

Trader Joe's, the Episcopal Church, and a Shepherd-King

In the interest of full disclosure, I want to let you know that I have preached a part of this sermon here before. It was the middle of summer over a year ago. The attendance was pretty light. At the door after the service, a parishioner said, "that was a really good sermon; you need to preach it again when more people can hear it." Well, I'm not going to re-preach that whole sermon, but there is a story and a reflection that I am going to use. Full disclosure.

First, I want to start with two questions. There will be third question a little later on.

First Question: How many of you consider yourself to be an Episcopalian?

Second Question: Now, how many of you have shopped at Trader Joe's?

I love being an Episcopalian, but more about that later. I also love shopping at Trader Joe's. They have a little bit of everything, and there is always something new to discover. There is a sense of being a part of something that I get when shopping at TJ's, almost as if they have created a unique shopping culture. A few years ago I came across an article in the Los Angeles Times. Since it was about Trader Joe's I naturally read it; but there was a bonus. For buried about halfway into the article was a reference to the Episcopal Church. Here is what Mary McNamara wrote:

"Trader Joe's' expansion has been as spiritual as it has been physical. Over the years, as more and more people picked up those orange baskets and headed through its door, Trader Joe's has created a unique demographic, a decidedly local lifestyle -- TJ Culture. TJ Culture is to food shopping as sort of what the Episcopal Church is to Christianity -- a realistic idealism that rejects many of the rules and regulations associated with stricter sects. Just as the Episcopal Church borrows some from the Catholics but is generally more liberal when it comes to sin and attendance, Trader Joe's dips into the health food movement, the gourmet food, wine and booze craze, and the ever-popular discount ideal. But all in moderation."

“...what the Episcopal Church is to Christianity -- a realistic idealism that rejects many of the rules and regulations associated with stricter sects. ...the Episcopal Church borrows some from the Catholics but is generally more liberal when it comes to sin and attendance...”

To be an Episcopalian is actually more than that of course, but for a moment, let's stick with looking at Trader Joe's. It strikes me that Trader Joe's is a both/and kind of place, rather than an either/or kind of place. It is a wine shop and a cheese shop and a vitamin place and a pet food store and a health food store and etc., etc., etc. It is not one or the other, or one over the other, it is all of them and all at once.

We, the Episcopal Church are a both-and kind of church. From our earliest beginnings as the Church of England, and especially from the time of Queen Elizabeth the First, we have seen ourselves as both catholic and reformed, both words beginning with lower case letters.

At our best, we recognize the value of tradition, while being people living fully in our time and place.

We take scripture seriously without necessarily taking every word literally.

At our best, we hold scripture in high regard, not as some frozen in time document, but because God still speaks to us through the Word. And that voice comes often in new and surprising ways.

At our best, we hold that Scripture can speak in different ways to people in different times and places.

At our best, we maintain the sacramental life of the ancient catholic faith and yet remain open to new ways that God acts gracefully in our lives.

At our best, we are a people of faith, and yet we allow room for questions and even for doubt.

At our best, we are a people that can uphold the traditions of the church, and provide for full inclusion of all people in the life and ministry of the church.

At our best, we are a church that welcomes women into ordained ministry, into all the offices of the church, including the highest office in the church, our Presiding Bishop.

At our best, we are a church that welcomes all, invites all to be transformed into the image of Christ in which we are created.

I think it takes a couple of things to be an Episcopalian.

One, it takes faith.

Faith that God is still speaking, that God is continuing to lead us into a richer, deeper truth, into a richer, deeper humanity.

Faith that we do not know it all, but that God does.

Faith that God is in charge and all is well.

Faith that, if we are faithful, we will be all right.

And besides faith, it takes a certain courage. You know, the name of Trader Joe's newspaper-like advertising is the "Fearless Flyer."

Sometimes, I feel like that describes us. And, if you remember Rev. Mary's sermon from last week, she reminded us that courage is not the absence of fear, but overcoming fear.

OK. Here is the third question: How many of you have read or heard a criticism of the Episcopal Church by other Christians or even from within our own Anglican tradition?

Well, let them say what they wish; we know, we know, that we are Christians who are simply trying to be faithful to God and to the Gospel.

It takes a certain amount of courage to be an Episcopalian.

Discerning God's will for us is often difficult and sometimes leads us in to dangerous territory.

But then,

It takes a certain amount of courage to follow Jesus.

It takes a certain amount of courage to trust that God is leading us.

It takes a certain amount of courage to trust that God does new things all the time.

It has always taken courage to follow Jesus. Paul, the writer of our first lesson today, is a classic example. Giving up position and power and authority, he became a servant of the gospel and suffered greatly at the hands of the religious and imperial authorities. It is not too hard to look at Paul and see what courage it took for him to follow Jesus and to trust in God. He writes about it plenty!

He was beaten five times with the thirty nine lashes, three times with rods, once receiving a stoning, three times shipwrecked, a night and day adrift at sea, and as he put it, “on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from bandits, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers and sisters; in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, hungry and thirsty, often without food, cold and naked. And besides other things, I am under daily pressure because of my anxiety for all the churches.”

And yet there was a sense of real joy in Paul. Despite suffering all those things, he was still able to write in his Letter to the Romans that “neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.” Despite all the evidence to the contrary in his life, Paul knew, in the depths of his being, that God’s love would never desert him. Paul was a man of deep and abiding faith in God, who seems to incarnate the words of our Psalm 100 – “be joyful in the Lord.” For Paul, following Jesus was a both/and experience – both hard and joyful.

Jesus, the iconic human being whose life invites and ushers us into the life of God, is a study in courage. Speaking truth to power, going places that no respectable Jew would dare be caught, questioning the practices and teachings of religious leaders, having candid conversations with women, touching lepers, dining with the outcasts of polite society, tempted by the forces of evil, conspired against, betrayed, arrested, tried, convicted, beaten, vilified, and finally, crucified, he must have felt fear. He was, after all, truly human. And yet he overcame it all with courage that becomes a model for us.

“The King of the Jews.” As far as we know, this is the only sentence written about Jesus during his lifetime. It was a slam, scribbled on a piece of wood and nailed over him as he hung dying on the cross. It was probably seen as a final insult to Jesus. A king can control events, especially events in his own life. Jesus was called “messiah” which means “anointed to be king.” And so they mocked him in his

final hours. But God was to show that Jesus was a very different kind of king than they had known.

Jesus was, and is, a both/and kind of king. He is at once a shepherd, guiding and saving his people, and a ruler, and “his kingdom will have no end,” as we say in the Nicene Creed. His teachings lead us to follow where he leads the way, and that leads us into the both/and world that is at once difficult and joyful. His teachings can be hard – just re-read Matthew 25’s telling of the story of the sheep and the goats! Being a sheep of this shepherd is sometimes difficult, for this shepherd is also a king that demands our highest loyalty, our deepest service, our greatest courage. All lead to joy.

We follow a liturgical year in our worship both for the purpose of following Jesus and for our own spiritual formation as the people of God. My favorite definition of spiritual formation is “the process of being conformed to the image of Christ for the sake of others” by Robert Mulholland, Jr. He reminds us that we are shaped by every event of our life, that each event is an experience of spiritual formation and that slowly, every so slowly bit by bit, piece by piece, we are shaped into some kind of being. “We are being shaped either toward the wholeness of the image of Christ or toward a horribly destructive caricature of that image.” His question to us: “Are we being increasingly conformed to the brokenness and disintegration of the world, or are we being increasingly conformed to the wholeness and integration of the image of Christ.”

Today, on Christ the King Sunday, we end another church liturgical year. The church today teaches us that Jesus is now a ruler who will judge the world. Since Advent 1 last year we have followed Jesus through his human life. I had a professor in seminary who observed that “if I am no different at the end of a year than I was at the beginning of that year, well, then, I’ve wasted a year.”

At the end of this year of spiritual formation, perhaps it is a good day for us to take stock. Am I any different at the end of this year than I was at the beginning? How have I changed? And maybe to imagine Jesus asking us a question he asked of Peter so long ago: “Who do you say that I am?” Or even better, “What does the way you live say about who Jesus is for you?”