

ὁ λόγος παρακλήσεως
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Holy Trinity, Wenonah NJ – Todd Foster
(rev. 201908240940)

Why do you go to church?

In nomine...

0. Greetings

Good morning! I bring you greetings from your neighbors at St. Thomas' Episcopal Church in Glassboro!

I am thrilled to be here with you this morning, and even more thrilled that Father Ben is filling the pulpit and presider's chair back in Glassboro! Ben and I, along with several other local priests, meet together most weeks for Bible Study and prayer. This has become an important rhythm in my life, something that empowers me and encourages me for ministry in this place. And often when I meet with our little community and hear Ben's understandings of Scripture, I'll say to myself, "St. Thomas' needs to hear Ben Maddison!" We each bring our own strengths, our own understandings, our own perspectives on Scripture. I believe that St. Thomas' will be better off for having heard the particular ways in which the Holy Spirit chooses to speak through Ben this morning, and my prayer is that that same Spirit will, by the grace of God, empower me to utter some word that might be profitable for you as well.

I. Intro

Why do you go to church? This is a question I love to ask at St. Thomas'. It's a question I love to ask in Vestry meetings. Because it's a question I have spent a lot of time asking myself. And my answers have changed through the years.

Yesterday I attended the memorial service for Dr. Charles Moore, the minister at my parents' church for nearly 50 years, and the person who baptized me at the age of nine. When I went to ask him about baptism, he asked me why I wanted to be baptized. I told him it was because I wanted to go to heaven. Apparently that was a good-enough answer for him, because the next

question was when we wanted to do this. And so it was the next time the church met that I was baptized.

Since that time, though, I have become less satisfied with baptism, or church attendance, as simply a “Get out of jail free card.” Or, as some people say, “fire insurance.” Or, to quote Dr. Patrick Malloy, who used to teach at General Seminary, “Pie in the sky when you die.” I believe in an after-life. But I don’t claim to know anything about it. There’s a veil between here and there and I haven’t heard of any reliable information leaking backwards. Except this: Jesus made that trip. And the advice he brought back was, “Do not be afraid.”

So I believe that my baptism carries big important meaning for what happens after I die. And I believe that church attendance is a valuable and important part of the baptized life. But the question Mr. Moore asked me continues to echo. Why do you want to be baptized? Why do you go to church?

II. Thesis

Our Gospel reading today tells the story of Jesus encountering two different people in the synagogue, that place of worship that corresponds roughly with what we call “church.” There is a whole crowd of people there, but only two of them are addressed directly by Jesus in this account, only two of them held up by the author of our Gospel. There is a woman, crippled by an infirmity that has left her bent over double for the past 18 years, perpetually bowing and looking subservient. And there is a synagogue president or, dare I suggest, the senior warden!

II. A. The Woman

Why did the woman come to the synagogue? Probably it was her habit to do so every Sabbath, just like other people there. Maybe she and others made a special effort this particular week because they heard that itinerant preacher, Jesus, was going to be there. And Jesus had been making some waves. If you’ve been listening the past several weeks in church, our Gospel readings have been about Jesus saying and doing the things that prophets did. He’s been calling out the rich, questioning motivations, challenging assumptions about wealth and poverty, about God and humankind. And he’s been healing people.

Maybe this woman was a regular synagogue attendee. Maybe she was just curious. Or maybe she showed up because she had a need that no one was capable of filling – except perhaps Jesus.

Whatever the reason for her presence, this woman didn't have to say a word. Her bent back spoke for her. Jesus called her over and healed her. And immediately she opened her mouth and praised God. Wouldn't you?

II. Β. ὁ ἀρχισυνάγωγος

Then we have the other character in our story, the leader of the synagogue. Why did he come to synagogue today? Almost certainly it was his habit to do so every Sabbath. Maybe he made a special effort this week because he was hosting a special speaker this week! He knew Jesus would be there – and whether he was more concerned about seeing Jesus or about providing proper hospitality to the crowds who would follow Jesus in through his doors, it was going to be a big week! This was a man with responsibilities, obligations. The purpose of the synagogue was to provide a place for people to gather, to learn about God, and to worship. The weekly service had a whole rhythm to it: a well-established liturgy which brought comfort and helped people draw closer to God just by its familiarity and predictability. The synagogue ruler was there to facilitate the worship of God's people, to provide a context for people to encounter God.

I made a joke about the synagogue ruler being like the Senior Warden. Maybe he bears some similarity to an Episcopal priest as well.

Yet when Jesus heals the woman, the synagogue ruler's reaction is decidedly negative. He doesn't chide Jesus directly, but all the people standing around instead. He's determined to maintain order, and Jesus has just offended his clear sense of what is appropriate to do on a Sabbath. The synagogue ruler came to the synagogue to observe the Sabbath as carefully and piously as he might.

III. Good News

Now presumably, both the woman and the man came to the synagogue in order to encounter God. That's why we go to church, right? But notice how when God in the flesh actually shows up, when Jesus walks into their midst in bodily form and does his thing, the two react very differently.

The synagogue ruler responds with fear and rigidity. Jesus was throwing him off his game, not fitting the script for how the liturgy is supposed to go. God showed up and the encounter demanded some flexibility – as if we, who rarely understand our children or our spouses or even ourselves, could understand and predict what God would choose to do! When the synagogue ruler couldn't handle the surprise, Jesus called him a “hypocrite.” “Hypocrite” is a Greek word that means actor. The synagogue ruler was acting like he was serving and seeking God, but when God showed up, it turned out that wasn't what the synagogue ruler wanted after all.

I wonder how sometimes our devotion to duty interferes with Jesus' attempts to love us? We're working so hard to do the right thing that we're not able to encounter God. Because if the Biblical accounts tell us anything, it is that God has a knack for showing up in unexpected ways. God ranges far past the bounds of human imagination and expectation, and comprehending how God is in the room requires a flexibility that often we lack. The purpose of worship and prayer is to prepare our hearts for the shock of encountering God!

I wonder how sometimes our piety can frustrate the very love of Jesus? How our convictions and sacred spaces can actually lead us away from Jesus and prevent us from experiencing his loving presence? Again this is because we get attached to the things, to the spaces, to the experiences themselves instead of using them to reach out toward the God who is reaching for us.

The woman, on the other hand, had a much clearer idea of what she was looking for. She was showing up for the sake of duty. She had her own pieties, her own ideas about approaching God. But when Jesus changed the script, when he asked her to come near to him, she didn't say, “Hey, this isn't how it's supposed to go! The sequence hymn comes next!” Instead she responded to God in the room. When Jesus healed her, she cried out “Hallelujah” and praised God. And Jesus named her not a hypocrite, but a Daughter of Abraham: one in whom God's steadfast covenant with the patriarch was confirmed.

IV. Invitation

I go to church not because it's my job. I'm here looking for Jesus. I think the pieties, the traditions, of the Episcopal Church are a great gift and help to my search for Jesus. But I'm looking for something more than tradition and piety. I'm looking for an Eternal kind of life. I'm looking to launch my little pilgrim coracle out into the deep waters of life and faith and dependence upon God. I, too, want to be a Son of Abraham, a disciple of Jesus.

Why do you go to church? What did you come here to find? What will you lose if you find it? What will you gain? Are you ready to take the risk?

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