

Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost

Fr. Rick, homilist

Last Sunday, Clyde gave us a presentation of the 2018 General Convention. He mentioned the three areas of mission our Presiding Bishop is encouraging all churches to have, as part of their mission: Evangelism, Care of Creation, and Racial Reconciliation. I know this surfaced in conversations Rev. Debbie had with you. As we move to a strategic planning session, I am sure this will surface again.

Of the three, Evangelism is one that can sometimes make a person uncomfortable. One may have images of door-to-door representatives of a religion trying to convert others – or of loud-voiced preachers proclaiming, “You must be saved or you are lost!” In all honesty, sometimes people in relationship with God do get lost. This is what we hear in today’s first reading as King David is reprimanded by the Prophet Nathan. These approaches to evangelism are not what the Presiding Bishop is calling us to do. His message of evangelism centers on the love God extends to us, not on intimidating us to fear God or be damned.

What is evangelism? A very basic definition of evangelism is sharing with others our relationship with God. When I first arrived in the United Kingdom during my sabbatical, I went to a bed and breakfast at which I planned to stay a few days before the start of my first retreat. At the time, I had been up for approximately 39 hours and was exhausted. As I was about to enter the B&B, a man asked me where I was from. I said I was an Episcopal priest from the United States. He said, “Oh, I don’t believe in religion.” I responded, “Some people don’t, I just believe it can do real good, but I know it can also do harm.” He didn’t respond.

The next evening, I went for supper to the pub that was part of the B&B and asked a group of three men and a woman if the chair next to them was available. They said it was. As I sat down, I recognized the man who told me the night before he didn’t believe in religion. I said, “Why, hello! I remember you from last night.” He said, “Oh, yeah I apologize for what I said.” I said, “Really? A lot of people share your opinion.” He then asked me point blank, “Why do you believe in God?” I responded, “Wow, when I look around and see all the incredible beauty of the world of which we are a part and what we are learning about this magnificent universe, I am struck with a sense of awe. How can I not believe?”

He then asked, “How about suffering?” I asked him, “Which suffering: that which we cause due to the negative treatment we as humans do to ourselves and one another or that which occurs within nature itself?” He then said, “You do believe in free will then?” “Oh, yes!” I replied. The man next to him said there is no free will, because psychics can see the future, and if they can see what is going to happen, then it is fixed. I said, “I really don’t agree with you, but I think we can agree to disagree.” He nodded his head.

The first gentlemen then asked, “Do you believe in hell?” I responded, “Well, it is all in the definition. I understand hell to be the refusal to love – to accept love and to give love. And I believe God is always offering us love and inviting us to love others. That is what Jesus is all about.” I encouraged them to read *The Great Divorce* by one of their countrymen, C.S. Lewis. The book’s

symbolism illustrates that what keeps us from becoming totally loving is our refusal to let go of anything we hold on to that violates the value of ourselves and/or all others and/or of God's creation. This was a moment of my sharing why I believe, and what I believe, my evangelism.

Last Sunday, Father Frank stated that for the next several Sundays, the Gospel readings are going to be from the sixth chapter of John's Gospel containing what is called the Bread of Life discourse. In this Gospel, there is no story of Jesus having his last supper with the disciples, in which he identifies the bread as his body and the wine as his blood. However, this bread of life discourse is understood to help develop the meaning of the Jesus as the Bread of Life, especially within the mystery of Holy Communion.

Some commentators say the people to whom Jesus was talking must have been dense to not understand what he said. Jesus has said some pretty confusing things: "You must be born from above," "Whoever drinks of the water I give them will never thirst," "Before Abraham was, I am." Say what? I mean really. The people to whom Jesus spoke these things did not have the benefit of almost 2000 years of theological reflection and discussion on what Jesus said and did. So before we are tempted to think ourselves superior, let us remember how mind blowing this must have been to the people he encountered.

The evangelist John introduces Jesus to us as the enfleshed communication of the message of God. Identified by John as full of grace and truth, Jesus invites us to live in relationship with God, and he shares how to do so. In doing so, he feeds us. He is, for the follower of Christ, the bread from heaven. Those who heard him were able to think through what he shared with them. It may have pushed the envelope of their understanding, but it was something for them to chew over repeatedly – the bread of heaven.

We unite with Jesus every Sunday as we share his presence in the Scripture, which is proclaimed and preached, in the exchange of peace we have in seeing in one another a child of God, and in what Orthodox Christianity calls the mystery supper, also known as the Eucharist or Holy Communion. Our Holy Communion is the moment that we are united with the communion of saints from the past, the present, and the future as Jesus shares this most intimate meal with us. And we are encouraged to become what we consume: the presence of Christ.

Paul's letter to the church members at Ephesus encourages them to live lives worthy of their calling as followers of Christ. He encourages us to do the same. He speaks of the gifts given to us for the building up the body of Christ, building ourselves up together in love.

So, how comfortable are you in being an evangelist? Perhaps we can reword that: How comfortable are you in sharing with others why you believe and what you believe – your relationship with God. When you do so, speak in the honesty of who you are. Be genuine. And if your response is simply, "I am not sure" be comfortable with that. We are all on a journey. In our lives, we all experience many different perspectives. No matter what you express as to why and what you believe, child of God, just be real no matter what your answer is. Amen!