

Proper 17 Year B

It was almost twenty years ago that I was in a contentious vestry meeting at my home parish in Dothan.... A few years before I lost my mind and went to seminary. Nativity parish was in the midst of a huge building project, and that night the head of the building committee asked the vestry to choose a color for the new carpet to be installed in the newly renovated church.... Bad idea!... after about two hours of passionate debate we were no closer to choosing the carpet than when we had first started... several of the vestry including the senior warden noted that as long as they had been members of Nativity the carpet had been red... in fact the red carpet had been in the church since the early sixties... now we're talking RED, red... several others thought that a muted slate color would look so very Anglican... One vestry member who rarely spoke asked why we needed carpet at all... Agnes Simpson, matriarch of the parish, perennial vestry member had said nothing... Agnes always wore her hair in a bun, had chain smoked for well over half her life, so much so that her voice was reduced to a gravely murmur... she was in the choir, we all suspected because she would always have a good seat in church.

I had been quiet during the debate... really... and finally I asked Agnes whom I knew had been at Nativity at the time the red carpet had been installed way back when... "How was it that we chose this signature red carpet?" She looked at me and the gathered faithful, with a twinkle in her eye, and said in her gravelly voice... well, we had a member who was in the carpet business who went bankrupt, and he donated the red carpet that he had been unable to sell.

So I tell this story as a fable of sorts... a fable to the tried and true doctrine of: "that's the way we've always done it." Now that is not only a Mobile thing... we've always done it that way... It is a human thing... There is something about us humans that seek to institutionalize our world... maybe we do it for a sense of security... maybe it is driven by fear.... But as soon as we make sacred the "way we do it," then we stop the creative process... We see it in our world... in Education... in Healthcare... in the justice system... in government... and certainly we see it in the church... What is it that we trust so much in the status quo... Ironically, in our post-modern culture, institutions have become subject to question... there is disillusionment towards all of our institutions... government, education, healthcare... and certainly the church... church growth experts are pulling their hair out trying to figure out why people just aren't coming anymore. The numbers of members of mainstream denominations across the board, including the Episcopal Church, have declined over the past fifty years... why?

Maybe we should get back to the way we used to do it... In 1958 All Saints had registered for Sunday School 458 students... It was the most in the diocese of Alabama... In the nineteen fifties, dubbed by some church growth analysts, as the golden age of organized religion in America, people went to church... maybe because the traumatic memory of the second world war was still poignant, but people went to church... but that was the church in which not only could women not be priests... but women couldn't serve on the vestry, couldn't be a delegate or a deputy to General convention... girls couldn't be acolytes.. that was the church that if you divorced then you would be excommunicated for a time... Agnes Simpson was one of those casualties... I remember, when I was a child, seeing her, standing off to the side during communion... waiting for her church family to partake... she, dutifully singing in the choir until her probation was over... This was the same church that opposed either overtly or tacitly integration and civil rights... because, because... that was the way we'd always done it... that is what institutionalization does... it creates a fortress, a formidable barrier to inquiry and change...It can become abusive.... Agnes, bless her faithful soul, was abused. It is not what we believe that pollutes us... Jesus says in Mark... it is what we do.... and I think that we are beginning to articulate in our culture that we've had enough of the way we've always done it.... I want to suggest that repentance... that churchy word... repentance is about looking at the way we've always done it, and creatively changing course.

This is what is going on in Mark's gospel from which we just read... the elders keeping ritual purity as an end unto itself.... Worshipping the way we do things, instead of worshipping God.... God who always defies the way we've always done it. In Mark's gospel Jesus devotes a great deal of his energy challenging the institutions of his day.... He challenges the inequities of living under the rule of empire... and he challenges the hypocrisy of the religious institution of his day... here the Jewish leadership and religious scholars are questioning the piety of Jesus and his disciples... because they are not doing it the way it has always been done.... There is a hallmark to the religious experience in every culture and tradition... and that hallmark is freedom.... These followers of Jesus have had a religious experience... they have seen the light as it were...they are swept up... they have entered into a way of life that institutions cannot contain....It is a life of love, sacrifice for one's neighbor... a life of mutuality and collaborative fellowship.... And there is freedom in that.... freedom that institutions cannot contain.... And the institution doesn't like that.

Now I'm not saying that we abandon tradition... I am a card carrying traditionalist when it comes to the church... and really about a lot of other things as well... but tradition must always creatively evolve... tradition must build creatively on what comes before; it must always question why we do what we do; and it must always look for new ways of expression rooted in what we learn and experience along the way... What institutionalization does is make idols... sacred cows... not to be questioned... but the spiritual life is at its heart a question... I hope you're not coming to All Saints for easy answers... I hope you're coming to a place that honors your questions, celebrates your questions... The church is not going to survive doing it the way we've always done it... the church is going to survive and thrive by living into the freedom that we have in Jesus... and that is the freedom to be fully human... the freedom to be who God intends us to be.... Not perfect... but fully human....

Now, I say the freedom we have in Jesus.... And of course our biggest problem we have is that we have institutionalized Jesus as well... made him safe, sterile... made him someone wholly apart from us... the sinless one we say.... We've made him an idol... But brothers and sisters if we are to survive as the church.... We have to recognize, remember, that the freedom we have in Jesus is to live the **way** of Jesus... to bear the marks of God's life in the world... the marks of God's life:...loving kindness... doing justice... walking humbly in this life... that's a Bible verse Mr. Trump would do well to remember.

Mary quoted our presiding bishop elect last week... that Jesus didn't come to found an institution... he came to found a movement... He didn't come to be worshipped and adored... He came to inspire the people of God to be the people of God:... to set captives free... to restore the lost to their God given dignity... to make sure that God's people share in the abundance of this world that God to this day calls good.... To beat swords into plowshares for God's sake... violence is no longer going to work in this world grown smaller and more connected.... That's the way we've always done it, at least for seven thousand years... It is time to find another way... repent in short.

In our baptisms we are conscripted as activists... some of us voluntarily.... Most we conscript as children... In our baptisms we are conscripted as activists for God's revolution... Dear friends, we no longer can be a church of belief only... we were never meant for that... we are to be activists for the good.... And I believe with all my heart that there is freedom and joy in that, not in the hereafter, but for now.... freedom and joy to be the people of God.... freedom and joy to live the way of Jesus... freedom and joy to bear the marks of God.... To love our neighbor

as we love ourselves.... To love kindness... to do justice and to walk humbly with our God... That is no fable....that is the true way... even if we haven't always done it that way.