

Sermon – May 16, 2010

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Here we are – at the end of the Easter Season – just after Ascension Day, only a week away from the Feast of Pentecost. As we read or heard in the book of Acts, much has been happening in what we could call the early church, as the disciples gather with others to process what they have seen and heard, (often hearing and seeing Jesus in the flesh !)

One might think that today’s Gospel reading comes from the time of Jesus’ last interaction with his disciples before he ascended into heaven. But no, this message comes from an earlier time, just before he was betrayed, tried, condemned, crucified, and resurrected from the dead. It is still good today.

Listen to Jesus prayer and conversation with God–

I have made your name known to those you gave me from the world.

They were yours and you gave them to me.

They know that I came from you, that you sent me.

They have listened and learned

And now, I am coming to YOU and will no longer be in the world

But - they will be in the world and I ask that you protect them

So that they may be one as we are one.

And - I ask not only on behalf of these (persons) but also for those who will believe in me through their word and that they may all be one - and that your love for me can be shared and spread.

Then Jesus went off to meet his fate.

We don't know if the disciples heard Jesus' conversation with God and prayer request. What is important is that Jesus knew, trusted, and loved this small band of disciples who had accompanied, followed, and supported him for a relatively short number of years. Given to him by God, they were not all alike in background, interest, or skill but were willing to come along for the journey, listen and learn, sometimes question and protest, and simply be a witness and do what was asked. Easy to do before Jesus' trial and crucifixion, although there was some human denial there, but more difficult later when "they" were charged with spreading the good news, telling the story of the Messiah and sharing Jesus' unique message of love – beginning a long physical and spiritual journey what we will read about in Acts and the letters of Paul, James, and others.

Somehow it seems easier to start or build a new structure – a house, a school, a business – a church – than to improve the old model. Also more exciting and invigorating

The Episcopal Diocese of Rhode Island, a geographic grouping of all churches in the state under the leadership of Bishop Wolf, is presently studying and reviewing the mission priorities and goals of the Episcopal Church in this state. Parishes also do this regularly; (St. Luke's Vestry is now developing a three year specific series of goals that we will follow.)

A small diocesan committee, the Mission Task Force, has been charged to start this work and will give a report at Convention 2010 in the fall. So far more than 150 people from throughout the diocese have attended a number of listening sessions to describe and put forth our sense of purpose, meaning, and mission at Christians and Church in our communities and the world

This is what we asked:

What are you doing when you feel most passionate and alive in the spirit?

What is your congregation doing that you can celebrate and share with other churches?

What can we do as RI Episcopalians that would bring us together and make a difference in our community and the world?

So far this is what we have seen and heard.

Superficially, on Sundays, we are pretty much all the same with worship services, music offerings, and educational programs for children, youth, and adults. Some of us are destination churches where people come to experience a certain style of liturgy or music or to be with a certain group of people; others are more of a neighborhood church. Right now most churches are experiencing some kind of financial difficulty and many churches are supporting an old building that needs repair. Demographically, some churches have many young children in attendance, others have a primarily retirement-age population. Most churches have some kind of week-day program but that varies greatly. “We” recognize each other as Episcopalians and speak the same church language.

This is what Paul and other present-day disciples and missionaries would see as they traveled through our various cities, towns, and communities. However, they might ask.

1. What happened to the mission, the challenge given to the first disciples, the ones that Jesus had specifically prayed for? Does that directive persist to this day – to spread the good news of the Messiah and tell the world about his message of love and salvation.
2. What about the mission of our present-day, local churches. What are they and we doing to spread the good news?

That’s a big challenge that cannot be answered in this sermon but here are a few things that Rhode Island Episcopalians are saying about what is important to us and what can we do – in and through the church.

1. Provide opportunities for young people to work in their own churches and together with other youth.

2. Outreach programs are important to help the local community and beyond. These are energizing and help build relationship and understanding among different people. Our buildings let us extend our outreach by welcoming and sharing resources. Outreach activities provide opportunities for others to work together.
3. It is good to have a specific goal or purpose so that workers can see when the work is done – participate in a project that has a tangible result.
4. The church welcomes the participation of everyone – lay people are very important and often initiate good projects
5. We should work for justice as well as performing charitable acts. Try to solve the cause of a problem.
6. There is a place for small as well as big churches. People are very supportive of small struggling churches and interested in finding ways to support them.
7. One person said that the job of the church was to take care of marginalized people, minorities, people on the edges of society, to work for reconciliation. I thought about the people sitting in our own pews each Sunday who are simply seeking comfort and come to church to worship and learn. But then, aren't we all minorities at one time or other. As we have needed and received help, we help others.
8. The job of the Diocese, the larger church, is to support and fund programs that individual churches can not work with – in prisons, hospitals, colleges, camps, in the Hispanic community.

It is clear that the present day Episcopal Church has become more than a place of worship and more than a place of learning about God. Today's church is not what you grew up in when church meant Sundays and that was about it. Everyone knew everyone else and little blue mite-boxes seemed to be our only connection to charitable giving, and that was pretty far away. The people we have talked with at our recent "listening" sessions, have come from all parts of the diocese and from many very different churches. They all find meaning in giving to others and seek

opportunities to do so – in their personal lives but also through their churches. They enjoy having the opportunity to share their different ministry with each others. The phrases were - “how can we” and “how did you” - rather than - “we wish we could” or “that’s impossible”. And, I realize now, that no one talked about the financial cost of outreach ministry. That is pretty surprising.

These groups, did not talk about the mission of the disciples and the early church – telling the story of Jesus’ coming, spreading the good news, developing worshipping communities and building churches. They did not talk about evangelism – important but a conversation for another time.

But the people gathered together these past few weeks, enthusiastically supported the mission of the church to reach out to others, to be doers of the word and not just hearers, to look beyond the four walls of our churches, and to see the real needs of the community – and then work with others to help people in need.

On reflection, I have been surprised to realize that what I do and think is important is shared by people here at St Luke’s and also throughout the Diocese. Yes, our mission has changed and, hopefully, will continue to do so as we work collectively to know and address the needs of our neighbors.