



SUNDAY SERMON

Turning to Follow Jesus

Welcome to Revival Weekend here in the Episcopal Diocese of Washington! “Revival” and “Episcopal” are not words most of us expect to hear in the same sentence. My usual response to the idea of attending a religious revival is “No thanks,” “I’m happy with my faith the way it is.”

To join a fervent appeal for the Holy Spirit to revive my soul and stir up the power of God in and around me—well, this has seemed to involve a style of expression that might be fine for some Christians, but not for me.

I do appreciate the power of revivals to help us summon God to be active in our midst. Great waves of religious revival in our country have not only added new believers to church membership rolls but have led to profound and lasting changes in our culture.

But revivals seem to involve a level of passion and spontaneity that we don’t associate with Episcopal worship. Our understanding of God is shaped by the so-called three-legged stool of reason, scripture and church tradition, and we pride ourselves on being a church in which no one is asked to “check your brain at the door.” Perhaps like you, I have come to associate religious revivals with a type of piety that is more emotionally expressive than what I’m comfortable with. So, I’ve avoided revivals.

That is, until today. Under the leadership of Presiding Bishop Michael Curry, Episcopalians are hosting gatherings to help anyone and everyone experience the power of worship to draw us closer to God and to bring a reconciling spirit to a discouraged and divided world. And a busload of St. Columbans will experience a revival’s power today.

Soon after he became Presiding Bishop, Michael Curry got our attention by renaming what we are—we are more than the Episcopal Church, we’re a branch of the Jesus Movement on a renewed mission. And he got the world’s attention when he preached at the royal wedding about the power of God’s love to bring not only personal transformation but political, economic and social change.

Today’s gospel reading takes us back to the first moments of the Jesus Movement, begun in order to fulfill the prophet Isaiah’s promise that God will bring hope to “the people who sat in darkness” (Matt 4:16).

continued

DATE

Epiphany 3
Sunday, January 26, 2020

PREACHER

The Rev. David Griswold

1 Cor. 1: 10-18

Matt. 4: 12-23

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That darkness was real for the beleaguered people of occupied Palestine in Jesus' day and it is real now for some of us and for many around us who wait for the light of God. Yet in order to be the movement that makes Jesus present in all places, we need to reaffirm Jesus' presence in our own lives, and step closer to him, just as the first disciples do in today's story.

Claiming a personal relationship with Jesus does not come easily to many Episcopalians. Bishop Curry himself has put it this way: "John's gospel says, Nicodemus came to Jesus at night. Only an Episcopalian would try to get close to Jesus when nobody was looking. That's an Episcopalian!"* And for much of my life, that's been me-- ready to worship God in community but hesitant to get on intimate terms with Jesus.

That being said, I feel blessed to be learning the value of spiritual practices and a life lived in Christian community that bring me into the presence of Jesus, who offers me unconditional love and an easing of burdens that can overwhelm me. That same Jesus also beckons me to look beyond myself to those people and places where Jesus' love is needed. Perhaps that is how we discern that we're getting close to Jesus-- not only when we need and feel quiet reassurance of God's love, but also when we make choices and set priorities in ways that stretch and surprise us.

The readiness to be close to Jesus-- which I've spent years discovering, like Nicodemus, when nobody was looking-- seems to arise for the fishermen of today's story in an instant when Jesus says "follow me, and I will make you fish for people" (4: 19). The two pairs of brothers drop their nets with an immediacy that strains our belief given how mysterious and risky Jesus' offer seems.

Yet perhaps they've been dwelling with Jesus longer than we know, anticipating what it will mean to be in relationship with him. For whatever reason, their instinct is to turn--to turn from what is familiar toward that which is unknown yet irresistible. We turn when God bends our hearts toward a purpose larger than our own.

The Greek term for "follow me" means more than "join my walk" or "adopt my teachings." Jesus is inviting the fishermen and us to pattern our lives after his, to be in a relationship in which we experience the world as he does. In offering them a new occupation as fishers for people, he names the essential task of discipleship, which is to nurture relationships that reflect and expand the Kingdom of God.

Perhaps no matter what our own occupation may be, the closer we get to Jesus, the more we will understand our chief calling to be as stewards of relationships among God's people-- relationships that transcend human categories of status and privilege and can thus transform the world. That's the threat Jesus poses to the status quo of his day and the promise of the Jesus Movement today.

For that movement to fulfill its promise, we need to know what it means to turn and follow as did Peter, Andrew, James and John. Whether we discern this in a single

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moment of burning insight or gradually at times when nobody is looking, Jesus will be there to meet us and lead us to new places.

Staying turned toward Jesus is difficult. Sometimes life can seem too hard, the competing impulses too strong, and the rewards of faith too elusive for us to remain intentional about our relationship with Jesus. This problem isn't new—the disciples who first follow Jesus repeatedly turned away from him and let him down.

And today in the passage from Paul's letter, we find the second generation of the Jesus Movement is divided and distracted in ways that could grind it to a halt. The Corinthian Christians have begun to understand themselves not primarily as followers of Jesus but as members of groups rallying around their favorite orators. Some say "'I belong to Paul' or 'I belong to Apollos' or 'I belong to Cephas'" (1 Cor 1: 12) as if faith is a competition among preacher fan clubs.

Paul reminds them that their relationship to Jesus, symbolized in the cross, binds them together in a value system that stands in contrast to the way the world sees power and rank. In effect, he tells them to re-turn, to get close to Jesus again in order to remain true to their calling.

People of faith like you and me need constant invitations to turn to rediscover Jesus. To say "I'm happy with my faith the way it is," as I used to, closes us off to new possibilities God has in store.

The Jesus Movement couldn't find a more faithful, exuberant and insightful advocate than Bishop Curry. He preached a rousing sermon at our diocesan convention yesterday, and I'm excited that today we Episcopalians are carrying on the revival tradition to spread Jesus' way of love. But if we, after attending today's gathering, or watching the webcast, declare, "I belong to Michael Curry," then the revival's power will be limited.

And I know he would be the first to correct us just as Paul corrects the faithful in Corinth. For it is Jesus who calls and beckons us to follow; it is the love of Jesus the world so sorely needs; and it is in and through us that Jesus' love will be made known.

Amen.

*Link to sermon cited: <https://www.episcopalnewsservice.org/pressreleases/79th-general-convention-of-the-episcopal-church-july-7-revival-sermon-by-presiding-bishop-michael-curry/>