

September 4, 2022, St. John's

Scripture. We study scripture to reveal the word of God and every week we read excerpts from both the Old Testament and the New Testament. There is of course a gospel passage which is to a great extent the "featured" reading of the day. There is also an epistle, and I find them fascinating. Today's epistle is the apostle Paul's letter to Philemon, in which he tries to persuade Philemon to treat his slave Onesimus as an equal brother in Christ. Paul stops shy of advocating for the abolition of slavery but the letter to Philemon, when considered along with all the other epistles, provides a glimpse into the issues facing early Christians and early Christian churches.

The epistles, whether written by Paul or by someone influenced by Paul (touching off centuries of scholarly debate), are essentially letters and perhaps a sermon or two addressed to those early churches and/or church leaders. Taken as a whole, they encouraged their readers to remain steadfast in their faith in the face of persecution and "creeping heresies" that would diminish their faith in Jesus Christ as the true Son of God. They also firmly admonish their recipients for engaging in behavior that runs contrary to that faith. After all, Christians were supposed to be different than everybody else! They were supposed to rise above the cultures in which they were founded; not to simply be absorbed by them. In the epistles we find a growing sense that what would grow from the "Jesus movement" into full Christianity would be in it for the long haul. The immediate apocalyptic fervor of the time was diminishing.

The epistles presented the early church, and continue to present us, with a two part challenge. They challenge us to look within and among ourselves to examine how we relate to each other in our internal culture, AND, to keep in mind how we must appear to those on the outside looking in. As one might expect, they compile a long list of Do's and Don'ts. On the Do Not side we find an example in Philemon today; we should not treat brothers and sisters in Christ as slaves. Other epistles warn against establishing hierarchies within faith communities based on income, education, and vocation. Still others entreat us to avoid valuing some individual abilities or gifts more than others. Speaking in tongues was a particularly hot commodity in those days. The "Do" list was more predictable and inarguable. Charity, generosity, patience, courage (Luke's gospel today) and humility are universally accepted.

So how are we doing? How do we relate to each other and how do we appear to those on the outside that are (hopefully) looking in? As a "student preacher" in a diocese somewhat short on ordained clergy, I have had the opportunity to serve at several different churches in central New York. They have been large and small, urban/suburban and rural, homogenous and diverse, and the Episcopalians in them cover a wide range of ages, occupations, and levels of formal education. I wonder what it would look like if we were able to take all of us and place us in one sanctuary, one parish, and present us with a challenge. The challenge would be a big dead tree threatening, if it should fall, to demolish a significant portion of the church infrastructure (I say that because I have one in my backyard).

Perhaps the poet would look at the situation and create a verse describing the plight of the church, bringing tears to your eyes. The engineer would calculate the potential angle of descent and tell us where exactly the falling tree would hit. The insurance agent would calculate how much it would cost after the deductible. The science teacher would tell everyone what kind of tree it is and what caused its demise. The linguist (speaking in tongues) would describe the

scene in several different languages. The activist would decry the corporate greed that led to the importation of the pest that caused the tree to die in the first place. Then the fellow in the flannel shirt would go and get his rusty but trusty old bucket truck, chainsaw, and safety harness, and cut down the tree. Perhaps he would even give away the firewood. Would all of these people be respected and treated equally in our very large church? Would we present a healthy internal culture to anyone outside looking in?

Honestly, I believe we would. Our parishes seem to be uniformly and genuinely welcoming places. Yet here we are in an era of declining church attendance in a country where many people regard themselves as “spiritual” but not particularly religious. Perhaps we are not doing anything “wrong”. It could be that we need to find a message that is “more right” to accompany everything else we do. Christian novelist and preacher Frederick Buechner passed away a couple of weeks ago. He summarized the essential insight of his career by saying “Listen to your life”. He said that one of the most powerful ways God speaks to us is through what happens to us. Instead of focusing on past failures and worries about the future, Buechner said to “pay attention to moments when unexpected tears come to your eyes and what may trigger them”. We are led toward truth and beauty by a lump in the throat or a movement of the Spirit. We don’t have to cry! Buechner also wrote about vocation: “The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet”. He is saying that if you find value in what you do and there is a need for it, then you have a very “real job”.

I am not an expert, but that appeals to me. Church can be a place where we share stories of how we have encountered God in our lives. Out loud! With joy, and a sense of wonder. (The brief story of Ellie the swimmer will appear here). When listening to each other we may be surprised at some of the places and circumstances where God has appeared to our brothers and sisters in Christ, including but not limited to those places where our “deep gladness meets the hunger of the world”. No story is above or better than any other. As we gather for the new school year, I hope that everyone who can will come to church, or, return to church if you have been away, and share your stories of how you have experienced God in your lives. In person is the best way. Our shared experience in the church can only enhance the message we present to our neighbors in Oneida. Peace.