

3 Epiphany C January 27, 2019

Today

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In a sermon she gave three years ago, religious writer and speaker Diana Butler Bass cited two mindsets that she believed were hurting the church: nostalgia and anxiety: a longing for a romanticized past and a worry about a future that won't look anything like the past we remember. Diana Butler Bass made a good point in her sermon and had Pew Research results to back up her statement as well as anecdotal experiences from her own Episcopal parish. Perhaps some of us long time church members have some of our own experiences with nostalgia or anxiety.

I certainly have. Although the most powerful didn't happen to me until I came here to Church of the Good Shepherd and entered into the world of campus ministry. It has been through my experiences meeting good church goers that I learned about something called "Canterbury Club". Don't worry if you haven't heard of it; I hadn't until I came here and I have been an Episcopalian since birth and have been active in Episcopal parishes my whole life, even when I was in college. My parish did not have a Canterbury Club, and neither did the one I attended when I was in college. Canterbury Club was the name given to the segregated ministry for people in their late teens and early twenties who attended college or university.

Today there are people who have incredibly fond memories of their Canterbury Club experiences; and I have had the opportunity to meet quite a few in this diocese and they have shared their memories and stories with me. Many have these fond memories of Canterbury Club because that is where they met their spouse, or found a welcome home, or were invited into leadership. And these same people are quite distressed that today, not one single Episcopal parish in the diocese has an active Canterbury Club; they are anxious that means people in their early twenties won't find spouses, find welcome, or have leadership experiences; in other words, today's students won't have the same experiences they did and won't go on to be active participants in church as they get older. These folks often tell me I should start Canterbury clubs back up again, with no intention of listening to my observations of what I see life is like for students I meet in colleges and universities today, and how ministry is changing. While I confess to feeling frustrated with these encounters, the people who share their stories and worries with me have the best of intentions. But it feels like we are not able to connect because they struggle to hear about what I see and experience because they are too busy looking back to their own college days in the past and worrying about a future they cannot control, which keeps them from being fully present to what is happening today.

It reminds me of a saying that used to be popular: Yesterday is history, tomorrow is a mystery, today is God's gift, which is why it is called the present. The purpose of that saying was to help people have a more balanced view of life so as to make as positive an impact on the day as possible. It is about being informed by the past, being mindful that the future can be affected by our actions, but only when we fully participate in the present.

Perhaps this is what Jesus might have been trying to say in today's Gospel lesson when he read from the scroll in the synagogue in his own hometown. We heard Jesus was getting a lot of attention, word about him was spreading, he was traveling and teaching, and getting praise for what he was saying. According to the author of Luke, this was because Jesus was filled with the power of the Holy Spirit, which we might remember he received at his baptism. And it sounds like things were looking good for Jesus: he's Spirit filled, traveling, teaching, getting a good reputation, and welcomed into his hometown where he was given the honor of reading from the scroll of Isaiah.

Then Jesus read from the scroll words that were attributed to the belief of what the Messiah was going to do: bring good news to the poor, proclaim release to the captives, give sight to the blind, let the oppressed go free, and proclaim the year of the Lord's favor. These all might sound pretty good to us sitting here this morning. Who doesn't want the poor to hear good news, who doesn't want the blind to see or the captives or the oppressed be free from captivity and oppression, and doesn't the year of the Lord's favor; when we see God favors the oppressed, the poor, those who are taken advantage of, sound like a good time?

Well, maybe not everybody would find that good news. To the corrupt and powerful this might sound threatening, especially if they like to keep people from seeing how they are being taken advantage of or prevent the oppressed from realizing they don't have to stay in oppressive or abusive situations. But for the rest of us, this sounds pretty good. Or at least in theory, at least as something that sounds good when it is read in church.

After Jesus read the words of the scroll, he handed the scroll back, and sat down. We might not think much of that action, because in our liturgy we have people read from the scriptures and when they are done, they sit down. In our modern liturgy, sitting is the posture for listening or receiving. But in Jesus' day at the synagogue, sitting was the position for teaching. That might be why we read in Luke's Gospel that the eyes of everyone were on Jesus at that moment. He had read, and had sat down to deliver a sermon, or begin a teaching session. It might have been one of those electrifying moments. And the lesson Jesus gave was not about the prophet who was believed to have written the words he had just read; Jesus did not teach about the translation, or what the words might mean, or the context of those words. Jesus did not talk about

what historians or scholars or commentators of the past believed these words meant. Jesus did not talk about the past at all. Instead, Jesus talked about the very day; today.

And made the extraordinary claim that today the scripture was fulfilled not any action or ministry taken, but by the people simply hearing it read.

What a remarkable claim. The scriptures were fulfilled simply by hearing Jesus read them. What could Jesus mean by that statement? Could he possibly be saying that once a person hears the scriptures read aloud, they are somehow responsible for them? Is there some connection between hearing the words of the scriptures that makes them no longer something of the past and are now fully present here among us today? Perhaps. When I think of the encounters I have with people who tell me about their past but are not willing to listen to my present experiences or be present with me, what I feel is a loss of connection. And I wonder if we could connect, perhaps they could join me in ministry today instead of longing for the past and worrying for the future.

Perhaps Jesus was saying his presence was what was making the scriptures fulfilled, they were more than nice ideas or pipe dreams, they were God's real intentions for how the world God made out of God's love is meant to be. And by hearing those words, those intentions were somehow now manifest in those who heard them. As one commentator suggests, the author of Luke may be saying the same God who is present to us in the person of Jesus is also present and active in the life of the church. And the life of the church is about being present by being informed by the scriptures and the past, mindful of how what we do and say can affect the future, but only by being fully present today, and recognizing the gift of today, of this day. For it is today that Christ is with us.

One of our favorite memories here at Church of the Good Shepherd is a Sunday in November a little over 4 years ago when my family and I came to here so I could serve as your supply priest for the day. One of the things we remember about that day is how we: you as a congregation and me, felt the presence of the Holy Spirit with us and we all felt that the Holy Spirit was calling us together to live together and pray together and worship together and share meals -and cake- together and of course, do ministry together. Today, after this service, we will indeed share some good food together and we will hold our annual meeting. I know, it isn't something most folks find exciting, and I am sure there are people who will succeed in leaving before the meeting, because who really enjoys meetings? But there is more to an annual meeting than voting and budgets. There is the work of the ministry we have been doing together and the fruits of the Holy Spirit that are growing from it.

One of the things I am very proud of is how as a parish we remember the day we first felt the Holy Spirit, and listened to it, and have let that memory guide our decisions by helping us recognize the presence of the Holy Spirit today instead of getting lost in that memory. I am also proud of the ways we appreciate and honor the church leaders of the past who helped keep the church going by embracing ministry opportunities today. As a result, I do not see much in the way of anxiety about the future. Just a curiosity about what it might look like, and the hope that what we learn as we do ministry today might be helpful to those who will be engaged in ministry in the future.

Which I hope will be reassuring in the moments that we might find disappointing, or when we get tired, when things don't turn out the way we wanted them to, because there might be something even better going on. No matter what happens, the Holy Spirit is with us today, and today we have heard the words of the scriptures, today we will receive Holy Communion, and today we will do the work of administration so that we can continue to do the ministry the Holy Spirit is calling us to do, to love God and our neighbors through our worship services and many ministries, and to continue to grow together and to grow deeper in love with God and our neighbors. It is all informed by the past and mindful of the future. And it all happens today.