianism is you all over. I wish you'd hire some theologians with some guts for a change. Can't you find something more fun to do than diocesan conventions? One more thing. Please get out of the middle of the road! That's where all the accidents happen, theologically speaking. Remember, I wasn't crucified for my moderation."^{ix}

No, indeed, Christ was not crucified for his moderation, and we will not be blessed for remaining lukewarm. So, if we are actually going to be the Church—if we are really called to be the Church—let's devote the remainder of our days to the doing of something which is noble and grand and good for God.

If we are genuinely called to take up our crosses and follow him, then let us die for something worth giving our lives to. Let's make St. Bart's that kind of place, that kind of Church.

Amen.

ⁱ The Book of Common Prayer, 1979, p. 854

ⁱⁱ Ibid, p. 854

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid, p. 854

^{iv} Ibid, p. 854

^v Ibid, p. 854

^{vi} Ibid, p. 855

^{vii} Joseph Fort Newton, *River of Years; An Autobiography*, J.B. Lippincott Company, Philadelphia/New York, c. 1946, pp 234-235

^{viii} Yr. B, Synthesis February 6, 2000, p 3

^{ix} William Willimon, *Christianity Today*, October 25, 1999, "Annual Bible Issue"

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