

## **JUNE 13**

This week marked my 39th ordination anniversary and my 42nd wedding anniversary. I am glad for both.

Two sayings come to mind when I look back over the years. The first is the signature tag line of the Saturday Night Live character, Roseanne Roseannadanna, played by Gilda Radner: "It's always something". The other is the world-weary remark made by one of the secretaries at my first parish, "It's always chicken salad".

Roseanne Roseannadanna's rueful declaration, made with a certain resigned acceptance but also a fundamental confidence in one's ability to cope with whatever the "something" might turn out to be, never failed to illicit a laugh. Indeed, it does seem so looking back. For example, Dorothy and I were the proverbial poor church mice when I was an assistant priest, and that did not change after I accepted a call to a parish in northern New Jersey that the bishop had about despaired of. Upon arrival, I discovered the Vestry had no money to pay me. Their resources had gone to ship our hand-me-down, junk shop furniture from Pittsburgh. I had turned down two other parishes quite recently that had plenty of money for a priest. But I had only felt the deep soul chime inside in one place, and they hid the fact that there was no money by not reporting that my predecessor had worked without pay so the books would look good. Imaginary money in baloney finance reports. Interesting times, my first week. And thereafter. If it is not one thing, it's another. It's always something.

Over years of parish service, the meaning of "It's always chicken salad" has sunk in also. The woman who said it was the person in charge of publishing the parish weekly newsletter and managing the calendar and building use for the parish where I served first as an assistant, and in time priest-in-charge. It was an exhausting job in a large congregation with a huge physical plant and a big staff (11 full time and 6 part-time staff, with an army of volunteers) to keep connected with. At least weekly, and often more frequently, there would be some hullabaloo about last minute schedule changes, menu alterations (there was a cook on staff), calendar adjustments for the newsletter, and under-the-wire submissions for the newsletter. In the midst of all this frequent flapdoodle, Jan would just sit quietly at her desk waiting for the authoritative word to come down from

wherever. I asked her how she managed when so often it appeared that contradictory ideas would produce conflicting directions that could see-saw back and forth—sometimes right in front of her desk at the front of the open office area. She looked at me with the serenity of long experience and said, “It’s always chicken salad”. That is, most decisions run a predictable path through relatively fixed parameters so the outcomes can be anticipated to a large extent. Vestry meetings were third Tuesdays at 6, with drinks at 6:45 and dinner served at 7. The agenda and the menu choices were largely fore-ordained. The chicken salad, one might say was fixed; the choice of being served on lettuce or in tomatoes was relatively easy to execute, even at the last minute—after all, if you know it’s always chicken salad, you’re way ahead.

The utility in these thoughts is that they both help us cope with things as we set out on whatever the day has for us, and encourage us to believe we can cope in practice with what we encounter. The danger is that we won’t see new and different aspects of things because we’re so set in our way of looking that we push fresh information and perspective to the side when it should be front and center.

But what about when we’re confronted with a break in the pattern, a new thing? What do we do? In a landmark book, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, now almost 60 years old, Thomas S. Kuhn made a simple, but profound, argument: scientific world views (Darwin over Creationists, Copernicus over Ptolemy, Einstein over Newton) change when new data overwhelms current explanations for observed phenomena. The result is the opportunity for a new explanation to emerge that not only accounts for old and new data more simply and elegantly, but also invigorates work in other areas. So, a revolution in ideas can occur when the power and simplicity and scope of an idea encompasses the mass of evidence and problematic stuff in front of us.

Another flight into the sky-blue air of abstraction, Tommy boy, you may be thinking. Chicken salad and Scientific revolutions. Right.

I’ve been thinking about what I see in the wake of the George Floyd and Breonna Taylor killings. Specific, appropriate, heartfelt shock, horror, and outrage being expressed by many thousands of Americans and even people in other countries. In the course of this, the Black Lives Matter idea has come forward again, and with it wider protests against monuments to

the Confederacy and its leaders, along with the perpetuation of rebel heroes' names in the designations of military camps and installations, and even statues and stained glass windows in churches and public buildings. We're not talking about chicken salad any more. This is more than the daily "something".

Some have been bemused at this—why George Floyd and Breonna Taylor? Why not Tamir Rice or Philando Castile or literally hundreds of other men and women over the last 3-4 years? I don't know. I'm not sure anyone knows. I know that pressure has been building and that each time another black person gets killed for being alive while black, the noose of racism gets tighter, and folks can't breathe. This was a choke off point for people of color, and a repent of and resist racism moment for white people.

I think the Rev'd Al Sharpton said it best in his sermon at the memorial service for Mr. Floyd: sometimes God uses people and circumstances we don't expect to teach us and galvanize us so we—at long and bitter last—start to face ourselves. When we look at these witness tree moments of racism in the deaths of these two black people, we see the forest of horror formed by all the individual crimes and indignities, deprivations and hardships, cruel lies and blasted hopes people of color have had to endure in white America.

It is white people who are taking down the statues in Richmond and elsewhere. White people want to strip off Confederate names from military installations and forbid flying the Confederate battle flag. Even NASCAR banned that flag. It is white people who—at long last—are saying that we fought wars against rebels and nazis and came out 2-0 against those ideologies; isn't it high holy time we start to live out the values they were willing to die for? Of course, as history shows, we have failed badly, horribly, in this. So, we have a lot of repenting and repairing to do, and much of it has to be on the side, not front and center.

More than one person has observed the radical statements we make at every baptism and renewal of baptismal vows are the Episcopal Church's warrant to each of us that our faith is to be lived in witness to the name if the Father, by the example of the Son, and through the power of the Spirit: Will you persevere in resisting evil, and, whenever you sin, repent and return to the Lord...will you strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being?

The structure of our society is changing. The old explanations and baloney justifications and willful blindness to stark reality cannot continue because we are seeing old ways of thinking crumble. It will not always be smooth, easy, well-mannered, precise, timely, and quick. In fact, it will often be a mess in many ways. But on the other side, America will be better, we will be a kinder, freer nation, and that will be a great good day.