

Lent II Year B 2018

Your four delegates and I just returned from our diocesan convention that was held in Destin Florida. Our diocese is composed of south Alabama and Northwest Florida. It was a good convention by all accounts. The theme for the convention was “being the church.” We heard some good preaching; we passed a balanced budget; we heard of a number of new projects and initiatives by our bishop that would serve as resources for us and other parishes helping us in our various ministries; the entire convention of delegates packed food boxes for the increasing number of our neighbors who face food insecurity; we heard reports from Beckwith and Wilmer Hall and Murray House, our diocesan agencies... all good reports. They are doing good work, and are in the black. We heard from the youth delegation who will most probably be given not just seat and voice... but also a vote at the next convention. We were told by the bishop that the diocese actually grew in total number of communicants (4); and that congregational giving increased for a second consecutive year after a good ten years of decreasing giving... We ate a lot of good food... And it’s always fun and edifying to be around other Episcopalians... It was a “feel good” sort of convention.

But the whole time I was a little disquieted... My disquietude began at the preconvention meeting. There the bishop informed us that he was glad to say

that there would be nothing controversial at this convention... I thought to myself that that was odd given that we live in a world fraught with controversy... Shouldn't the church stand in the midst of that, I thought... Shouldn't we be speaking out amidst a controversial world the message of the Gospel... Our finest hour I believe as the church is when things are falling apart, because we know that Love will always have the last word... and, as followers of Jesus we are compelled to call out the evil and injustice around us. Silence is complicity... and to avoid controversy is being silent. At the convention we did talk some about the travails of our world, but we spoke of it as "out there." Everything in here, in the church, is going just fine. We're fine. Isn't that what church is about.

In his official address the bishop stated that the principal reason people come to the church for sanctuary... and I thought to my curmudgeonly self... yeah, that's the old hospital for sinners paradigm... the church as a place to withdraw from the ills of the world around us, a place of solace and comfort... Now please don't get me wrong. We have a fine bishop. He is passionate and intentional, and hard-working, and honest. He is a good pastor to his clergy. He takes his preaching seriously... but I think like many bishops of the church these days he's relying on the old 'success' paradigm... that if we're not growing by the numbers, then we must be doing something wrong. All mainstream denominations in the

U.S. have declined in numbers dramatically over the past fifty years. For people who pay attention to such things, self-avowed atheism is now the second largest faith identifiers just below Christianity. There are more atheists than Jews, Muslims, and Buddhists combined. Fewer people in short are going to church. So we must be doing something wrong we say amid our self-analysis, and yet we muster all kinds of examples that everything is just fine. I suspect that the church has always grappled with its sustainability; but what I have finally come to believe is that the church suffers, perhaps now more than ever with self-absorption... That would make sense. We are arguably the most self-absorbed culture on the planet, so it follows that the church would reflect that.

But brothers and sisters, the church when at its best is countercultural. In many ways its mission is to call out the delusions and illusions of culture; perhaps the church is a means by which we might own up to our shortcomings and weaknesses, while at the same time owning up to our role in naming the possibilities of life for our world. Perhaps in our gatherings, for liturgy, our prayers and praises; and for service, we are about the practice of keeping awake, aspiring to being mindful to the realities of our world; and mindful as to our place in it... even at the expense of feeling just fine. But knowing all the while by faith that Love will have the last word. Our presiding bishop calls the church a movement. I

like that. I would add that it is a resistance movement. We resist all that is evil, and stand for all that is good. Sometimes, often times, that puts us at odds with the status quo. Sometimes that puts us at odds with each other.

So that is what Mark is saying in his Gospel. He is talking about being the church... and for Mark the church is not a sanctuary. It is a gathered community whose sole purpose is to be among the outcasts, and the poor, and the alienated and the disenfranchised as advocates... standing for and speaking for the voiceless among us; and calling out the powers that be that oppress and debase. We are in short called to pay for the sins of the world. That's what Jesus means when he implores us to take up the cross... we are to take on the violent structures of our world that debase and shame. The Cross is a symbol of such a structure; upon which Jesus gave his life. So that is the work of the baptized. We are the resistance. We are guardians of dignity, and respect and well-being. We are subverts of violence. We do not retreat into a sanctuary of solace... We are sent as a living sacrifice for the world's good.

There is a hue and cry these days that we need to work at civil discourse. I agree with that. I'm for civil discourse with those who want to debate the nuances of issues that face us... But that debate has to be honest and intelligent.

I'm not going to argue with those who skew the facts, or with those who choose ignorance over enlightened reason; those who are disingenuous. And moreover, there are some things for us that are, if we claim to be Christian, that are undebatable: For example, as a movement, we are nonviolent; we are anti-war... that's scriptural. That means that we stand in solidarity with those who call for a ban on all weapons of mass murder. How in the name of God could we ever rationalize assault weapons in the hands of civilians, and yet some Christians make that argument; and we wonder why some are now questioning the relevancy of the church. I lament that our convention said nothing; was silent on the call of our youth for the banning of all assault weapons. For us the welcome of immigrants is undebatable. We need reasonable laws and guidelines, but we are commanded in scripture to welcome the resident immigrant as if they were members of our own family; we stand for healing as central to the restoration of community. Affordable healthcare for all citizens should be a right, not a privilege... that's not a debate for us. We Christians can't be racist, nor can we ignore the structures of our society, including our state constitution, that disadvantage people of color. We are charged to respect the dignity of every human being. For us that is not a debate. And wealth should be shared. God's abundance isn't reserved for a select few. That is scriptural as well. The vision of

the world as contained in our sacred lore is that there are no outcasts; that the resources of this planet are enough for all of us. It is not about the strong surviving for us.... It is for us who are strong in love to empower the weak.

Being the church means that we are participants in God's project of drawing all people to Godself. Because that is what Love does. Love can't resist taking up the cross of shame; and love requires our lives as sacrifice for the sin of the world, no less than Jesus the anointed of God. You are God's anointed, dear friends, and we dare not rest in the sanctuary of our self-absorption. We are to go to the broken places, where the sidewalks end, and the street lights are shot out; we are to go to the prisons and projects where despair is the air they breathe; and make those places a sanctuary for God's abundance and dignity. Take up your cross good people, and be the church; and by the way... invite others to join us; I think people want relevancy and purpose and vision. Invite others into the movement... you know who they are... I believe this life of Love is irresistible. It is our true calling, and it is our bliss... maybe the secret for the sustainability of the church is not more and more programs, and committees and quotas, and being just fine... but mere invitation to be about restoring the world as God wishes it... Take up your cross, brothers and sisters, if you dare, take courage, and be the church.... Even if there are two or three of us, we'll be the difference.