

## Proper 17 Year B 2024

A few years before I lost my mind and went to seminary, Nativity Parish, my home parish in Dothan, was in the midst of a huge building project, and at a vestry meeting one 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 tedious 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... "Church Red" they called it.... There were some who thought that a muted slate color would look so very Anglican... heresy! ... One vestry member who rarely spoke asked why we needed carpet at all... Agnes Simpson, matriarch of the parish since time immemorial, perennial vestry member, quintessential church lady, 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 gravelly monotone... she was in the choir nonetheless, but we all suspected that she was in the choir because she would always have a good seat in church.

Being disarmed by the tedium, I hadn't spoken during the debate... but finally I raised my hand and asked Agnes, whom I knew had been at Nativity long before the time the red carpet had been installed way back when... "How was it that we chose this sacred red carpet?" I asked. She looked knowingly at me and the gathered faithful, 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.... The slate carpet won the day.

So I tell this story as a fable of sorts... a fable to the ostensible 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... 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?

Some opine, maybe we should get back to the way we used to do it...

According to our archives, 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... 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 of the Eucharist... 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 and

revelation... And it can become abusive.... Agnes, bless her faithful soul, was abused by the institution.

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.... We quite possibly will elect a woman to the office of president of the United States. I want to suggest that repentance... that churchy word... repentance is about looking at the way we've always done it, and imaginatively changing course. Repentance is not so much about saying we're sorry, but reclaiming our authenticity. And I would go on to say that the call of the Gospel is not some discreet way of life that we can't possibly live up to... but a call to authenticity which is entirely possible. To that point, we have made the Gospel of Christ an idol as well.

This tension frames what is going on in Mark's Gospel from which we just read... the elders keeping ritual purity as an end unto itself.... That is to say, 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 iron rule of empire... and he just as much challenges the

hypocrisy of the very religious institution in which he was formed... 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....

Because of their idolatry, the religious elite have forgotten the heart and soul of the faith. There is a hallmark to the religious experience in every culture and tradition... and that hallmark is freedom.... These followers of Jesus are having 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. If it's not about freedom, it's not about God.

Now I'm not saying that we abandon tradition... I am a card carrying traditionalist when it comes to the church... but tradition must always creatively evolve... tradition must build imaginatively on what came before; but we must always question why we do what we do; and we 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 a place to find answers, but a place of discovery. 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 authentically human.... Perfection is an illusion; authenticity is a real possibility. The role of the church is quite simply to empower our collective imaginations into radical authenticity, so that we as a community, in which the whole is greater than its parts, can act for the good and the true.

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 sent him back to heaven... 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 that many in our culture have forgotten..

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... to 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 where mere belief is sufficient... belief is subjective and provisional... 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 our reality... even if we haven't always done it that way.