

Church of the Good Shepherd
and
St. John the Evangelist

7th Sunday in Pentecost
July 18, 2004
Fr. Bill McGinty

“Reach Out!”

When the Second Vatican Council met in Rome in 1963, it had no clue as to what its outcome could or would be. It had been called by Pope John XXIII in the first year of his reign. People were surprised. They had expected nothing from the aging prelate, considering him a mere caretaker Pope! But Councils of the Church for Catholics are serious, happening every hundred or so years!

John the XXIII invited theologians and Bishops from other Christian Denominations including the Anglican Communion. The Roman Curia, the Cardinals who make up the Pope’s Councils, had already drawn up an agenda and had begun to write documents to be published after the Council, confirming what they believed was the status quo in the Church. The first thing the Council did was to throw them out and instead turned to weeks of prayer calling the Holy Spirit to guide the Council.

Watching what Catholics were doing in those years, 1963 – 1965, prompted us, their cousins in the Anglican Church, to conclude that they were having a sort of 20th Century Reformation.

The next fifteen years were exciting, inspiring, adventurous, and full of activity. And not just for the Catholics in the Roman sense, but for the rest of us who felt a great stirring of Christianity’s social conscience. It was a time of change, sparked perhaps by John Kennedy in his short presidency, by Martin Luther King, Jr., in his Civil Rights campaigns, and by an energized youth movement that was restless for social change and justice.

Christians, like us, saw it as an opportunity to present the Gospel as a blueprint for man’s redemption. Musicals like “Jesus Christ Superstar” and “Godspell” seemed to amplify that message.

Now, today, thirty or forty years on, the challenges that we face are so much different because we live in a different world! No longer do we fear Communism and the Eastern Bloc. Nor are we concerned about the nuclear threat or the arms race. So, what does concern Christians and Episcopalians in particular that shakes us out of our complacency and invites us to go and battle on behalf of the Gospel and Christ?

To me it is summed up in two phrases: “The Sermon on the Mount” and Outreach! Cause once you have read the “Sermon on the Mount” in Matthew, Chapter five, you can’t climb back into the pew and merely listen to the Word of God! You can’t do that! You can’t be a hearer of the word only; you have to become a doer of the word, and if you become a doer of the word, then you are talking about reaching out to others! Because there is something so compelling about the Imperative morale in Matthew 5 and 6, “Go do unto others as you would have them do unto you!” that you can no longer use your religion as a means of

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propping up your life! You cannot anymore use your Church to prop up your marriage! You cannot just come to Church so your kids can have some friends! When you read Matthew 5 and 6, you become someone who must enact Jesus' message and make it come about for real. Christians are not people who go to Church! Christians are people who build Churches – build communities.

The “Sermon on the Mount” is dangerous! Seriously dangerously! The “Sermon on the Mount” will turn you into a fanatic, just like Saint Paul! People will not want you in their lives, at least not for long periods! The “Sermon on the Mount” will make you seriously unbalanced!

“You are the light of the world,” you cannot hide that light. You must go outside these walls where it can be seen! You must let others see the good that you do so they too will turn to God as their Father!

You must become a different kind of person, not one who visits anger on anger! Not one who fights evil with evil, but a person who brings peace and harmony!

And the good that you find in the pages of God's word you cannot hoard for yourself. You have to share it with others! Christians cannot pre-select their friends! We have 2 1/2 million people suffering from AIDS! We have whole populations discriminated against because of the color of their skin. We want to point the finger at other people's sin and say, “I am not like that!” NO! The Gospel says reach out to your brother! Give your coat to a sister! Walk the extra mile with the stranger! Sounds easy doesn't, it?! The Gospel is not easy! The Gospel is tough love and we have to dispense it!

Trouble is we couldn't recognize an AIDS victim if we tripped over him at the Church door, and we never talk to strangers, let alone go the extra mile with him! Truth be told, we don't walk!

People, we have to get some serious outreach programs started. If we didn't have the food pantry program, we wouldn't have anything!

We have to preach the Gospel by what we do! What are you prepared to do for the Gospel this week? Will you visit a hospital? Will you spend an hour with a senior in a nursing home or senior care? If you had a neighbor with AIDS, would you cook for him? If I have a Eucharist for AIDS victims and their families here in this Church, would you come?

There is a truth in the statement that the Gospel doesn't really reach your heart till it makes you feel uneasy! The Gospel should make you feel uncomfortable! It should make you say, “God, what am I doing here?” It made the Pharisees uncomfortable. That is why they silenced Jesus!

In 1986, I visited a leper colony in China. I definitely felt uneasy. When Debbie Conroy first stepped into the Pike County Jail, she felt uneasy. When they suggested we should

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think of setting up a half-way house for prisoners let out on probation, it was uneasy thinking about it. Tell the town council we are looking after ex-cons, they will feel uneasy too!

The truth is we don't like that uncomfortable feeling. Jesus, in the "Sermon on the Mount" says, "Love your enemies." That's okay if we are talking about the Russians because they live far, far away, but Mary Smith in the next pew talks about me on the telephone in her not-so-secret telephone gossip ring. Am I supposed to love her? See the Gospel is tough. It makes the demands. It will not let us be the romantic little cobblestone church in quiet little Milford!

- 1) It wants to tell us that there are children out there being abused and what are we going to do about it?
- 2) It tells us there is an eleven year-old boy in Matamoras who needs an organ, a liver transplant, what are we doing about it?
- 3) In our town, fathers meet their kids in McDonald's on cold wet days and have no where to take them – what do you want to do about it?
- 4) And on a street in Port Jervis, a teenager is offered drugs by a pusher after her father threw her out of the house when she told him she was gay – what are you going to do about it?

By now you should be feeling uncomfortable! "Comfortable Episcopalians" should be an oxymoron! Episcopalians cannot afford to feel comfortable because we should be in the outreach business. Read back the minutes of the Women's Guild in our archives and you will read: "Outreach!" Read of the stream of parcels that left this church from 1941 to 1945 to soldiers, sailors, and airmen and you read: "Outreach!"

If we are not reaching out to others, then the words we read in our Holy Book are dead words and Jesus' words, his commands, are not getting through to us and are not being obeyed!

Jesus, the Word should send a shiver through us; Jesus, our Master, our Teacher, who presides here in this place at every Eucharist, in every meeting, gracing every activity! If he did indeed make his presence visible, would that make you feel uneasy! Would you find the stare of his deep brown Arab eyes too penetrating? Would you find yourself working twice as hard at the flea market or any other activity? If you knew he would be at the worship committee meeting or the divorced and single parent group, would you come, too?

I'm sure you would! WE have many projects going on in the church at this time. Today, make up your mind to join one of them! Reach out and touch a life that the Gospel may be played on the strings of your soul and Jesus Kingdom lived through you here and **NOW!**

The Gospel is not easy. It will take you and twist you every which way! It will wreck your schedule. It will drive your family insane. It will leave you with too much to do and unpaid bills. You let the Gospel seriously into your head and you will unleash the power of the

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Holy Spirit. One person filled with the Holy Spirit could transform this parish and shake the whole of Pike County. Tell me today that you feel a genuine commitment and you wish to receive the Holy Spirit and we will all lay hands on you next Sunday and then watch out, because you will be fired up and unstoppable. We might as well dismiss the vestry and the priest-in-charge because this church would never look back.

Just once, step forward, open your heart and say “God, my God – alone I can do nothing – transform my life from this moment on, deepen my faith, breathe in me hope, fill me with the love that flowed from his Cross, make me one in Spirit with the power of God, that I may live and others may live through me! Come Holy Spirit!

Amen +

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