

7 Easter
The Sunday after the Ascension
June 2, 2019

In the name of the God of all Creation,
The God alive in each of us as God was alive in Jesus,
And the power of God known in the Spirit.
Amen.

Last week, after preach my NOT A SERMON about our new initiative, **Beyond the Commons**, I heard from a number of you reporting your opinions on the new seating ... your report **about** the pews. On most weeks I also hear reports from you about all kinds of things ... I see it as a report **from** the pews. But there is another Pew Report ... this one written by the Pew Research Center in Washington DC, and the Pew Report is different from the report **from** the pews, or the report **about** the pews. Anyhow, the Pew Report on Religion documents the changing landscape of religion in America. For me, the most significant statistic is the growing number of "None's" ... those who check "None" when asked what their religious affiliation is ... it is spelled N-O-N-E not N-U-N. In 2007 those who said they had no religious affiliation were 16% of the population. In 2014 ... just seven years later ... that had increased to 23%. In the youngest age group surveyed, the Millennials, the percentage of those claiming they have no religious affiliation is 36%!

There is much in this report to consider, and it caused my brain to swirl. For the past several decades I have been skeptical of the future of the institutional church as expressed in the mainline protestant denominations ... the Episcopal Church, Presbyterian Church, the Methodist Church, etc. I believe the statistics of the Pew Report confirm that the base is eroding, and without that base the top heavy institutions are going to topple over. However, I also believe that each and every person has a spiritual nature ... I will go so far as to say that we are spiritual people occupying a physical body. And because of that, I also believe that communities of faith, such as St. Cyprian's, will continue to have life regardless of the changes that may happen to the larger institution.

Today is the Sunday after the Ascension. According to the Book of the Acts of the Apostles Jesus was "lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight." The wonderful graphic on the cover of the worship booklet shows the disciples all looking up at the feet of Jesus as he goes to heaven to sit at the right hand of God. This is one piece of what is known as "high Christology." High Christology is about the divine nature of Jesus as God's only Son ... the Christ. High Christology is not about the life, ministry and teaching of Jesus. High Christology says that Jesus was born of a virgin who was impregnated by the Holy Spirit. Jesus lived his life among humans as a divine being. He was crucified, resurrected by the power of God, and then ascended to heaven. Jesus came from God and he returned to God. That in a nutshell is the orthodoxy of high Christology ... Jesus is the Christ!

Richard Rohr ... as many of you know ... is a present-day Christian mystic. In his new book, ***The Universal Christ: How a Forgotten Reality Can Change Everything We See, Hope For and Believe*** Rohr asserts that the mystical, divine Christ is alive in everyone of us. For that matter, this divine Christ is present in everything in the universe. This both affirms high Christology ... Jesus is the Christ ... and it debunks it ... everything is the Christ. And this isn't just about God being in everything. It is that everything is in God. Thus when you or I show compassion to a stranger we contribute to what God is. When you or I show prejudice or bigotry we diminish God in some way. You will hear more of **The Universal Christ** in future sermons.

Now, the story of the Ascension is one of those bible stories about Jesus that I have a hard time wrapping my head around ... at least as a literal fact of history and as a doctrine of the Church. However, after 40 plus years in the pulpit I believe I've come to understand that accepting the literal words of the text ... whether it be the Bible, or the Prayer Book, or books of theology ... is not the only way to a deep faith.

As most of you know, before I went to seminary I taught mathematics at the University of South Carolina and the University of Tennessee – Chattanooga, so I was accustomed to standing in front of a group of people and speaking. However, in seminary the students participated in the daily worship and the first time I was vested for the role I was ... surprisingly to me ... rather nervous. As I stood at the chancel steps to read from the Prayer Book I realized that my knees were shaking under my cassock. As I read the prayer I was wondering if my classmates could see my robes twitching or hear my voice cracking. Then I had this thought ... all while I am reading a prayer out loud to the congregation of students and faculty ... then I had this thought: "Stop thinking about your knees and think about what you are reading!" I always thought it odd that my mind could be doing one task, and another part of my mind could be thinking about how nervous I was, and yet another part of my mind was scolding me.

So, recently, as I stood at the altar reading the Eucharistic Prayer at the altar, I had a thought. I saw something in the prayer that I had never seen in that way before, and my mind started to play with the words ... all while I am praying the word of consecration for the bread and wine of our communion. My spiritual advisor ... if I had one ... would have chastised me. Yet, I wonder ... maybe that is exactly what is supposed to happen. We can look at the words of the Eucharistic Prayer as meaning literally and exactly what they say ... they are reporting fact and history and the doctrine of the Church. Or we can look at those words ... and the words of any prayer for that matter ... as an entrance into a holy moment and a sacred space. Perhaps my mind was supposed to wander.

Now, don't get me wrong. If you are praying the Lord's Prayer and your mind is wandering off to the grocery shopping you have to do after church, I'm not sure you are moving towards a sacred moment ... no matter how heavenly your dinner will be. However, most of you come to worship with us on Sunday mornings with a desire to experience something holy. If you didn't you would have made another choice of how to use your time. And, in that context, I believe anything that opens us to that holiness is fair game.

I remember years ago preaching a sermon about forgiveness and reconciliation. I will confess that I don't think it was a very good sermon. Yet, after church a parishioner said that the sermon had prompted an amazing experience. Earlier that morning she had a passionate argument with her sister. It was about a betrayal that had happened years before. She said, "When you started talking about forgiveness and reconciliation it touched something in my heart and soul. I don't really remember what you said ... I wasn't really listening. But my heart is now changed, and I know what I have to do to forgive my sister. Thank you." I know I personally didn't have anything to do with it. She entered that sacred experience by the power of the Holy Spirit. Yet it would not have happened had it not been Sunday morning, in church, in the context of holy time and sacred space.

The thought I had last week was this: What we are doing is not about **an intellectual assent** to the words of a text ... whether it be our Bible, or the Prayer Book, Eucharistic Prayer, or some grand tome of theology. It is not about **a literal agreement** that the facts and history are absolutely correct. It is not about a once-and-for-all ... one-time-only deal. For me, the story of Jesus living and dying and being raised again, and lifted up to heaven at the Ascension is not the primary point of the story. For the story to be "true," we must not **stand outside** the story and look in at it ... and even intellectually accept the veracity of the story ... but rather we must **enter into** the story and make it our own.

Over a decade ago, while still the rector of St. Mark's in Toledo, Ohio, I got a call from the Bishop of the Diocese of East Carolina. A parish in a coastal North Carolina town was in need of some very special care after an extreme trauma, and because of my background in conflict transformation he wondered if I might be interested in interviewing with the Vestry. The parish was St. Paul's in Beaufort, North Carolina. While at CREDO a couple of weeks ago the group all went to dinner in Beaufort. I know the town and the parish well ... perhaps too well. My family had vacationed there since I was a toddler. I know many of the clergy who have served in the parish. And perhaps most significantly, this is the church at which I conducted my father's funeral, and my father's ashes were buried in the garden right outside the parish house doors. All of that came to mind as our van drove right by St. Paul's on that evening as the group from CREDO headed for dinner. So, years ago, with my mother living just a few miles away in the next town, the opportunity of being the Rector of St. Paul's was an attractive possibility. Yet ... for some reason ... I was wary.

When I arrived for the interview the psychic environment felt conflicted: one side of the room felt hostile, while the other felt welcoming. Then the first question was asked and I knew my instincts were correct: "Do you believe in the literal Virgin Birth?" Sadly, this interview wasn't about seeking a pastor to heal the deep wounds that had injured the community. Rather, it was about being right or wrong; about being "in" and being "out;" about orthodoxy and heresy. After the interview I withdrew my name from consideration. On the surface it was an extremely attractive possibility, yet deep in my heart and soul I also knew that I was too close to the situation, and that I would be seen as cause for further division, not the healer I feel called to be in my ministry.

I tell you this because I believe we are often blinded by the statements of our faith identities and we fail to seek God's grace, love and mercy **beyond** the words that try to define us. For me, it is not a matter of whether or not Jesus was literally born of a virgin, or ascended into heaven (wherever that is) But, it does matter that we come from God, that we are created in God's image, and God wants us to be in God's holy presence. I believe that our hope ... as children of God ... is not in getting it "right." Our hope lies in grace, love and the mercy of God. Our hope is not in an orthodox faith that can pass some litmus test. Our hope is in a God who is God, however our limited minds understand God to be God. Our hope is in God who does what God does. Our hope is in God who loves all that is made; who sees the sinner far off and rushes to greet them; who takes the side of the poor and marginalized; who heals those who are broken in body, mind and spirit. Our hope is in a God who welcomes all to God's table.

I believe that in Jesus we have seen God. The gospels tell us of the life, teaching, healing, and ministry of Jesus. Early Christianity searched for an identity in a world already populated by Judaism, Greek philosophy, Roman imperialism, and Eastern mysticism. Yet we don't have to look for the living God in the dead shards of history. Some may find reason to divide the church along the lines of ancient concepts and details. But, for me, what really matters is God's ongoing life, illumined for us in Jesus of Nazareth. It is about our citizenship in a Godly realm where love conquers hate, joy conquers despair, goodness conquers evil, and hope appears on even the harshest of days. It is about being distracted from the words of the text into a sacred space and a holy moment.

As an Easter people, we believe that the risen Christ comes through those doors into our sacred space and calls us outside into lives marked by peace, servanthood, and hope. How will that happen? How will we see enough to find that kind of faith? I believe that our primary work as people of faith is to know one another, to listen to the world around us, to hear questions that stir our imaginations, and in those questions to witness the presence of God. Rather than squandering more time arguing about answers, we need to imagine the questions.

Rather than looking up at the feet of Jesus at the Ascension as depicted in the graphic on the cover of the worship booklet, let us begin to look around at each other and the world around us ... then we will know that we are in the presence of God.

Sometimes I am distracted even as I pray out loud. I don't think I am alone, and sometimes I think it is the Holy Spirit leading me ... and possibly you ... to a new way of seeing things ... a new understanding ... a place and time that is holy and sacred. And, yes, sometimes it is just a distraction, but I think it is worthwhile keeping my mind, my heart, and my soul open to all possibilities.

I believe we are spiritual people occupying a physical body. And I believe that all of us yearn for an experience of the holy ... the sacred ... even those who check "None" when asked about their religious affiliation. The Church is not doing a very good job of connecting those awe-filled moments of experiencing the holy and sacred with the narrative of our faith. I think it is a

matter of how we tell this story ... how we tell it in our words ... and in our actions ... and how we live the story in our own lives with integrity.

This sermon is about how we tell our story of the faith we have inherited. It is also about holy distractions that lead us into new experiences of the sacred. I encourage you to welcome those holy distractions ... they just might lead you into the presence of the sacred One we call God.

There is much in the Pew Report that needs unwrapping. One piece is that those who claim no religious affiliation are not all atheists or agnostics ... indeed, most of them call themselves "spiritual." If the Church remains static ... stuck on the literal interpretation of the ancient texts that have been handed down to us ... stuck in the way it expresses its story, then the "Nones" will remain "Nones." But underlying the Christian story is a universal truth to be told ... it is just a matter of how we tell it. It is about connecting the faith we have been given to those awe-filled moments of the holy and sacred that all people experience at one time or another. Sometimes it is about holy distractions leading us to sacred moments.

Amen.