

Stewardship Sunday Sermon 2017

October 15, 2017

In last week's sermon, I mentioned that when reporters were interviewing the survivors of the Las Vegas shooting, a large number of survivors – many of them wounded – spoke about how grateful they were to be alive. They realized that they could easily have been among the 59 persons who were killed. Having faced death themselves, and seeing many who were *indeed* killed, the survivors were keenly aware of the preciousness, and the fragility, of life.

I also mentioned in last week's sermon that the same fact holds true regarding the life of the Church: the life of the Church is precious **and** – at this time in our history – fragile. This past week I read that between 2006 and 2016, the number of white evangelical Protestants – that group long thought to be immune from the decline of the **mainline** denominational churches – the number of white evangelical Protestants fell from about 23 percent of the US population in 2006 to 17 percent in 2016; and only 11 percent of white evangelical Protestants are under the age of 30.

Now, you could spend hours each day reading books and articles and blog posts about the reasons for the decline of the Church in the past 10 or 20 or 50 years. There is no end to the ink spilled on this subject. But after a while, your head gets dizzy and your eyes start losing focus. I guess the bottom line might simply be that more and more people are finding no compelling reason to attend or join a church.

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One of the hand-outs the you will receive today is a fun, fill-in-the-blank “mad lib” that gets you to thinking about *why* you attend Christ Church. Now, most of us older folk grew up in a time when that question simply wasn't asked. You went to church because you were *supposed* to go to church, and because everybody *else* went to church, and because it was part of our culture, just like baseball, the flag, mom, and apple pie. But the days when the majority of Americans felt an obligation to attend church on Sundays are long gone. So we have to ask ourselves, “Why **do** we attend church?” We need to ask this question if for no other reason than we need to communicate to people in our world why **they** should consider attending a Christian Church, and Christ Church in particular.

Your Vestry and I have been struggling with this issue for a couple of years now. At our Vestry Retreat last Spring, Ann Fleming, our Diocesan Missioner for Transition Ministry and Congregational Development, led us in discerning the unique identity and gifts of Christ Church. She showed us a TED talk in which the presenter [Simon Sinek], a business consultant, motivational speaker, and best-selling author, argued that the central problem in most organizations or companies is that while they know *what* they do and *how* they do it, few organizations or corporations know **why** they do what they do. Ann Fleming challenged our Vestry to ask the question: “What is our ‘Why?’” We know *what* we do and *how* we do it: We come to worship each week, offer Sunday School and other formational opportunities, and participate in various ministries both inside and outside the church (about which John Merriam

will speak later). This is **what** we do. And **how** do we do it? Through the commitment of time, talent, treasure, and spirit from each of you.

But **why** do we do these things? Why do you commit your time, talent, treasure, and spirit to the life of Christ Church and our many ministries? If you're at all like me, you have some vague, amorphous inner *sense* of our "Why?", but you probably couldn't articulate it in any confident way. And in our day and age when the Christian Church is declining and more and more people are losing *any* connection with the Church, Christ's body in this world, it would be helpful if we could articulate to others *why* it is that Christ Episcopal Church, Canon City exists, and why its mission is so important to us, our community, and our world.

What is our Mission? What is our "Why?"

About a month ago, our Vestry watched a brief video in which a Christian pastor stated: "If your mission statement doesn't make people laugh, it isn't bold enough." That was very helpful. First, because we Episcopalians, especially, tend to shy away from being overly bold in our proclamations and assertions, and we *need* a bold statement to penetrate our complacency and inertia, and to challenge us. But it was also helpful because, according to this pastor, a church's mission statement should be descriptive and inclusive of all the various groups in the church. This had always seemed to be a barrier to articulating our mission – at least it seemed that way to me. We have a diverse congregation, comprising traditionalists, people who want to do new things, conservatives, liberals, people of different musical tastes, people who interpret the Bible differently, contemplative pray-ers and people who are more word-oriented in their prayers – and we could go on and on listing differences among us. Yet at the same time, we are a very close-knit congregation. We care for one another and love one another, despite our differences; and we work closely together in ministry.

A little over a month ago, I ran across a simple mission statement on an Episcopal Church's web site. It was unquestionably a bold statement – so much so that I was indeed tempted to laugh when I first saw it, as was our Vestry, when I showed it to them. Yet, I think that each of us felt a kind of resonance with the statement that was strangely and strongly compelling. The mission statement was this: "Love God. Love your neighbor. Change the world." It seemed to distill the essence of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. It was inclusive of the many diverse viewpoints held by members of our parish, yet it did not feel at all like it was a watered-down, lowest-common-denominator statement. It had undeniable power. And it was certainly Biblical. When Jesus was asked, "Which commandment in the law is the greatest?" He replied, "'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets." (*Matthew 22:36-40*) Not only is this Mission statement Biblical; it has a long tradition of use in Anglican church liturgies. We use this "Summary of the Law," the two Great Commandments, in our Rite I Eucharist service.

Whenever our Vestry had struggled, in the past, with discerning our Christ Church gifts and characteristics, "welcoming," "hospitality," and "caring" were always among the characteristics and gifts mentioned first. Loving God and loving our neighbor are something we who are Christ

Church have always done – imperfectly, of course, and of course we need to continue to work hard at it – but nonetheless it is who we are. And at the same time, it challenges us to be ever *more* loving of God and neighbor, and *more* outwardly-focused toward the world.

Love God. Love your neighbor. Change the world.

“Change the world.” I think the unanimous reaction from our Vestry to this statement was: “Boy, does our world need changing!” We were created in God’s own image and likeness, and we need to be changed *back into* the image and likeness of God, having, as St. Paul was fond of saying, the mind of Christ. The kingdoms of this world need to be transformed, more and more, into the kingdom of God. A bold mission? So bold that you are tempted to laugh? Yes. And that’s exactly what we need.

Now, some of you are probably asking yourself right now, “What on earth does this have to do with Stewardship Sunday?” And my answer is: *Everything*. For on Stewardship Sunday, we are asked to pledge our time, talents, and treasure. But what are we pledging our time, talent, and treasure *to*? **Why** should we support Christ Episcopal Church, Canon City? Because we hold a mission, vision and values that the world desperately needs, yet seems to have lost, even among “Christian” nations (if there even is such a thing). The Two Great Commandments, to love God and love our neighbor as ourselves, have never been more desperately needed in our world (or rather, **God’s** world, for it *doesn’t* belong to us). If we carry out these two commandments, we will find that the issues that seem to be so divisive among us will become less intractable. We will listen to one another more, and care about others – not just those who are *like* us, but those who are our enemies, whom Jesus *commanded* us to love, and whom he showed in the parable of the Good Samaritan are our neighbors, also.

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Does that sound like something you can buy into? A mission you can join with enthusiasm and commitment? A mission which is worth sacrificing for? It does to me. And I hope that you, too, fellow members of Christ Church, will commit generously of **your** time, talent, and treasure, to *join* this mission and help bring about God’s kingdom on earth as it is in heaven.

AMEN