

St. John's Episcopal Church
Hamlin, Pennsylvania
The Rev'd Ronald Royce Miller, Ph.D.
The Fifth Sunday After the Epiphany
8 February 2015

Scripture readings:

Isaiah 40:21-31 Psalm 147:1-12, 21c I Corinthians 9:16-23 Mark 1:29-39

There is interesting suggestion in the lessons for today about who God is, how we feel about who God is, and how we share what it is we feel about who God is. I am most attracted by the lesson today from I Corinthians - typical Paul in that *"If I proclaim the Gospel this gives me no grounds for boasting."* Well, who would have said it *would* have? He might have - *"for an obligation is laid on me and woe to me if I don't proclaim the Gospel."*

The question is, how are we going to proclaim the Gospel? How are we going to share with ourselves what it is we believe about God in terms of good news? Then how do we share that in our community? And then how do we go beyond our community to share that good news which I think we are sometimes vague about. There are those who are not vague about what they perceive the good news to be, and there are those who are not vague about how they think they ought to share that good news. And I must say there are some of those folks who embarrass me and who use the title and the name Christian in a fashion that I find foreign, inappropriate and, by my standards, not very Christian at all. Despite his crippled personality and attitudes, St. Paul occasionally does get some things right. And he has this desire to share good news about Jesus with the Church of his day and others. He's posing the question, rhetorical as it may be, *"How is this done?"*

"For though I am free with respect to all..." He's talking about how the Gospel has liberated him from a contractual relationship with God, from the burden of rules and regulation and the Law and righteousness worked out by himself for himself by obedience to the Law. He's had one of those V8 aha! moments. There is liberating freedom, good news that we have received about the love of God which was communicated to us most emphatically and beautifully by Jesus. And this turns him on! He's delighted about this and he's asking, Well, what do I do about this? *"For though I am free with respect to all of that, I have made myself a slave to others."* I am committed to communicate to everyone I possibly can the freedom which I am enjoying because they have their religion mixed up just as I had it mixed up. And their religion isn't making them and the world a happier and better place. It's causing and creating misery for them and for the world. Religion's good at that!

So Paul commits himself, enslaves himself to sharing this good news, this love of God for all people, with all people, starting with his own people. And how does he do it? I think the rest of this text could be reduced to a sentence, but I won't get there just yet. *"To the Jews I became as a Jew. To those under the Law I became as one under the Law. To those outside the Law I became as one outside the Law. To the weak I became weak. I have become all things to all people."*

I can read that on face value and say, *"Well, he's a phoney. You can't do that. You can't be all things to all people."* But you can be honestly yourself to all people. And you can honestly share your honest self and your honest belief and your honest joy with other people when - and this is what I believe is the kernel, at the basis of what St. Paul is saying - when you respect others where they are and how they are. So he goes to the Jew as a Jew. He goes to those who obey the Law as one who obeys the Law. He goes to the prisoner as one who knows about being in prison. He goes to the weak as one who understands weakness. And in identifying with those to whom he goes he runs the risk of a relationship which means he runs the risk of an exchange of ideas. He runs the risk of believing that his good news is way better than anything else the world has and will be welcomed and enjoyed by others when it is properly and appropriately and joyfully and humbly shared with them.

So what I hear St. Paul saying this morning is, *"If I have a message to share and if I wish to share it with others that might mean that (a) I am going to have to respect them whoever they are. I might have to respect their language. I might have to respect their culture. I might have to respect their gender. I might have to respect their abilities. I might have to respect their preferences. I might have to respect their disabilities. I might have to respect all*

of those people for whom I think my good news is something worth having as people who are worth sharing my language, my culture, my good news, my abilities, my inabilities, my preferences, my position in life.” But to have an exchange like that will never ever, ever, ever happen in any useful way unless mutual respect and the risk of mutually respecting and communicating with each other is taken honestly by both parties.

You want to talk about impertinent questions: I was asked this morning whether or not I was a registered Democrat. Any guesses? *[laughter]* The point is not whether or not you should be. The point is my dearly beloved younger brother is not. And he is a man I admire and among the four of us is certainly the most lovely. Bruce sits on the church council of his Reformed Church in Catasauqua, of all godforsaken places, which is a suburb of Allentown. We come from the same parents, from the same home. I mean I must tell you I grew up in a society and culture where I knew I was a Republican before I knew I was a Christian. *[laughter]* My grandmother was the first president of the West End Women’s Republican Club, for God’s sake! I know who Barry Goldwater was because my grandfather campaigned vigorously for him. My grandmother had tea with Mamie Eisenhower, for goodness sake. I have the entry ticket to the White House.

And Bruce has that gene and I don’t. But we love each other and we disagree mightily. But the hope I have is after our encounters he will in all honesty and integrity say to me, *“But you make your point very well.”* I can’t ask for more than that because what that means is despite great and deep and grave and incontrovertible differences I have been able to be heard and I have been able to share my point of view. Isn’t that brilliant? Which is way different from going to Africa with a Bible and beating black women over the head and putting them in Victorian dresses and saying, *“Sign the line. Agree with us.”* And that’s what we’ve done. You know that’s what missionary work has looked like over the years. And now when people get disgruntled with the Church in England they go sign up with the bishops in Africa because they have 19th century theology which we gave to them lock, stock and barrel and then left them with that. Do you see what I’m saying? We’ve imported stuff, we’ve beaten people over the head, we’ve taught them that’s right. They took it hook, line and sinker. We’ve grown since then and we’ve left them with that - instead of saying, *“Can we in honest, humane and divinely inspired relationship have a conversation about what is good and true and beautiful and honest and real to me in terms of good news, the Gospel, God’s love for me?”*

And how in the world could I go to anybody else who is God’s own child just as my brother is my parent’s own child as I am and with anything other than respect and love differ? Is it possible for us to differ and end up in the same place where Bruce and I end up which is this: He knows that he was loved by the same parents that I was loved by, and neither of us could honestly say one was more or less loved than the other. We could not have that conversation, I could not be given the privilege of making my point well or poorly and I could not speak so lovingly of my brother if we didn’t come to each other in the midst of our differences as a Jew to a Jew, as a Greek to a Greek, as one who respects the heritage, language, tradition and culture of the other. We couldn’t do it. We could not do it.

I’ve used this example before. Above the altar at Muhlenberg College Chapel in Allentown is a large stained glass window. It has five long pieces that are called lancets which depict The Great Commission - *“Go ye therefore into all the world and baptize all nations in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost”* - probably the most corrupt piece of scripture that was ever written. It was added later by the Church, you see. Jesus never said those things. And we’ve taken the idea of sharing the good news - not a bad idea - and made it into our license to beat people over the head to do things our way. I mean I know for a fact - and I learned this from German parishioners - that God’s native language is German *[laughter]* because in the Bible in Genesis God is looking for Adam in the Garden and he says, *“Adam, wo bist du?”* *[laughter]*

We live in a world in societies and culture which teach us to be afraid of that which is different and which invite us to use our religion as a license to a kind of pious superiority about others - the way they think, the way they dress, the way they act, the way they believe. And, yes, it’s a complex and interesting world in which we live, but our job is to make sure that our religion doesn’t become our license to be irreligious, anti-religious or unreligious and call it that by beating other people over the head with our way. But believing that our religion indeed liberates us to have a

conversation and liberates us to love the differences, and liberates us to respect that which is not like us and ourselves and liberates us to run the risk that even if I share my ideas I might get some somewhere along the way. And that God is big enough to save me when my idiotic and asinine orthodoxy crumbles and falls apart - and save me even then if the news is really good.

I don't get this part in the Gospel today. Jesus doesn't talk to the devils because they knew him. What does that mean? They knew what he would say: "*Oh, shut up!*" I guess that's what we're being taught to say, "*So shut up*" to the devils. Just shut up! The ones in here - between the ears, the ones in our breasts, the ones in our guts when we have all those knee-jerk reactions, these xenophobic reactions (meaning fear of the different) and believe that our God, in fact, does create me different from them and them different from me. And I think I have an answer to why. There's more than one answer to that question.

You know the story of the Tower of Babel, don't you? God creates all the different languages because people were trying to reach heaven. Wasn't going to allow that to happen so he confused them in their communications. They should have written the Bible in the 21st century. All you have to do is pull out a plug - confuse your communications, undo your e-mail. We've all had that experience. But I firmly believe that God has given the world and all who live in it all of this variety of culture and language and cuisine and couture and all the rest of it so that we would not be bored, so that we could enjoy difference, so that we could find things out from each other, so that we could learn and share and receive and give. And St. Paul at the bottom of his crippled little first century Christianity starts to see this - that the love of God frees him to love other people. Period. Not to love them enough to beat them over the head with the Bible but to love them enough to be in a relationship with them so that when they see his joy they can say, "*I want some of that too. Where did it come from? How do I get it? And will you give me some?*"

St. Paul says, "*Well, if it doesn't give me any ground for boasting, I have an obligation in this to share that glorious wonder of God's love!*"

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