

I asked for the opportunity to preach this Sunday to persuade you to attend the adult forum I will be leading this and the next two weeks. In the adult forum, I will take a humorous approach to serious issues. For this sermon, I am taking a more serious approach to serious issues, and we can discuss what I say in the sermon in the forum, or after the service.

I want to take this time to reflect on what it means to be an Episcopalian and a Christian and realize that sometimes one can be a very good Episcopalian without necessarily being a Christian and certainly one can be a Christian without being an Episcopalian. The challenge is to be both Christian and Episcopalian at the same time with priority being given to Christianity over being part of this denomination.

That is not too hard today. When I was a boy, and maybe even a baby priest, most Episcopalians had always been Episcopalians or at least had decided to become Episcopalians and learned something about our strange ways of doing things. That is not the case today. Most Episcopalians, and this may be true for Christ & Holy Trinity but I don't know for sure, are members of a local congregation first, with little loyalty or sense of affiliation towards the denomination.

We see evidence of this when congregations seek to leave the Episcopal Church and discover that their buildings are owned by the Diocese. This makes us significantly different from, for instance, our near neighbor, Saugatuck Church. The United Church of Christ does not own Saugatuck Church, the members do. The Diocese of Connecticut, and ultimately the Domestic and Foreign Missionary Society (the legal name of the Episcopal Church) owns Christ & Holy Trinity. They do this even though you and I pay all of the costs of Christ & Holy Trinity and if we add new buildings or upgrade them, we pay those costs too, but the diocese owns them. Whether we agree with the theological or political positions of the denomination, our building is owned by the denomination. This is the cause of much consternation in breakaway parishes. In this diocese, several churches attempted to break away. Some of them ultimately gave up, Bristol settled with the diocese, at least one is in court, Seabury Church in Groton, and the status of St. Paul's Darien is unsettled. While many of us may have chosen to come to Christ & Holy Trinity because of the preschool, the choirs, the sermons, friends, or the clergy, once here we are part of a hierarchical church.

I am a cradle Episcopalian, as are John and Joe Wagenseller. Most clergy are not cradle Episcopalians. Most clergy, like most parishioners, chose the Episcopal Church. We can only hope that the clergy knew what they were choosing.

So let me look at the Gospel for clues as to what it means to be Christian. Jesus heals Simon Peter's mother-in-law and then tells her to be quiet about it. Why would he do this? Obviously, Jesus has a knack for healing and it could be a big moneymaker, but he consistently, especially in Mark's Gospel, heals and asks the person healed not to spread the word.

Was he being selfish? Was he saying that only some people are worth healing while others are not? Was he feeling overworked? Or overwhelmed? Probably not. The reason for the silence was much simpler. He did not come to be a healer; the Christ is not principally a healer, he came to preach the inbreaking Kingdom of God. That is, he came to say that now is the moment to make the decision and be for God or against God. The hour is late and our lives need to be conformed to this simple choice. Of course, 2,000 years later the perspective on the cry that we need to decide now seems somewhat dated. The world did not end. Nevertheless, the Gospels call us to make that decision as if the hour were very late. Are we for God or not? That is the only choice, in the Gospels. It is not up for debate.

Mark is very clear. We are not Christian because Jesus was a great healer. Jesus did not earn our obeisance by promising us health or wealth.

Elsewhere the Gospels are clear that we are not Christian because Jesus was a great teacher. I make the radical statement that he did not teach anything that was not already true or believed, even the summary of the law, you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and your neighbor as yourself. Likewise the Golden Rule predates Jesus, do unto others as they have done to you... Jesus did not teach anything extraordinary. He did not comment on many issues that we wish he had commented upon. Much of what he taught is hyperbolic because he was preaching that we must be radically dependent upon God. For instance the Jimmy Carter sin, if your eye causes you to sin pluck it out, better to go to heaven with one eye than to have your whole body go to Gehenna (Matt 5:29).

We do not learn our way to Christianity and Christianity is not a sophisticated religion. Sophisticated people from time-to-time make it difficult to be Christian, but Christianity is not sophisticated.

Mark is saying that the sine qua non of Christianity is belief in the resurrection. Without the resurrection, Jesus is only of interest as a 1st century rabbi. He was not even as radical as John the Baptist. He seemed pretty ordinary in his teaching and even his healing was not unheard of. Jesus is worshiped as Lord only because of the resurrection. He is not worshiped because of the Virgin Birth, whatever that means, he is not worshiped because of healing, he's not worshiped because he could resuscitate the dead, he's not worshiped because he spoke truth to power by challenging the authorities—which he didn't do often—he is Lord because of the resurrection and this action alone reveals him as the Son of God.

Mark shows Jesus as engaging in healing as a proleptic event. That is, in the healing miracles Jesus gives us a view of what heaven will be like. Jesus does not say that simply being Christian is enough to be healed. He says that the most important thing is to realize and live as if God's kingdom is actually coming.

You can be an Episcopalian without accepting the resurrection. For some of us it is enough to accept the reality of the crucifixion and that Jesus really existed. But without accepting the resurrection, we are not Christian.

Now of course this is a ridiculous statement. One cannot really be an Episcopalian without being a Christian, but I have seen many Episcopalians who were unsure of the Resurrection, except as a superstitious belief, but very aware that there are benefits to being an Episcopalian. So from a practical standpoint one can be Episcopalian without being Christian. (The same holds true for Roman Catholics, Lutherans, Congregationalists, Presbyterians etc.)

Being a non-Christian Episcopalian means preserving the traditions of the church because they are somehow good for us. Being a Christian Episcopalian means challenging our traditions because some of them confine us. Being a non-Christian Episcopalian means belonging to a club of like-minded people. Being a Christian Episcopalian means belonging to a church that challenges us to be faithful to things that may not be in our personal best interest, for instance God's preferential option for the poor.

I speak as an Anglo-Catholic who loves liturgy, the sacraments, good music, intelligent preaching and theological conundrums when I say that haberdashery, solid liturgy, inspiring words and debating theological questions are of no value if they are not rooted in a belief in the resurrection.

Now, what does it mean to believe in the resurrection? It means that nothing in this world, position, income, prestige, good manners, being tacky, or even family, is more important than living with the realization that Christ died for our sins and therefore the only important thing we do is to live as if our sins are forgiven, our future is secure and we need to share this good news with others. By this definition, I am not Christian. I still put a lot of things before my confidence/faith in the resurrection. But I am striving to be Christian. I am clearly a better Episcopalian than I am a Christian.

Therefore, I work on being a Christian, not being an Episcopalian. It is very easy to be an Episcopalian. We define membership as being baptized. We give you a vote if you are baptized, confirmed or received (and this is not always enforced) and are known to the treasurer. Generally, we expect you to attend church 3 times/year to vote. But we do not keep careful records so really being baptized and being known to the treasurer are the requirements to be an Episcopalian. Not a very high bar. On the other hand being a Christian, in the sense I am using it, means living one's life in light of the resurrection. There is nothing that can separate you, as a Christian, from the Love of God, and the challenge we have as Christians is behaving first as if that is important and 2nd as if we believe it. Christianity is a process and our experience as Christians deepens as we learn more about the importance of the resurrection.

Therefore, in the forum, I am going to talk with you a little bit about what it means to be an Episcopalian but underlying this and the next 2 weeks will be an attempt to help you and me work out what it means to be Christian. I hope you enjoy the journey and at the other end of it have a better understanding of what it means to be faithful.