

A Sermon Delivered by
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Seventh Sunday of Easter
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We have reached the Seventh Sunday of Easter, and next week is Pentecost, the beginning of the longest season in the calendar of the church year. Today, I think it is fair to say, we face new and unprecedented challenges to our faith. No matter where one turns there seems to be an assessment of how well our views, our beliefs, our commitments, and even our way of life is holding up.

Americans for example, are constantly asked by pollsters whether we are on the right track, and going in the right direction, ...or not. At the same time we are being challenged by leaders in our church institutions to explore ways that we can make our faith more vital and alive because the statistics show our numbers are declining and our influence is diminishing. The net effect of all this "assessment" is somewhat of a blur as we seek to find the fundamentals of faith that remain unchanged; as well as discover the methods of scholarship that root us in a Biblical tradition that has credence. More than anything, it seems, we need a strategic plan that will help us implement our beliefs in the so-called "real world" where, as the Prayerbook says, "we live and move and have our being." We need a plan that will guide us toward comprehending the inevitable dilemmas of daily life, and we need a strategy that will help us deal with the various crises that are bound to pop up on our respective journeys of faith.

It is alleged that Woody Allen, one of my favorite humorists, framed the issue properly when he declared: "More than any time in history mankind faces a cross roads. One path leads to despair and utter hopelessness, the other to total extinction. Let us pray that we have the wisdom to choose correctly."

Well that may be a lighthearted solution to a profound theological problem, but Christians have an even more illuminating approach to the dilemmas of

life. In fact, as the church winds up this Easter season we emphasize the most significant piece of news our faith offers by way of belief – the resurrection of Christ.

That message is one which needs to be proclaimed boldly, but it often gets mired down in a world gone awry. For example, one writer described it this way:

People outside the church confront the challenge of living and working in a world where organizations are being ruthlessly flattened. Out-dated corporations are collapsing. And – especially among the generation of youth now rising – their skill at using information technologies to assess alternatives, no matter what the need, makes them less devoted to, and more skeptical of, the old brand loyalties such as – Ford, Ivory, Sunoco, or Episcopal.

The truth is that churches which grow spend time talking about the basic things that really matter to people: sin and forgiveness, reading the Bible at a deeper level with integrity, how to form healthy loving relationships with all sorts and conditions of people, and how to find joy and happiness within the boundaries of a dynamic Christian faith.

The fundamental question, then, that emerges from such an assessment is this – Are we more committed to our institutional loyalties and structures, than we are to the Gospel? Or put a bit differently: Do we think we should be the church in a certain way that appeals primarily to our own self-interest? Or put still another way; Do we advocate a Gospel that proclaims good news to all people, everywhere, assuming that one size fits all?

The truth is the gospel IS the message. The church, secondarily, is the medium of the message. There is power and authority in the original Good News we claim, and the church is searching to find a way to have that communicated clearly. If our organizational medium of parishes and Sunday worship services can't adapt to carry the message, then it will be passed by, no matter how many commissions we empower, task forces we form, or resolutions we introduce on the floor of church conventions, to perpetuate the message.

As I've said before, the challenge of the preacher on any occasion is to proclaim the good news of Christ from the pulpit; and then joining with

everyone else during the week, seek to implement that good news in our daily lives by example. The work of the church is to allow all of us to support one another in that task – proclaiming the good news through deeds and actions. We do that best, not by stressing right beliefs or doctrines, though there is a time and place for that, but by emphasizing right relationships; just, caring, and honest relationships among our neighbors, as well as growing relationships that connect us to our brothers and sisters around the world. As both our Prayerbook and the Presiding Bishop have said: on “‘this fragile earth, our island home,’ our job is to show up, pay attention, tell the truth, and leave the rest to God.”

That’s particularly good advice because we note in passing that the religious scene is a rapidly changing one; so much so that we may need to adjust our fundamentals. In the midst of this shifting religious sentiment, I have been impressed with Saint Peter’s Church taking the lead by working not only ecumenically with people from other denominations, but systemically and intentionally with people of other faiths. In addition, efforts of cooperation have been initiated with believers of all persuasions from distant corners of the world; Glenside to Ghana to Guatemala. As a result we are coming to understand the mysteries of life, the meaning of faith, and the vast scope of world-community.

To that end, listen in closing to the following passage written as all the people of the earth somehow managed to come together...

Then, each person who had a name for God looked at the others who had a different name. They looked into God’s mirror and saw their own faces and the faces of all the others. And they called out their names for God: Source of Life, Creator of Light, Shepherd, Master of Peace, My Rock, Healer, Redeemer, Ancient One, Comforter, Mother, Father, Friend, all at the same time. At that moment, the people knew that all the names for God were good and no name was better than another. Then all at once, their voices came together and they called God One. Everyone listened, most of all God.

That’s the positive direction the world is heading, and here’s the good news for us as Christians; we don’t have to give up anything that violates our own doctrines or beliefs. In fact the deeper we go into our own Christian heritage, the more we will have to contribute to the healthy discussions and religious debates that take place around the world. We make a significant contribution to the wider discourse if we are deeply rooted in our own views and speak

clearly with integrity.

So the Gospel we proclaim, the good news we strive to live out in our daily lives, and the faith we seek to share is simply this. Jesus, the man for others, lived 2000 years ago, and died on a cross. Miraculously he rose from the dead and gives us hope for eternal life, even today.

Christ is risen. He is risen indeed. Alleluia.

In the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

CREDITS:

William Sloan Coffin, CREDO, 2004

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The Rev. Caroline B. Edge, Needham, MA

Mark D. W. Eddington Episcopal Life, 2009

The Most Rev. Katharine Jefferts-Schori