

St. James, West Dundee, IL (Diocese of Chicago)
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150th anniversary

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I've been at two of The Episcopal Church's seminaries this past week, and both of them are embroiled in significant conflict, mostly related to financial challenges, changing realities in the world around us, and what their vision for the future is going to be. This congregation has never had any controversies about such things, have you?

Human communities are in pretty continual flux, when you think about it. Moses is reporting to his community about the new rules he's received from God, rules for living in a radically new context. Remember that Moses has led a bunch of slaves out of Egypt, they've been wandering around in the desert, complaining a lot about the food and living conditions, and wondering if they wouldn't have been a lot better off if they'd stayed in Egypt. 'At least there,' they whine, 'life was predictable!'

Well, actually, it wasn't quite so rosy. Pharaoh kept changing the rules about work and living conditions, and tried to kill off their children because the community was growing in spite of it all. The Hebrew slaves are now free, out there in the desert, and they can't quite figure out how to deal with it. Moses is reporting back from his latest meeting with God, with some very simple rules for free people to live in relationship with God and one another. The list starts with remembering that God is God, and only God is God, not any one of them or any other thing they might construct or conceive of. The rest of the rules are about dealing justly with neighbors – don't take away their lives and loves, their honor or their possessions. You wouldn't want anyone to do that to you. Those are the basics for living in freedom. Love God, who has created you and everybody else, and treat all those others with justice.

Human communities are always trying to go back to an earlier idea of when life was better, safer, more predictable, or somehow easier. The reality is that it only looks that way from a distance. Paul gets it – he's telling his friends in Philippi that he could boast of how well he kept the rules in an earlier time but now that he's encountered God in the risen Jesus none of that matters. He's admitting that he was living in relationship with an idol, something he worshiped instead of God. 'I forget what lies in the past, and I press on toward what God is calling us toward' – that vision of healing and wholeness, justice and peace we call the Reign of God. He doesn't claim to have figured it all out, but he knows that he's moving toward that transformed world made evident in resurrection.

From the stories and bits of your history I've heard, I think it's fair to say that you've been through this several times, even in living memory. Life gets a bit comfortable and predictable and before long some people think that's the way it's always supposed to be. And then along comes some crisis –

finances, a fight over some change, challenges in the community around you – and the reaction by some is to try to cling to what seemed unchanging and predictable. Unless we're talking about God, that's generally an illusion. Even if we ARE talking about God it is an illusion – think of how God's creative spirit keeps unfolding the world around us. Like those Israelites in the desert, we are bound for the promised land – but we haven't arrived yet.

I don't know if there is anyone here this morning who was around in 1952. Does anybody remember Murray and Clare Dewart[1]? He came here as rector in 1948, soon after he was ordained. His son wrote a letter when he learned of this anniversary celebration, telling of a vibrant congregation with a large choir and Sunday school. In this growing, post-war community all seemed well until the fears in the larger society began to intrude. Fr. Dewart was preaching about Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, and "blessed are the poor for they shall inherit the earth." Apparently that was too much for some on the vestry, who feared he was a communist sympathizer. Joseph McCarthy's sanitation campaign caused this parish to purge a truth-teller. Fr. Dewart and his family left here, but they survived, and went on to flourish in other communities in Massachusetts and the American Cathedral in Paris.[2] McCarthy encouraged people to worship the idol of national purity and hermetically sealed ideologies. In spite of him the meaning of "red" has shifted in 65 years, from the vilified "red menace" to what are now termed "red states." The Brotherhood House that became part of your new parish hall in 1905 got its start as a ministry for factory workers. McCarthy would have thought that outrageous, too. Other things have changed as well, including the kind of people we call to be priests and rectors. McCarthy would have been appalled by that, too.

Jesus ends his parable about the vineyard tenants with words about rejected stones becoming cornerstones. As hard as they try, those tenants can't ever completely destroy the landowner's original plans for a good harvest and a rich vintage. Some people may get it totally wrong, and may continue to do so for years, but God is still God, and the foundation of a world of justice and peace never disappears. The misguided and the evil cannot change the DNA of creation. God, and divine humor, will prevail. Today St. James is feeding people of all sorts and conditions – the poor and homeless as well as the local police department. You are working to feed starving children of all ages, races, nations, and creeds. Somehow that just might help to heal divisions everywhere – in Ferguson as well as the Middle East, in Congress and in seminaries.

Those who are being confirmed and received today, and all of us who will reaffirm our baptismal promises, are claiming that cornerstone, that DNA of healing and justice. Even when we get it wrong, even when we're afraid the world has gone to hell in a handbasket, that divine intention remains. We're more likely to remember and rediscover that DNA when we act like free creatures, free to worship God without fear,[3] rather than the latest idol somebody is pushing on us. Those idols are all around us – and they have power only if we give it to them. Consider a few of them:

"We've always done it this way." [No, we haven't. We've just forgotten what's changed.]

"Christians are supposed to be *nice*." [No, we aren't. It means *stupid*.] [4] Jesus challenged others, and he stirred up conflict. We're supposed to be holy, and willing to suffer for the sake of righteousness.]

“Don’t argue with me!” [We’re meant to listen to and obey God, and if we don’t argue or wrestle with God, we’re never going to grow.]

Sometimes the idols are about our self-focus: “I’m afraid, I’m not strong/smart/young/old enough...” [It’s OK to be afraid – and remembering who loves you helps to put the damper on fear.]

Moses was afraid, and he went anyway, *after* he argued with God. None of us has all the gifts and guarantees we want, but Jesus has been there ahead of us, and God is going with us down this road. If you want assurance of that, look at the face of your neighbor.

Press on toward that heavenly goal. And whether the road rises up to meet you, the wind is at your back, the sun shining warm upon your face, or the rains falling soft on your fields, OR NOT, know that God WILL hold you in the palm of his hand.

[1] <http://www.legacy.com/obituaries/baltimoresun/obituary.aspx?n=clare-b-dewart&pid=123093301>

[2] Letter from Murray Dewart (fils) to St. James Parish 8 Sept 2014.

[3] Luke 1:74

[4] Nice comes from the Latin *nescire*, not to know.