

Lent 5C 2013
Philippians 3:4b-14

I've been thinking and talking with a few people about how we might continue some of the practices that we learned and experienced while Jane Redmont was with us. It was one thing to take advantage of her offerings while she was here – changing one's calendar isn't too hard if it's for one time only.

Some of us didn't take advantage of any of her offerings. We, of course, had other things to do, weren't interested, or didn't need help along our faith journeys. We're fine doing it – whatever it is – on our own, thank you very much.

And others were just out of town and physically unavailable.

But we did have a very good response and her work with us begs that we do follow up to meet some of the identified corporate and individual spiritual needs at St Clement's

The apostle Paul writes this morning about pressing forward; not looking back at our lives but pressing forward as people of faith. It doesn't really matter what we did, what we had, what marks we have on our bodies identifying us as belonging to a certain community, or being good because we're supposed to be good. We need to look ahead at who we are becoming – we need to press forward.

Paul writes that everything that comes out of who we are and our faith drives us to do certain works toward the glory of God. We do these things not for our own satisfaction and our own edification and our own acknowledgement but because we are called by Jesus to do them to the honor and glory of God. These things come out of the context of our faith.

More deeply, our identity is about who we are in our essence – in the very cores of our souls – and how that defines who we are and are becoming. This applies to young people and middle aged people and older people and the elderly. We do not ever stop becoming in our journey toward God. And we do not stop becoming in our identities and responsibilities as one of Christ's believers and followers. When we retire from our professions, we do not retire from our walk with Jesus through the rest of our lives. Sitting around is not an option. Ignoring this community and our faith and doing good works elsewhere is certainly an option, but we are called first to work through our community of Christian faith as Christians. A community in which we hold up one another spiritually, renew with one another, journey with one another – all having the faith that is so important to attend to and respond to and give us strength as we journey toward God. Remember that faith without works is dead?

We spent time during our week of spirituality discerning the gifts we have been given by God and how we are able to share those gifts in community. That's the reason for the gifts – sharing and offering them for the good of the community. Do we know what our gifts are? Do we use them in and through this community? Because our primary identity is one of a person of faith, our primary vehicle for sharing our gifts is through the faith community. Then we look at other organizations and needs they fulfill in the community. But our first responsibility is to share in community, to build up the community with our gifts so that we can even more effectively reflect our identity as Christians in the surrounding community.

This is about coming back to basics in our own faith journey. There are some questions we might ask ourselves...

Where was I five years ago and where am I today? Have I grown at all in allowing my faith to expand into my work in and through this community? Has my growth come through the strength and fellowship of this community? Or have I thought that I could take care of myself on my own. Remember that as Christians we are a community of faith, not a solitary faith. That is one of our greatest strengths.

What is holding me back in my spiritual growth and how am I holding back the spiritual growth of this community? Am I afraid of having my understanding of God challenged --- it's worked for me my whole life and I don't need to change it? How does that affect the rest of our community? Or do I think that no one really wants to hear about where I am on my faith journey?

Are there traditions that I'm unwilling to change? Do I think I have the right to insist that certain rituals and ways of worshipping must stay as they have been? What will upset me, what will make me angry if these things – these symbols – of my way of worship change? How will my ways exclude the ways and needs of others? Do we even know the ways and needs of others? We certainly know our own ways and needs – what change will I allow to exclude me? Who is worship about anyway?

Who am I as a Christian and Episcopalian and what do I see when I look forward in my faith journey? What kind of change can I affect that will make my life and words and behavior a reflection of Jesus Christ?

I think about change especially now as the search for a curate begins. What type of person do we want? One who does all the traditional things of a parish community – working with youth, pastoral ministry, some adult ed, and preaching and celebrating the Eucharist. Or will we have someone who will challenge us to reach out in non-traditional ways? Someone who will bump up against the way we have always done things – who will take church into the community – into the bars and coffee houses and clubs and beaches and other places where people gather. Will we have someone who will be frustrated by the rigidity of our worship space and see this as a way to exclude younger people or those returning to their faith? What kinds of change are we willing to accept if we have a curate under 35 who lives his life primarily in the electronic world? Or will we accept another woman priest or another gay priest? What if we find a young, technologically savvy woman gay priest? Could we stand it??? I do remember shortly after I came here that we lost a parishioner specifically because “this place” was being run by a bunch of women.

Will we allow ourselves a curate who will challenge us and our way of life as much as we will challenge that person to develop in some ways that will be too traditional for him or her? That will be a big sign of who we are becoming as followers in a community of Jesus Christ.

And then there is change in our physical plant. I remember some of the grumblings during our capital campaign for over \$800,000 that eventually raised \$1.8 million. There were some strong grumblings about using that money for the poor and hungry rather than putting it toward a renovated and updated parish house, inviting grounds, and bright worship space. I must tell you, though, that we are serving more people now every month than probably any other time in the history of the parish. Of course, we are in the middle of one of the highest per capita neighborhoods in the state, but we have expanded to generously make our facilities available to almost all who come to us. But we're not done. We are still restricted by the buildings behind the fence of this campus. They are old, in dire need of major overhaul, and inefficient. They are not facilities that meet the 21st century needs of young children. And their usage is pretty much restricted to young children. Is it time to evaluate what we have and determine if the rest of our campus can better serve the Lord by some major changes for and with and alongside the school? Of course it is! The facilities of our school were built 50 and 60 years ago. It's time to bring them into the 21st century as well.

Who are we as individuals and as a community called? We know what we've done and we can live on the laurels of our past or we can press forward and decide who we want St Clement's to be as we and our children and those who have yet to come to us search for a place of spiritual grounding, of welcome, and of being equipped to move in the world on their spiritual journeys.

Paul had to be concerned with the issue of legitimacy through circumcision. He was concerned with following the law – following the religious rules. He was concerned with clearing out all those who broke the law and walked away from the Hebrew culture and faith. But his life changed when he met Jesus. His life changed. He realized all that he had missed and all that he could be; he knew that he was now walking with the one who was and is and will always be the way, the truth, and the light. He had missed so much. Where are we – individually and corporately – in this community? And what more can we do to honor God as we look forward toward all the possibilities of sharing the Good News of Jesus Christ in the next couple of years and in the next couple of decades?

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