

St. John's Episcopal Church
Hamlin, Pennsylvania
The Rev'd. Ronald Royce Miller, Ph.D.
The Third Sunday After The Epiphany
22 January 2017

Scripture readings:

Isaiah 9:1-4 Psalm 27:1, 5-13 1 Corinthians 1:10-18 Matthew 4:12-23

Some of you may or may not know this, but this is a liturgical church which means I had nothing to do with the selection of the lessons for today. If it were up to me, I probably would have avoided it: "...*that all of you be in agreement and that there be no division among you.*" Ha Ha Ha! There are divisions among us and certainly some of them at this point are very political. There's even a Baptist and a Methodist in this church this morning - there might be some religious differences. And a Lutheran preacher in an Episcopal Church! Visitors, we don't know what you think or where you come from. And here's this guy 2,000 years ago appealing to the early Christians to be united. Well, we've had 2,000 years of failure on that score, haven't we?

I grew up knowing that "Catholic" was a dirty word. We were Lutherans. We were Protestants. The simple phrase was, "*We don't do that. That's Catholic.*" Now of course I was ordained in 1975 in one of the most densely populated Roman Catholic square miles in all of North America, and my colleagues were Roman priests who taught me more about the Church than I ever learned in my own seminary - and I had more than one seminary.

We have to really wonder what's being said to the church in Corinth or what's being hoped for the church in Corinth by St. Paul. When this is recorded there is religious division. People don't agree, and how in the world did he expect that they might?

"What I mean is that each of you says, 'I belong to Paul,' or 'I belong to Apollos,' or 'I belong to Cephas.'" Any other names you want to add in there? How about Trump or Clinton? Did that escape you? [laughter] Whoever says that scripture is out of touch with what it is we're dealing with? And there is division **in** the Church - deep division. Paul asks the question: "*Has Christ been divided?*" We just spent a couple weeks looking at texts about John the Baptizer, and his whole message was very clear. "*Not me! Behold, there is the Lamb of God. I am not the messiah. He who comes after me, whose shoes I can't even tie, he is the messiah! Not me. Jesus!*"

John the Baptizer was very clearly aware that he did not want to be put on a pedestal. He did not want to be regarded as a charismatic leader of the whole shootin' match, and I'm sure he knew it was riddled with danger. You know what happens to him anyway, don't you? He loses his head. There's probably no better depiction of that piece of scripture, in my estimation, than Richard Strauss' opera *Salome* and the profound perversion that is expressed in that opera when Salome makes love to his severed head. She enthuses about his beautiful hair and kisses his dead lips and carries on so much so that the perverse society around her crushes her to death, and that's the end of it.

Being a charismatic leader carries with it a certain amount of danger. Part of the problem is, as a human being and as a person who's lived my entire professional life as a pastor of congregations, I get really nervous when people start to want to put me on a pedestal because when they've got you up there, they can kick that pedestal out as quickly as they got you there. That was no place that Jesus was going, and it was no place that John was going, but it must be confessed that both of them were charismatic, and both of them were leaders, and both of them paid for their role with their lives - as did Mahatma Gandhi, as did Martin Luther King, Jr. Now all of those folks had something in common. You could say it was their charisma. I'm more willing to say it was their message which was charismatic, and I think they all shared the same message. And Paul is struggling with the reality of that message when he writes to the Corinthians and says, "*There is trouble here. I appeal to you in the name of Jesus Christ that you agree, that you get along, that you be of one mind.*" Well, that's 2,000 years of failure in the life of the Church, more or less.

You may recall on the eve of Thanksgiving across the way at the Assembly of God Church, I appealed that we Christians might consider getting together and sharing a meal. Now if you really want to get Christians

nervous, suggest celebrating a sacrament together. Why do you suppose it really breaks down at that point? Because when it comes to the really holy, the really numinous, the real reality of God's real presence, it's only good enough for me and my kind. God couldn't possibly go to that bunch of sinners across the street because we are better than they. They have something to learn from us, and we have absolutely nothing to learn from them.

Now if I were more highly paid, I would probably owe part of my check to Judy Restraino who usually sits next to Louise but who came to the 8 o'clock mass today. Before the mass started I complimented her on a bumper sticker on her car. It was a political sticker. You figure out what it said. [laughter] She said to me - and this is the business of learning because what she said was profoundly true - "*We're all having a very difficult time hearing each other.*" She made me take responsibility for my own position of being unwilling to listen well enough. But I'll tell you this, friends, when I listen, I also expect to be heard and I expect that there will be an exchange of ideas as opposed to an exchange of gunfire, because that only proves who draws first and who aims better. It proves nothing. And so for 2,000 years as the Christian Church, we have been under admonition from St. Paul and others to attempt to reach some kind of unity, and apparently we're not good at it.

Jesus is made by the Church into our central charismatic leader, our **only** charismatic leader - so much so that the Church figures we are going to make Jesus into God - not just our charismatic leader, but God! So when Paul gets frustrated about division, he asks the question, "*Has Christ been divided?*" If we can at least get that far, to say that the one unifying issue around which we gather - which brings us together - is, in fact, this cockamammy Jew of 2,000 years ago who comes into the world and says to the Church of his day, "*You've got it all wrong,*" and says to the government of his day, "*You've got it all wrong,*" and says to the politics and the economy of his day, "*You've got it all wrong.*" When we make this guy our central, primary charismatic leader, then it becomes our responsibility - it seems to me - to pay close attention to him, to his life and to what he says and how he lived out what he said he believed.

Now the pope in Rome this morning suggested that the gospel indicates when Jesus withdrew to Galilee to the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali that he was leaving the center of culture and going to a land occupied by pagans, essentially at the beginning of his ministry to proclaim good news. We hear from Jesus himself when he talks about to whom he goes, to those in power, he says "*the poor you will always have with you, the foreigner you will always have with you, women you will always have with you, salves you will always have with you, tax collectors and sinners you will always have with you.*" And I submit to you, brothers and sisters, that the way to test the quality of the gospel that we say we believe, teach, and confess is to ask those people to whom Jesus went how the gospel affects them. So the test of our Christianity is not, it seems to me, best effected by how pure we are in our doctrine or even how pure we are in our behavior, in what we do. This morning the pope said, "*This is not so much about what we do as about how we think.*"

So if what we think and believe about the gospel is to be tested in any way, we must ask those to whom Jesus went about how effective what we say we believe that Jesus said and did is for them. So the test of our Christianity won't have much to do with the catechism. It won't have much to do with the liturgy. It won't have much to do with a political pardon or a national government. It will have to do with how the people in Zebulun and Naphtali at the fringes and periphery of society and the world know that we genuinely believe God loves us and them equally. So the test of our Christianity is: Do we treat women the way Jesus treated women? Do we treat sinners the way Jesus treated sinners? Do we treat tax collectors the way Jesus treated tax collectors? Do we treat foreigners the way Jesus treated foreigners - with or without papers? Do we treat those who are injured and lying bloody on the roadside the way Jesus gave the example in the parable of The Good Samaritan? Do we render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's (it sounds like paying taxes, doesn't it?) and to God the things that are God's. This will be how our Christianity is measured.

The next thing we're going to do is say the creed. Now there was a fashionable time in the life of the Church when that was considered to be the measure of your Christianity - whether or not you bought this list of required beliefs put together by a bunch of cranky old white men [laughter] and then you could be a member of their ecclesiastical country club.

When people get excited in the season of the Nativity and I think appropriate questions are asked - What is meant by a virgin birth? Why is that a plank of faith for a God we proclaim is encountered as a human being, and we immediately start to de-humanize his birth? Some call it sanctifying but... Unity has much less, it seems to me, to do with creeds and liturgies and ecclesiastical organizations, party membership and politics and even culture and language than it has to do with how the poor, the persecuted, the sick, the marginalized, the "other" receive the gospel that we intend to communicate. I'm not going to get into the business about us not being a Christian country because we simply are not and, frankly, should not be. I'm grateful for that. But I am grateful that I am allowed to struggle daily with each one of you with what it means for us, in fact, to be Christians in whatever country and with and without whatever freedoms and how that will work out in how we live with each other and how we live with the rest of the world.

There is a crazy idea that Jesus was sent to be the sacrifice for our sins. (Even the Baptist is laughing at that!) How is that for an example of poor parenting? God didn't demand that Jesus be killed. People who couldn't believe what he said, killed him because they could not tolerate the simple truth he communicated that he was loved fully, completely and sufficiently by God and so was every other louse in the world.

We know what happens when it works a different way. It happened in the lifetime of some of us sitting in this room. When the charismatic leader convinces people that he and he alone has solutions for problems which generations have experienced and attempted to rectify. Hitler did it with Jews, gypsies, and gay people and others. He convinced a nation full of people that there is your problem. Exclude them! Rid yourselves of them and you will rid yourselves of your problem. And he was wrong. He failed to see in every Jew, in every gypsy, and in every gay person the object of eternal affection.

And so it was the Church, the state, the community - not God the Father - who killed Jesus. It was one of Gandhi's own who shot him because he insisted that people pay attention to each other - as Judy did in the back pew with me this morning and said, "*We need to hear each other.*" He paid with his life, and so did Martin Luther King, Jr., for saying that, "*No. These are people. These are citizens. These are our equals.*" I'll bet you most of the people in this room remember the 60s, and we're still enslaving people. We still benefit from a slave class in this country, and we still blame the victim.

Now when Paul appealed for unity, I don't know what he was asking about, but by now we must know that it was pretty much a waste of time to ask that all ecclesiastical organizations work together. That would be pretty much of a nightmare anyway, wouldn't it? Just what we need: more ecclesiastical superstructure! But I think his appeal was fair - that all Christian people believe that all other people in the world, every last one of us, is the full object of divine affection and receives from God as much love as you and I do and as undeservedly as we receive it. And, therefore, creeds become slightly comical. It doesn't say much in here about how to treat the stranger, the foreigner, women, undocumented aliens, the poor, gay people. It just says if you're going to be the mother of God you have to be a virgin and bear a child. Well, that's impossible.

I believe that what we do next, which will be to come to the altar of God, is essentially an act of impregnation. We come to open our mouths to take God into our flesh and blood, to take God into our bodies. We come and make the proclamation that as we do this together, we become Jesus, the Body of Christ in the world today. As you know, the Eastern Church refers to Mary as *theotokus*, the God-bearer. The Catholics used to say Mother of God and that horrified every Protestant bone in my body. But I challenge you to believe that as you come to this altar today that you come to participate with her as a God-bearer in your flesh and blood, virginal or not - I don't care. I care that you have flesh, period, and that you believe in your flesh you can carry the living, loving God to every other person you meet in your life today and for the rest of your life.

There's not much about Mary that would be considered charismatic or a leader. The qualities we attribute to Mary are qualities of humility, qualities of saying "Yes" to God and "No" to a crazy world. The attributes of the virgin or the Mother of God or the *theotokus* or whatever you want to call her, are that she lived in a world in which she did not understand everything with a child who mystified her and with whom she even struggled and fought, but whom she believed. And I think that's what is being asked of us today. And if we do that, then we can be unified - not in what we think but in what we do, not in how we formulate our theologies

but in how we serve the world and all who live in it.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.