

A DESIRE TO BE CLOSER TO GOD

Sometimes, around midsummer, I get this need to forget all the details and trappings and prepositional phrases of the life of the church and get back to what the Christian Faith is about. When I start asking “What am I doing here?” – I need summations, not details. I do not mean theological summations. I mean summations of Jesus’ story, and how we are still part of it.

In the wake of Jesus’ ministry on earth, amazing and profound things took place in the lives of those who believed in Him. For two or three years, Jesus taught and healed and made friends, and He spoke of life’s true purposes in ways that seemed both old and new, yet compelling. The growing response of the common people brought Jesus into increasing conflict with the religious and political structures of the time. Jesus would neither cooperate with the existing leadership nor sidestep the growing issues between His WAY and the way of the establishment. Since He would neither run nor fight, it ended in His crucifixion. Stunned and staggered for a short time, His followers quickly recovered and became dynamic witnesses and bearers of His new WAY of Life.

When asked how it was possible for them to do all that they were doing, they invariably said it was because Jesus had appeared to them after His death and was still with them, guiding and upholding them all the time. They always added that He would do the same for anyone who really wanted such an arrangement with Him.

And that’s it – the summation! The rest is history – history unfolding, and all the fascinating details that go with it.

The life of Jesus of Nazareth is incredible and endlessly fascinating. But the reason the world remembers Him is because of what happened to His followers. You know how it is: You grow up in this world, full of enthusiasm and curiosity. The possibilities seem endless, and the variety of experiences calls us to come taste and succeed and amount to something. Of course, there are warnings and rules running through it all, but that does not kill our enthusiasm when we are young.

After thirty or forty years, however, most people notice that there are set patterns underneath the variety of events. Most people find their niche or rut and pretty much stay there. New names and faces appear in the news, but the story gets more and more familiar. Nations rise and fall, but the problems remain the same. After the first three hundred times we watch a love triangle working its way through to its inevitable conclusion, somehow the plot does not seem as riveting as it did the first time. We end up suspecting that things do not change very much. We keep hoping, for a while, that they will. We keep longing for growth and change in ourselves. But it gets harder to think we will ever really change very much after the first few hundred tries. The second verse is the same as the first, and so is the two hundredth. Things go on and events keep happening, but nothing really changes. Not until or unless God comes into the picture.

The followers of Jesus – followers of all ages and both sexes – were really changing. And they liked it! The people who became their friends began to change too. That’s why we remember Jesus. What was He? What was there about Him that could have such an incredible impact on people? How did that happen, and why?

My own suspicion is that a lot of the people of the early church did not have any clear explanation for what was happening to them. They knew that they loved and trusted Jesus. They knew He was present with them – guiding and inspiring them – in the guise of what they increasingly called “the Holy Spirit.” This was long before any doctrine of the Trinity had been thought about. Most of the early followers, I suspect, were content to respond to what they were experiencing within and finding in fellowship with each other. So their lives changed, and they became humble, forgiving, loving people – most of all, perhaps, people of hope. They did not have many explanations for how it was happening, except they knew they were accepted and cared about, truly and deeply, by Jesus. They believed that also meant they were accepted and loved by God. So that came out in the way they did everything and in their attitudes toward everything. Those who knew them would often feel the warmth and the joy and want to be part of it too. So the Christian Faith literally spread like wildfire through the Roman Empire and beyond.

Here we sit, all these many years later, still wondering what it’s all about. It is miraculous that we do sit here – that there are still congregations of people all over this island and the nation and the world who still gather to honor and celebrate what Jesus has

opened up for us, and to find some way, if possible, to get in on the excitement. But lots of times it is not very exciting anymore. Many people are as excited about the Christian Faith and helping to bring or build the Kingdom of God as they are about brushing their teeth, paying their taxes, or doing any of the things we categorize as necessary or “good for us.”

Another way of saying it is that we do not change easily anymore. The patterns of discipline and devotion that once characterized the joy and hope of the Christian Faith now often survive as mere obligations – obligations that are never enforced. We try to *make* ourselves pray; you could not stop the early Christians from praying! We try to make ourselves forgive; that is not the same as being filled with such acceptance and grace that it just spills over. We try to make ourselves be generous; there have been those who have given to the church because being one of the *ecclesia* (the people of God) was so wondrous to them and they wanted everybody to have the experience of being part of it.

No, we do not change so easily anymore. We are more “mature” than our early-church counterparts. No matter how good any message is, we all develop resistance to it when it becomes known and familiar. We guard ourselves against its enthusiasm and exuberance, then sort of “dare it” to sweep us off our feet like it did Peter or Paul or Silas. And if somebody tells us the story of the Prodigal Son or the Waiting Father or the Self-Righteous Brother, we say, “Yeah, I already heard that one,” as if it were some kind of joke for our amusement or entertainment. It does not always occur to us that we are still prodigal or waiting or self-righteous, even if we have already heard it.

So the early Christians were *experiencing* their faith. They were losing their jobs and finding new ones. They were risking their lives and finding new ones. They were losing old relationships and finding new ones. They were far more vulnerable in the world and worrying about it a lot less. They had something to share and to say because of what was happening as they prayed and as they “heard” that Spirit Being talking to them within – giving them suggestions, offering guidance, making requests, sending them on all kinds of errands. And they dropped whatever they had to in order to respond to that Inner Voice: money, father, mother, wife – whatever they had to. They were *experiencing* their faith, and if and when they found time, they tried to explain to themselves and to each other what was happening. But the explanations did not much matter, because it was *happening*.

They found that LIFE with God was so much fun that it was worth any price on earth it might cost them. The explanations were only for fun – for sharing in their spare time. The explanations did not really matter. The experience was what mattered – the reality of Life in God’s presence.

Today we have a tendency to think about it and think about it and not really try it on very much. If we think about it long enough, maybe it will sink in enough and we will suddenly want to try it all the way. At least that seems to be the theory. And maybe on occasion that does happen to an individual here or there. But not for most. For most people, the experience comes first, then the explanation. How do you describe the value of friendship to someone who has never had a true friend and who suspects there is no such thing? It is always the human dilemma: We cannot find out unless we try something. But trying things is dangerous. If they do not work out, *then* where are we? And life is neither long enough nor strong enough to try everything or to survive everything. Maybe that’s why they call it a “leap of faith.” Somewhere along the line, if we want to know about the Kingdom that Jesus talks about, we have to want to know badly enough to risk everything we have to go find out by trying it on. Maybe it will end in disaster, but there is only one way to find out. Was it any different for Peter or James or Luther – or anybody?

I think it was G.K. Chesterton who said that Christianity “has not been tried and found wanting; it has been found difficult and left untried.” That may be all right for some people. But how will *we* explain it to our God if we make it all the way through this life and never really “try” the Christian WAY with wholehearted enthusiasm, as if it were our highest and most important concern?

What am I accusing you of now? I am not accusing you – I am accusing us. And I am accusing us of the same thing I always accuse us of: cheating ourselves out of some of the best joy and peace and love there is. We are not cheating ourselves out of *all* of it, of course; some of us have found and are still finding some of it. But it’s nowhere near what the Christ is sitting here waiting and hoping to give to us.

So yes, I am accusing us of trying the Christian Faith tentatively, piecemeal, skimpily, fearfully, and partially – on purpose. I am accusing us of trying to *think* our way into Christendom – trying to talk ourselves into it – and getting into endless arguments with ourselves that prevent us from actually *trying* it. “*O taste and see that the LORD is good.*” (Psalm 34:8) If your spiritual life is not dynamic and exciting, do not

just assume that there is something wrong with the church or with the Faith, God, or even you. All you need to do is choose one of the disciplines of the Christian Life that you have never seriously tried before and start doing it. (That's point number one in this sermon.)

There are members among us who have never really committed themselves to worship with us. They come to evaluate or criticize or encourage. Sometimes they like it; sometimes they do not. Sometimes they do not come for a while; sometimes they do. But they have never really committed themselves to worship with us. Yet that is one of the requirements. You cannot "try" the Christian Life alone. You have to join with a congregation somewhere, know yourself a part of it, care about it, pray over it, work for it, want its love to grow and spread – all "under God's mercy and will." Some of our members have thought about Christianity, but they have not tried it at this level because they have never committed themselves to worship with us (or with any congregation).

You may think it unfair for me to mention, but I do know that we have some members who do not go to their prayers each morning to dedicate themselves anew to do God's will insofar as they can understand it. Some of us say we are lazy, and others of us say we are too busy to give God our precious time. But those are not the issues. We have areas and categories of our lives that we wish to stay in control of – that we are not willing to turn over to the light and guidance of the Holy Spirit. Talking about it is minor; *experiencing* the Holy Spirit is everything. But the Spirit will not talk to us very often unless we turn our lives over. There is no way we can be the church or know what Christianity is about if we do not try it on.

We have members who do not study the Scriptures. We have members who do not tithe. We have members who have never tried forgiving their enemies. We have members who have never tried to accept or receive the sacrifice of Christ on the Cross. We have members who have never turned their vocations over to God. We have members who have never turned their fears over to Christ. None of these ways of behaving are incidental. These are all major, basic steps of the Christian WAY. Christ comes to us most often and most clearly when we are struggling to do what His WAY requires of us. That is how we become the church. We cannot give what we do not have. We cannot tell others of things we have not experienced. We cannot be what we have not done.

The reverse of these is also true. We have members who are trying and experiencing one or another of each of these steps of the Christian Path. Some of us are getting excited, finding miracles, and experiencing amazing changes going on in our lives. Others of us are changing, but only a little bit, in a few areas. And then we all get together – those of us changing not at all, those of us changing a little, and those of us in dramatic new love affairs with the Christ – and guess what happens?

Of course! Those who are not growing tend to discourage or discredit those who are. (Why do you think Jesus was so angry with the Pharisees?) And those who are pretty new at it can sometimes be discouraged if they think the negative (cynical) attitudes or remarks are coming from veterans of the Christian Life who know what they are talking about (rather than from spectators who maybe have been around for a long time and talk about it but never try it).

Once I was sitting in a twelve-step meeting, listening to one of the brethren expound on the great virtues of twelve-step programs in comparison to the hypocrisy and ineptitude of the church. That happens frequently. You would be surprised at how many alcoholics believe they have, during some period of their lives, “tried the church” and found no help there. No reason to limit the category to alcoholics. It is a strange phenomenon: we get familiar with this place and with each other, we get busy with our activities and normal programs, and then we forget that people are dropping in from time to time, looking for a spiritual WAY – for the Faith we represent. Is that not why we are here?

Anyway, this fellow did not know I was a minister. He was not after me; he was just telling it like he saw it. And how he saw it was really skewed. Nevertheless, it got me to thinking what it would be like if twelve-step groups eventually evolved to an approach similar to what we now have in the church.

I tried to picture an AA group that invited everybody who was interested in alcohol, on any level and for whatever reason, to come and participate. People would gather around the tables, and some would have brought their booze and be drinking it. Others would be talking about how it had ruined their lives. And quite a few folk would be there for no defined reason yet – thinking of giving it up or thinking of going back to it; not really certain it mattered one way or the other, but they “liked the people.” Frequently there would be big discussions

about whether people should or should not drink, and whether people should or should not work the program if they wanted to stop drinking. And there would always be a contingent of those who claimed to have tried sobriety for a while and found it did not do anything for them. So after every twelve-step meeting, some of the members would go home roaring drunk, some only tipsy, some sober. Some people would come to the meetings to drink, some to study the twelve steps. But it would be hard to study the steps with drinkers interrupting. And every time a discussion started, it would turn into an argument about whether the steps were important or necessary in the first place, instead of being a time for exploration of what the step itself was about and how to actually take it.

I wonder how many people would get help by going to twelve-step groups if they were run like that? If you had a friend or a loved one who really needed help, how encouraged would you feel about sending them into a mess like that?

In the AA program, there is one requirement for membership: “A desire to stop drinking.” What is the requirement for membership in the Christian church? A desire to stop sinning. In our language: A desire to stop being alienated from God. A desire to be closer to God. A desire to do God’s will.

Do you have any idea what would happen around here if every single one of us – every member of this church – had a desire to get closer to God? What would happen to us, and between us, if we all knew, for positive sure, that each and every one of us had a sincere and burning desire to be closer to God – to do God’s will?

Point number two in this sermon: From now on, ASSUME IT! From now on, from this very moment, assume that everyone you know or meet here has a sincere and burning desire to be closer to God – to do God’s will.