

6 Pentecost
July 12, 2009
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“Why am I Episcopalian?”

John the Baptist is a courageous figure in the New Testament writings. He stands for integrity and honesty in the face of Judaism’s covenant with God. He will not be silent, when confronted by sin and evil and upholds the commandments even till his sad, tragic and pointless death at the hands of Herod.

It is from this moment onwards that more and more of his followers seek out Jesus, because they too are seeking answers and a hunger and a need to find God amid the harsh reality of their lives. It is a poignant and a transforming moment in the history of humankind’s salvation.

On a human and personal level many of us too have such a moment. It is that fork in the road, that moment of decision, when we must choose the road to our salvation and the path that takes us closer to Christ.

In our second reading today from Ephesians Chapter one, the citizens of that city are challenged by the author to accept Christ as their personal savior. The passage explains who Jesus is, his relationship to God, and what he has done, to vanquish sin and bring salvation within the reach of everyone. Now, they are told they must live by a new Spirit because truth has been revealed to them and they have been sealed by the Holy Spirit.

This passage is one of the first creeds of Christian belief. Creed, from the Latin word ‘credo-I believe.’”

By the time we have reached our adult years, we too should have our own credo. We should have our fix on what we believe and why we believe it. We will never be asked, like John the Baptist, in the Gospel story, to die for our credo, but we can resolve, in our lives, to live by it.

Today’s is the second summer sermon that addresses what we Episcopalians believe and why we believe it. It is an important question on our spiritual journey: “Why be Episcopalian?” I have met Episcopalians who know with a certainty, why they are Episcopalians. They have a strong sense of their identity and a firm hold on, and knowledge of their faith. They themselves can be divided into two groups: “cradle Episcopalians, born into their faith and raised by parents into it. And second, converts to the Episcopal Church, who have come searching for the right path for them, they have a hunger for the Spiritual and a need to find Christ and serve his Gospel.

So often the latter group brings to the church an energy, but also pain, brokenness, a cry for justice and a need for genuine Christian sharing and compassion.

It is my belief that they find that within the family of the Episcopal Church and they receive it from so many 'cradle' Episcopalians. In turn, they bring new life and service.

The Episcopalian church is very unique. Many have called it the 'middle way', via media. It has distinguishing marks that set it apart. Whereas, Roman Catholics claim that their church is founded on Scripture and tradition and broad based Protestant churches claim they are strictly Biblical, the Episcopal/Anglican faith claims it is founded on Scripture, tradition and reason.

"Why should that make a difference? Catholic and Anglican students share so much of the same theology that they are often taught together in the same University College.

Where Episcopalians and Anglican diverge from the Old Catholic faith is that we believe that each Christian is a moral agent with a brain and a conscience given by God and with the aid of scripture and tradition of his church, is quite capable of making his own moral decisions.

In terms of what we believe, that is a biggy. We are not saying that we don't need guidance or that the Ten Commandments are not binding, we are saying that coming to the correct moral decisions ourselves, is of more value than having a moral decision imposed on us, or being threatened by hell, damnation or condemned for our personal choices.

It is not a license for us Episcopalians to say: "Anything goes." But it is saying that each of us can work out our faith, personal salvation with the help of our reason, scripture, our church and most of all our personal relationship with Christ.

This is one of the most important reasons why so many people are attracted to the Episcopalian church. It is why we are often called a church of diversity and a church with a large umbrella under which many people find shelter and refuge.

That is not to say that we are right, and Roman Catholics and Baptists have it wrong, Far from it. Both are strong beautiful faiths and are the way to God and salvation for many wonderful people. God bless them, they are our brothers and sisters in Christ.

We are simply saying that the Episcopal way is right for us. To be Episcopalian is to be part rebel. Episcopalians are often free thinkers. They are both traditionalists and liberals at the same time. In the Episcopal Church liberals and traditionalists sit and pray together in the same pew. Episcopalians are high on tolerance, we just find it hard to agree on anything, from church government to church music, but we know that about ourselves. We put up with it, because we are family, we have a burning love of the Gospel, social justice, a need to serve the poor and an irrational need to shelter the stray dog and the rejected human spirit. It carries us passed so many of our differences to work together for the common good. Episcopalians are good in a crisis. They know prayer is important. They want to be healers, they are just afraid of being called 'charismatics.' They would love to pray out loud and shout: "Thank you, Jesus!" They're just afraid to be labeled Fundamentalist. They would like to burn incense or sing a hymn about 'Mary', but we are afraid to be called too "Catholic."

Any time I hear people whine: “We are becoming too catholic, or we sound too Baptist” I know they have no clue what they are talking about.

Ex-Baptists and Catholics smile because they have been there. No, the problem is not fearing that we are taking on the hallmarks of another church; the problem is not knowing why we are Episcopalian. The problem is not knowing the faith and church we attend each week. The problem is not knowing the unique character of our own church and the faith stories of all the wonderful people, who have journeyed here and share worship with us on any given Sunday.

The most important question in our lives today must be: “Why am I Episcopalian?” Not “why am I Christian. We could be Christian in any church. No! Why am I Episcopalian? Surely, the answer must be: “I am Episcopalian, because God led me here. He led me here for a reason. He led me here, because rich or poor, whole or broken, God had a purpose for me in this place. As a liberal, he brought me to teach the traditionalist to loosen up. He brought me that the traditionalist might teach me the beauty and the richness of the past. As a ‘cradle Episcopalian’, he kept me here to learn from the searcher, the seeker after God, the healers of pain, and he kept me here to welcome them into a family of love, tradition and fellowship.

This is our church, anyone entering our great red doors must come to know, that it is a faith and a church to love. They can only do that, if they are prepared to sit and read and learn about it and have knowledge of it.

Every time, I hear of complaints of inadequacies of the Episcopal church, I think to myself: “Awe, but if you could only see the beauty, the richness, the tender mercies and the sheer wonder of what this faith has to offer. Come closer. Seek and you will find. Knock on the door and it will open for you. To know the depth of our faith is to begin to understand the enormous wonder of our God. We Episcopalians believe that our church is God’s creation. We have no trouble knowing the love and richness and majesty of our God, we just have difficulty transferring those qualities to our wonderful church and faith. But I am sure that is what God thinks of us. He thinks of us as holy, sacred and to be cherished.

In our worship, let us do what David did in today’s first reading and praise God through dance. May our prayer and worship be a dance that affirms God’s presence in our midst and the mystery and wonder of his grace to us as a church and fellowship.

Amen+

