

## WHAT KIND OF CHURCH WILL WE BE?

Sunday, April 26, 2009 - 3 Easter – Grace Episcopal Church, Haddonfield, NJ

Rev. Dr. Patrick R. Close

As I prepare to go on my sabbatical this week, I have been talking with people about what I plan to do with my time. Besides some rest, reconnecting with family and friends, and self care ministry ... I want to explore some things to bring back to Grace Church in the fall. I am looking for ideas, inspiration and the Spirit to help us be a better faith community, a better church. The question that Eastertide places before us, with its discussion of the early Christian community, is “What kind of Church will we be?”

This past week Diane and I had the occasion to visit with some friends for a dinner in Philadelphia. Don is on the Board for Campus Ministry in the Diocese of Pennsylvania. Temple University’s campus ministry was hosting a fund raising dinner at St. Luke’s and Epiphany Church on 13<sup>th</sup> Street. There was the usual feasting, drinking, conversations, auction and other activities that any fundraising event has ... but there were also the college kids. I spoke with several of them. There was Faith, from Connecticut, excited about both college and continuing to live her beliefs at college. There was Jenna, about to graduate, excited and scared about the future, but confident that God was with her in what was before her. The stories were the same, college kids and Christian faith ... the two can go together!

I was most impressed by Rev. Greg Wilson, the chaplain, when he spoke about the campus ministry at Temple University. He said that they had no chapel, no gothic church building to gather in ... they had no office on campus and had to rely on whatever room the college would loan them for meetings ... but they did have ...the kids! They had people! As a matter of fact, they had one of the largest groups ever this past year! Yes, the budget was always a strain to meet. Yes, they had to do a lot of fundraising to make ends meet ... but they had each other.

How does this group be the Church? They do so by the generosity of churches loaning them space to meet. They depend on the internet, texting and cell phones to communicate (clearly these are young people of the current age!). They host a different kind of weekly meeting, a “Theology Thursday” ... that meets in a bar! I think Jesus would approve, after all, he went where the people were ... and the kids said it was a relaxed and comfortable environment where they could safely ask the questions they had ... and it wasn’t about drinking!

Greg said that each generation of the Church has to ask the same question: “Where is God speaking to this generation?” He said it shapes all ministries. Have we asked that question of ourselves? Or are we so tied to the way things have always been done that we don’t bother to ask? Where are all our college kids? Yes, we see some when they are home from school ... or at holidays. We send them care packages twice a year to let them know we are thinking about them ... but where are we deliberately and intentionally reaching out to the next generation? Where will the Church be ... tomorrow?

Take a few moments and look around Church this morning. Not all our college kids and young adults are away. How many do you see in the pews today? Is there room for them?

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**Are we doing what we can to invite and include these young people? What kind of Church will we be?**

**A couple of weeks ago, I read an article in Newsweek magazine that said Christianity is declining in America. The Episcopal Church says that by 2025, membership may be done as much as 25%. Do we have nothing to say to the young people today? How will we speak to people and what changes might we have to make to include more people in our midst?**

**If we want some ideas about how to be the Church, it helps to look back at the information we have about the early Christian communities. The Christian Church took place in the midst of persecution and animosity ... but it spread like wild fire. What can we carry forward to help grow our Church today? The Book of Acts shows us an early community making Christ known to the world.**

**Today's reading is one of Peter's sermons that speak to a world about the healing presence of Jesus Christ. What we don't have in the reading is the event that sets the stage. Peter and John were going to the Temple to pray. There was a lame man, begging by the entrance. When Peter meets him, he says that he doesn't have any gold or silver, but in the name of Jesus Christ ... walk! And the miracle happens!**

**Peter uses this moment to explain that it is not him who has the power to heal. He talks about the power of Jesus Christ working through him to affect the miracle! Peter goes on to say that he, and we, are witnesses to what God is doing in Jesus Christ. Christ is present in our lives and now signs and wonders will be done through his disciples and believers! We are now conduits of the Christ's presence. Now that is something the Church can continue to be today!**

**The First Letter of John we read today is one of my favorites. In chapter four it announces the truth that God is love. In this passage we read and hear that we are God's children! We are challenged to live it in our lives. Have you ever noticed how children view the world? Often it is with joy and wonder and awe. Take this warm summer like day. Ask any teacher what happens in schools when this kind of weather approaches! The kids get excited and the energy levels surge! What happens to us adults? Too often each day is met with complaints, fear, anxiety or loathing.**

**If you ask kids what they think of a lot of adults, they say, "They're grumpy!" We let our maturity, our wisdom, and our experiences to turn us into grumpy old people. We lose the joy and excitement that children have ...and yet, God says we are God's children! Maybe it's time we live it and act like it! Will people be able to know that we are God's children, or Christians, by how they see us living and acting? What kind of Church will we be? I hope we will be more children friendly and inviting. Perhaps then we'll be able to be more children like in our lives and faith as well!**

**Finally, we hear in Luke today another story of the Risen Lord's appearing to the disciples. Jesus comes and stands among them, like what we hear in the Gospel of John. Notice the**

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first thing he says, “Peace be with you.” Christ brings us peace. He overcomes our fear anxiety with his presence and words of assurance. Are we people of peace? There is also some mystery here. Jesus appears in the flesh, he has a form. Jesus is not a ghost. This is not “Casper, the friendly ghost.” You can’t look through him. He is real. His presence is real.

Jesus asks for something to eat and they give him a piece of broiled fish. Jesus TAKES and EATS the piece of fish. Does this seem at all familiar? It sounds like the verbs from our Holy Communion service, from the common meal we share together, doesn’t it? Not only is presence is form part of the community, but so are the sacraments! Jesus will go on to interpret the Scriptures, so the Bible story is vital to the Christian Church.

Finally, Jesus will say to the disciples, and to us today, that they are to be witnesses. There is a profound need for the Church in any generation to take the message outside of what we hear inside these walls, in this building, and out the doors to the world! Maybe one of the reasons that our church growth is slowed and is declining is that we come here for ourselves, but forget that we are called to take the message out into the world of which we are part. Do you think there might be anyone else that might need to hear, see and participate in what we have today? What kind of Church will we be?

In Luke’s gospel we see that the Church has the form of a community. Important to it is the presence of Jesus, the sacraments, the Scriptures, and sharing the Good News. In this community the presence of Jesus Christ is celebrated and then taken out into the world! When this happens, people’s lives are transformed. It’s time for us to think about, and act upon our faith. It’s time for us to see what the Church has been and what it will become. I will end today with the question that I will ponder while I am away. When I come back, I want to hear from you.

... What kind of Church will we be?