

Church of the Good Shepherd and St. John the Evangelist

Week 3 The Parish Project
September 30, 2007
Fr. Bill McGinty

“To be Gospel Driven with Christ at Our Center”

There is a church in England called the Cathedral Church of Christ the King. It is made of concrete and sits on a hill. On all sides it has thick modern stain glass and a central funnel that raises high above the church. Yet, the greatest visible characteristic of the church is that it is round. People remember that for the simple reason that most churches are built in the shape of a cross. We call it cruciform.

A cruciform church reminds us all of the reason that we are here in the first place. We are here because of Jesus and his story of salvation. Sometimes we forget that. We tell ourselves that we come to church to worship our God or we come to church to have our spiritual needs met; we come for the fellowship or we wish to be with our parish family, but the truth is that any Christian church is there because of Jesus. All around our church tells the story of the Gospel. In a sense we are a “living virtual tour” of the birth, teaching, life and death of Christ.

If the shape of our church is a cross, then the windows tell the story of birth, ministry, teaching, parables and death. And as that story unfolds, we the congregation are not passive. We are not watchers. It is not an entertainment. We are participants. We are disciples, followers and even Apostles.

At the bell we gather and we sing our song in praise of God. We listen as Jesus teaches us in the lesson, reading or Gospel. We shout as Jesus’ listeners shouted: “Amen” we agree; or “thanks be to God.”

We stand to affirm our faith and repeat the words we first professed at Baptism in the Creed. At the offertory we bring gifts as the Wise men brought gifts. Our Altar Guild women “The Ladies of the White Glove,” have already prepared the table of the Lords supper. In bringing up the elements we also bring ourselves, our problems, our talents, our concerns and we lay them on the paten alongside the bread.

As the priest raises the chalice and the paten he offers these gifts to the Father. The Eucharist is an offering to God of the best that we have. The best is the story of Jesus in linking ourselves to it; we acknowledge that we too are a part of his story of salvation.

Think about it. We are gathered around a table. On it are the fair linens reminding us of the burial shroud of Jesus. The priest is dressed in a Baptismal robe.

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We say: “ this is my body; this is my blood,” under the shadow of a cross. Like the disciples we eat the Body and Blood together.

At the end, Christ blesses us and sends us out to do the work that he would do. Visit the sick, feed the poor, heal the lame, care for the widows and orphans, help the oppressed, and seek for justice, right and equality. Just as the disciples were commissioned and sent out by Jesus in the Gospel, we are sent out into our week to proclaim the Jesus story, in our ordinary lives.

That is why we are here. We are here to be disciples, to continue the saving work of Christ in the world and in this place. We go to church, what do we hear? Christ. We go out, what do we preach? Christ. In our life, what do we live? Christ. We can do no other than to preach out to others. “Hear word; preach word; live word, reach out”;- our mission statement.

It is not random nor arbitrary, it is the story of Peter and John in today’s first reading from the Acts of the Apostles. They were fishermen, but once they had experienced Jesus, once they had heard his teaching, their story changed. They could be fishermen no longer.

They had to go out and proclaim what they had heard. They had to live as Christ had lived, they had to heal, teach and reach out as Jesus did.

In today’s story their answer to: “Why are you doing this?” is : “Jesus Christ of Nazareth.” They are already Gospel driven with Jesus at their center. “We cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard.”

Yet, you and I did not spend three precious years being tutored by Jesus in Galilee. We did not stand and watch as Jesus the healer performed miracle after miracle making the blind see, the lame walk, and even raising the dead to life. How could we expect to have the faith and commitment of Peter and John?

50 years ago Kenny Brooks had his own story. It was the story of his life, his family and his place in the world. Then he met the wonderful Lucie. When they married all those years ago, his story became her story and her story became his story, ever since they have walked life’s path together.

Something like that has happened in our life too. We have met Jesus, we have heard his story. His story has become our story.

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The Early Church was every bit aware, that unlike the Apostles and first disciples, many Christians did not stand listening to Jesus at the Sea of Galilee. So they devised '*the three year cycle*' for the **Church's Calendar Year**.

It follows the three years of Jesus' earthy ministry, highlighting his teachings from all four Gospels. Each year it includes the highlights of his birth, death, Resurrection and Pentecost, at Christmas, Easter and spring.

From the 1st Sunday of Advent each year, through Christmas, Epiphany, Lent, Easter and Pentecost we are invited to journey through the life of Christ and participate in it. Our participation is called the Paschal Mystery. He is born, we are born, he is baptized, we are baptized, he teaches, we teach, he heals, we heal, he suffers, we suffer, he dies, we die, he rises to new life, we rise also.

That is what it means to be the Body of Christ. That is what it means to be followers of Jesus. That is what it means to be Gospel driven. That we take his story out into our world and we make it our story. Then we can call ourselves *Christ centered*. Then we can say we are "well" because we are living "in" Christ.

In the 2nd reading today, Paul is writing to the Philippians from prison. His words and mind are still centered on the Gospel. He says: "I am in chains, for Christ." It matters only that Christ is preached. For to me to live is Christ and to die is gain."

Paul, broken, in chains and in prison still thinks only of the Gospel and the centrality of Jesus Christ in his life. He has given everything for the Gospel. For him living meant Christ, dying will give him the one thing the other Apostles had, which he did not, time with his Christ.

Let me tell you what it means to be Gospel driven with Christ as our center. It comes from our Archives. It is written by a parishioner many years ago.

"When I rise early on a Sunday morning and make my way to church to perform my duties in the Altar Guild, I feel like those women making their way to Jesus' tomb on that 1st Easter morning. Through the dark, I pray a little prayer.

I let myself in and the church is dark just like Christ's tomb. I throw the switches and it floods with light like the light of Resurrection. I go about my duties arranging the Altar; the white fair linen reminds me of the burial shroud of Jesus. As I work I pray, counting out the communion breads and pouring the wine into its containers. I pray for all who will receive.

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Walking to the back of the church passing the Stations of the Cross I am reminded of Jesus' walk to Calvary. The morning light streams in through the Good Shepherd window as I arrange the Book of the Gospels between the two candles on the Altar.

I look down at my old and wrinkled hands and think of the long line of women who did these duties before me. As I bow to the cross I think of how honored and privileged I am and I pray for each one of them.

The cross flashes in the early morning light as the people begin to gather. It is quiet and silent and feels prayerful in this holy place".

Blanche Wood Terwillinger
January 1929

Let us pray in this Eucharist that we too may choose to serve also, and that Christ's story becomes the story of our life. As we depart out into our week that God may use our talents, be they as a writer, a housewife, a dentist, a cook, an Innkeeper, a creative designer, a school counselor, a nurse, a teacher, a waitress, a lawyer or a builder to bring Christ story to help others by the example of our lives.

And let us pray that our church be always Gospel driven with Christ at its center.

Amen+