

24 August, 2008
Mo. Kathleen Patton

Well, I absolutely *love* that beautiful reading that Lou gave us this morning from Exodus. I'm not going to preach on it, but I have to say that [if] they wanted to do population control, why didn't they go after the girls? Oh well. Anyway...

Let's talk instead about the Epistle. Let's talk about the Church. This reading in the gospel today is that classic reading from whence we get the image of St. Peter standing at the pearly gates with the keys letting people in. It's been used classically to justify the notion of a hierarchical institution with primary apostle at the top, i.e., a pope, whatever, but anyway - somebody in charge from whom all authority flows. And that idea that what they bind on earth and heaven, you know that Church and State are one and everything is underneath this centralized authority structure.

I'm not sure that Jesus meant that. I'm pretty sure that Jesus didn't mean that. But whatever Jesus meant, that idea of the Church as being the source of all authority and church leaders as being on top of things, is certainly unrecognizable in our modern culture. It just doesn't make sense. When people think of the Church as hierarchy, it's not a positive feeling usually. When people think of the Church as hierarchy, that's a scary thought and maybe even a laughable thought. The days of Christendom (even in Western culture, which was the only culture in which it was ever really in power) are over. And they've been over for some time, probably at least a generation.

But the echoes are still there and people when they think about the Church often think in those terms even if they don't acknowledge that way of thinking about it. Nevertheless, it's the image in peoples' minds.

The epistle today paints a different picture of the meaning of church. Paul talks to us and says, "I beseech you to present your body as a living sacrifice to God." And then he says, "Don't be conformed to the world but be transformed by the renewing of your mind."

Though while I do think that [the] hierarchical established church has lost its *punch* in the world at large, I nevertheless believe that people are profoundly hungry, all of us, for what the Church has to offer. We are hungry for that sense of deep connection with God. And we are hungry for genuine community.

It is, for all our communication, a faceless world now. You can go in and out of the grocery store and not even deal with the person at the cash register. As busy as we are, with all of our activities, with our earbuds in our ears and our flashing lights going all the time, face-to-face time is shrinking.

You know the last piece of furniture people buy in American homes these days? A dining room table. Nobody eats around the table! They sit in front of the TV – eat off their laps or a TV tray. Nobody sits together. Everybody's coming in and out on all kinds of different schedules, so what's the point of a table? You know, that's something Grandma keeps for Thanksgiving.

And so for all our constant noise and connection with each other electronically and however, we are really starved for genuine face-to-face human community. As much as the culture tries to offer us sources of happiness that range from superficial beauty to really good tasting food to the right kind of car and everything else, we're starved for that deeper meaning. We're starved for that connection to the Divine. We're starved for that larger sense of purpose in our lives. We're hungry.

And that's what the Church exists to do. To support people as they seek to open their hearts to the Divine. To create the living community, and Paul talks about both of those pieces. He talks about presenting yourself as a living sacrifice and being transformed by the renewal of your mind. That does not mean, 'get the right thoughts'. That does not mean 'don't do what the world tells you to do, do what the Church tells you to do'. The contrast is not 'be conformed to the Church's expectations versus the world's expectations'. The contrast is *conform* versus *transform*. That you may know – be transformed in your way of thinking, enter with the mind into the heart to that Divine connection so that you know what is God's purpose and will and intention for your life that you may live it out in a gracious way all around.

The Church exists, in part, to be a place that supports Christians in that work. In that work of presenting their hearts and minds and bodies to God and receiving the grace to be transformed. And then Paul goes on to talk about this community piece. Because the transformation is not merely personal – it is, indeed, personal, it *must be* personal – but it is also much, much larger.

We are no less than the body of Christ, Paul says. We are collectively the body of Christ. We all have different gifts; we all have different parts to play. It's like a symphony. You have to practice, right? You have to go home – if you are the flautist, you go home and you practice. For hours. Your six notes... but those six notes, despite how hard you practice at home, don't have a whole lot of meaning until you bring them into the collective. And then you hear – and maybe you get a solo; maybe you have a long and beautiful piece to do and it's wonderful but nevertheless it still doesn't have its full meaning unless it's part of the symphony. Until you hear the way your piece interacts with the other pieces and the instruments come together in unison, it's not the whole picture.

Until you come together and encounter one another and bring our gifts together – and I want to say it's not just our gifts that we bring to each other. It's not just the neat stuff. It's also our weaknesses. It's also our flaws. That's part of being the body of Christ, too. It's the ways in which we demand one another's wisdom and compassion. The ways we invite one another's humor and patience. It's the ways we inspire each other's kindness and self-control, those are the greatest gifts we give to each other.

For what is the point of being the body of Christ if it is not to learn to be lovers in the real world? I know we'd love to come to church and have it be some perfect place full of saints that just inspires us. But what we get instead is a place full of real human beings that need our love and our patience. And that means we get to be real, too. And we get to need one another and we get to try each other's patience. And that's the wonder of the body of Christ. That's the wonder of real community and that's what people are hungry for. They're not very patient with it, but they're hungry for it. We all are.

The Third Service planning group and the Faith Formation team and the vestry have been doing a lot of wrestling in the last couple of years with what it is to be Church. And the two things we come up with over and over again, I think, are these: A community and transformation.

The Church is meant to be a place where people can be transformed. The Church is meant to be a living, thriving community of connection. And so this fall, on Sunday nights we're starting something new. We're trying to find a new way to meet the hunger that is ours and is the world's. Half an hour of music, of labyrinth, of art, of ways to allow people to open their hearts to the divine and be accessible to the transformation of the Holy Spirit.

That's all it is – half an hour. Half an hour to open your heart. Period. No scary sermons, no ritual demands. Just come and open your hearts. And we hope that that would be a great gift to this community and I hope that the community in this building right now will embrace that and share it.

And then Wednesday nights, Stephen's Table is about community. It's about the face-to-face part. It's about wiggly toddlers and cranky seniors in the same room. It's about having a meal and being together and having some fun and being a little silly maybe. And then doing some learning activities, but being face-to-face with each other and being church-ed together. Not just you all facing me, but everybody facing each other and making community and praying with one another. We hope that that, too, will be a gift not only to those that are here already but to those who are not yet here.

I want to go back, in closing, to Peter's conversation with Jesus. I hear something quite different than the authorization of Peter to be a hierarch in this story. I hear instead, when Jesus says – you know Peter's original name is Simon – and in this story Jesus says, "You are 'Peter', and 'Peter' means 'rock' or 'rocky'. So now you're Rocky," he says. But right before he says 'You are Rocky' he says (when Peter recognizes that Jesus is the Messiah), "Blessed are you! Blessed are you – God is with you in a wonderful way because you didn't get this from someone else. You didn't get it from the hierarchy. You didn't get it off the Daily News front page. You didn't get it from some expert. You got it from here – God unveiled this to you, you've got it in your heart. You're a rock. And that's the rock you're going to build the church on."

The Church is not built on a person. Not on Peter the man, but on the rock of hearts made open and accessible to the Divine purpose. We know it's not Peter because you know what, show up next week and you'll hear what happens next to Peter. Jesus calls him Satan next week! But what it is is that deeper rock of the transformed heart and mind.

So I invite you to practice. Practice transformation by doing what you're doing right now. By coming to this table. By coming to Stephen's Table, by coming on Sunday nights if that is God's call to you. Practice that work of transformation, letting the Holy Spirit get to your heart, that you might be renewed and transformed and Christ's body in the world.

Amen.