

A Sermon Delivered by
The Reverend John Midwood
Executive Director of ECS
Saint Peter's Episcopal Church
Glenside, Pennsylvania

Second Sunday After Easter
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We gather in troubled and troubling economic times. Our homes and our savings have lost value over the last year. Individuals have lost employment and young folks ready to enter the work force this spring are facing extraordinary challenges. Trusted institutions have disappointed and corporations thought to be invincible are struggling to survive.

For all the dis-ease and consternation we feel as we live through this troubled and troubling economic time, we are not without the means to cope. We have personal resources other than financial, family relationships, and social networks that enable us to believe the current troubles are temporary, that we will make our way through these troubles, and that life in the future will be better, even if it takes a while to be fully realized.

Episcopal Community Services, the ministry your prayers, work, and contributions make possible, focuses on a particular segment of the population that knows economic troubles all too well, troubles that are unchanged whether the economy is strong or weak. Their troubles are passed from generation to generation because, not only are they without financial resources, they are without the non-financial resources that enable one to do more than survive in a creation that God supplies with ample abundance that all may be well.

At ECS, we work to enable individuals and families to find and develop their God given talents and skills to break out of what has come to be called generational poverty. We work constantly to improve our skills and competencies. One current initiative that holds promise and generates excitement involves working with teenagers. My experience is that engaging teenagers is always a challenge. It is doubly so for teens who have

experienced abuse and neglect, who have experienced homelessness, teens who know the future can be different and better, but are without the resources to bring that different and better future into being.

Two stories capture the reality and the pathos of too many young persons moving through adolescence in our region. One story involves a teen born HIV positive, who is no longer with us. As she was struggling with the disease that took her life, she was asked who she would be if she could be anyone in the world. Her reply, 'I would be me.' The second story involves a teen growing up in a single parent household, the parent is addicted. One Friday evening, when the teen came home, the parent was passed out on the couch. Later in the evening, around 11 p.m., the teen used the fire escape to sneak out of the house. When asked why she used the fire escape rather than the front door since her mother was passed out on the couch, she replied 'I wanted to pretend I had a parent who cared'.

You and I are not that teen's parent, but we care. Our caring grows from the love we receive from family and friends, a love grounded in the God who is the Creator, the Redeemer, and the Life-force of all that is good and holy in the cosmos. As a community, we gather around the table to celebrate God's love in good times and bad. We gather to celebrate beginnings and to mark endings. Whenever we gather, in good times, in celebration, in bad times, in times of loss, we proclaim that God's love is the source of all that is good and new, that God's love is permanent and unending even when times are bad and all seems lost, even in death.

Our message that God's love is ultimate and permanent is also our mission. That is why we care not just for those who are near and dear to us, but also for those unknown to us in need of tangible expressions of God's love. Jesus demonstrated the need to care for the stranger in need in the story of the Good Samaritan. And he led us to understand the critical importance of responding to the stranger in need in Matthew 5, the beatitudes. Blessing is to be found with those who are the poor, those in mourning, the meek, the merciful, the peacemakers. They are the blessed and the source of our blessings. God's love flows freely and abundantly to and through us when we respond with compassion to those who are blessed in God's kingdom.

The mission of responding to the unknown in need is critical to the health and well-being of the church. The Archbishop of Canterbury, visiting New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina, said the church must serve the most vulnerable in order to demonstrate that it is the organization that it claims to be. Bp. Stevens, in 1870, chartered the Episcopal City Mission, now known as Episcopal Community Services, so that we Episcopalians in this region might have an instrument whereby the church might truly be the organization we claim it to be.

In my view, one of the most misused sayings of Jesus is that the poor will always be with us. That quote is part of the narrative that leads to Good Friday and not part of Jesus' social teachings. To appropriately respond to the poor, we need to understand the experience of being poor. Our attitude must be something other than that the poor will always be with us. We are studying poverty and listening to those experiencing poverty and then working to apply what we learn and hear. Our study has led me to conclude that lack of financial resources is but one component of poverty. Persistent poverty involves the lack of physical, mental, emotional, spiritual, social, and educational resources. Listening has led me to know one must have strengths to survive in poverty. Listening to the teen born HIV positive and others has taught me individuals in poverty don't want to be someone else, they want the opportunity to be and to develop themselves as they see best for themselves. Our task is to help them discover and use their strengths, to assist them in charting a path to independence and self-sufficiency, and to open doors to resources that will make their journey a success.

Standing before you today, I am more mindful of the Easter season, than I am of the current economic time. There is truly Good News, unrelated to the economic recovery that may have begun, might begin soon, or is still a far way off. It is news grounded in the resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. It is news that God's love is stronger than death. It is news that you're your prayers, work, and contributions; news that with your support and in your name, impoverished strangers are being cared for and blessings are flowing between them and us.

The teen born HIV positive, aware of her condition and prognosis, didn't want to be someone else. She wanted to be herself. A holy and godly conversation with that teen did not involve trying to change her, but rather finding her strengths and helping her use

and build on those strengths to cope with the challenges of her life. She did not die forgotten or alone. We enabled that teen to live until the moment of death. And the lesson she taught us lives on and inspires me. That's good news.

The teen with a parent unable to care for her, found workers who care about and for her, they are helping her discover and use her strengths to forge a future other than that of the streets. They are working to identify resources that will make it possible for her to achieve a future other than that of the streets. There are 35 others teens just like her, all supported in the hard work of discovering and developing strengths for a future other than that of the streets. That's good news.

Perhaps the best of the good news is that together, by prayer, work, and financial gifts, this local Episcopal congregation, joining with Episcopalians and Episcopal congregations throughout our diocese, are insuring that the church is the organization it claims to be. An organization that knows where true blessing is found, an organization that cares for the stranger and the impoverished, an organization that lives by and in the power and love of the Resurrected One.

Thanks be to God.