



Crazy Christians

*Homily by Lisa Wiens Heinsohn given for the people of St. John's Episcopal Church
June 9, 2019, Pentecost*

Our denomination, the Episcopal Church, has what we call a Presiding Bishop. How many of you know who he currently is? Our Presiding Bishop is Michael Curry, the one who preached at the royal wedding a year ago. As anyone who saw that homily knows, he is a wonderful preacher. When I was in seminary I had the great good fortune to hear him preach at a conference called Rethinking Evangelism. I know the word evangelism makes a lots of us twitch. And Rev. Curry said as much in his sermon. His opening line was this: “If you want to strike terror into the heart of any Episcopalian, tell them they have to witness.”¹

Some of you will immediately understand what he is talking about. For those of you who might be less familiar, in some denominations, to “witness” means to share your Christian faith with another person verbally, to talk about it, most particularly to someone who does not share the faith, perhaps even with the hope of helping that person come to faith in Christ. Now do you understand why Bishop Curry thought that many Episcopalians would rather do almost anything else?

I grew up in a Christian culture in which it was seen as an essential part of your faith to “witness” to other people, because we loved people and wanted “salvation”, which we thought mostly meant an afterlife in heaven,

¹ This is my memory of his sermon, which I saw live at the conference called “Rethinking Evangelism” at Luther Seminary, St. Paul, in the summer of 2014.

for all people. So I remember in Junior High school, that was what middle school was called back then, I and a friend actually picked up the phone in my parents' room and dialed a random number and tried to "witness" to the people who picked up the phone on the other end. In those days people always picked up the phone because there was no call waiting, you never knew who was calling, and there were also no telemarketers so it was almost always a friend or someone you wanted to hear from. So these gracious people picked up the phone on the other line. This was southern California in the late seventies / early eighties, so not exactly the most religious of places. And I remember them asking me, did your parents ask you to call us? And I truthfully said no, I just felt God wanted me to do this. They were very polite and got off the phone as soon as humanly possible. And I never did that again.

Even as an eleven or twelve year old, I realized that this was not going to be an effective or even necessarily polite thing to do to try to share my faith with random people in the hopes of getting them to see things the way I do. But here is the thing. All though the New Testament, there is the language of "witnessing". In the first chapter of Acts, the risen Jesus is with his disciples before he ascends into heaven, and he tells them to wait in Jerusalem for the promised gift of the Holy Spirit. He tells them this: "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." So there it is, Jesus talking about the disciples being his witnesses to the ends of the earth. In our own Book of Common Prayer, in our baptismal covenants, we promise to "share by word and deed the Good News of God in Christ." There is that pesky reminder that we are meant to share, not just by deed, but by word, what is the Good News of God in Christ. So what are we supposed to do with that, really?

Today is Pentecost, and it is the day that we honor what happened when the Holy Spirit did come upon the disciples. They began speaking in other

languages, just like we heard here in the sanctuary a few minutes ago. They were speaking about what God had done for them in new ways, in ways they had previously been unable to. And it was so powerful an experience, for them and for people around them, that three thousand people flocked to them that day, wanting to know what this was all about and if they could be involved as well. They were witnessing to something they had seen and experienced for themselves. This was what many people refer to as the birthday of the Church. It was the day that the power of the Holy Spirit came upon the disciples, and the Jesus movement was born. So happy birthday, everyone! Pentecost is about people receiving the power of the Holy Spirit, who gave them the ability to express in new language, in fresh ways, what God had done for them.

And that's what the word "witness" actually means, right? It means to talk about something that you have seen or experienced. A witness in a legal situation is talking about what he or she knows personally about an event that has happened. Most of us have no problem talking about what we've seen or experienced, in our own words. But is Christian faith something you'd say you have experienced? I think many times we think about Christian faith as a set of ethical principles we want to follow. It's about love; it's about justice; it's about radical inclusion and welcome. It's about doing what Jesus would do, following Jesus' example. Or, if you're like me raised in a different denomination, Christian faith might have been understood as believing a certain set of doctrines, that Christ came to save people from their sins, and that believing in him granted us forgiveness and salvation and an afterlife in heaven.

Both belief and justice-making are important, but neither one of them necessarily involves what I think is most critical about the Way of Jesus: and that is experience. It is about the experience of being loved by God in Christ. It is about the power of not just believing, but experiencing, transformation and healing and yes, real forgiveness where it is needed. It

is about being able to connect the dots between what we do here on Sunday and what we experience in our daily lives Monday – Saturday. And for all those things to happen, we need a power greater than ourselves. We need not just a God out there, and not just a historical Jesus who teaches us great things and asks us to follow him, but the power of the Holy Spirit in our lives as individuals and as a community.

Some of you know that I am in an education program at Luther Seminary called a Missional Leadership cohort. Twelve Episcopal priests from around the country are walking together for eighteen months to learn more about our parishes or our dioceses, and to identify what are some of the greatest challenges facing us. As part of this work for me here at St John's, in the preliminary phase, I recruited a team of eleven people to help me begin to learn about St John's and what challenges we face. When I asked this team, how is St John's different from any other nonprofit? We talked about that question for a long time. And eventually, we decided that what we really are, or what we really should be or want to be, and what is also our greatest challenge, is to be a spiritual incubator for people—a spiritual incubator that nourishes people for the real ministry of St John's, which is all of your daily lives Monday – Saturday. Your daily lives involve your interactions with family and friends and neighbors and schools and work places, and they also involve the many other organizations you're affiliated with and support. Your daily lives involve how you walk through the world, both what you do in the world and how you treat people and also the stories you tell yourselves about who you are and what your purpose is in the world.

All of this is to say, that Christian faith, the Way of Jesus, isn't worth much if it's only about what we do here on Sunday. It's about the story of our lives, our actual, real human experience, all of it. I read an article in the Star Tribune on Friday about Melvin Carter Jr., and no, I'm not talking about the Mayor of St. Paul, but about his dad. Did any of you see that article? Melvin

Carter Jr., the father of St. Paul's mayor, was a police officer for most of his adult life, and as a police officer and during the years of his retirement, he is passionate about mentoring young black boys and men and helping them get out and stay out of prison. In this article he calls himself a “compulsive, obsessive, habitual, serial mentor” of young black males.² I put the article up on my facebook page, if any of you want to read it. Mr. Carter talks about his own history as a young man, when he was angry and running with criminals and getting arrested and being shot at by police. He says that by the grace of God and the help of people in his community he lived through that and became a cop himself, and since then he has been on a mission to give other people what he himself experienced. He says that he tells young black boys and men who are in jail or in juvenile detention, “I don't want to know what you did. There's more to you than that. You are our future. You are here for a precious purpose. . . you're too good to be kept in these cages.”³ The reason he can do this is that he experienced it himself. He has a story to tell, and a passion and a purpose.

We at St John's are at the precipice of a new era. It's a time when we are going to focus more on our own experience and connecting the dots between our actual lives and what we actually struggle with and experience and what in the world God in Christ through the Holy Spirit has to do with any of that. We're going to take the risk to share some of our own stories with each other and learn to recognize where God is in all of it. We're going to share how we struggle at school and at work and at home and wonder together how the Holy Spirit might already be working to grant us new identity and purpose and transformation. We'll learn how our stories connect with the great stories in our scriptures and in our tradition. Then we will have something to share with the world.

² Gail Rosenblum, “Retired St. Paul cop Melvin Carter Jr. helps young black men rewrite their script,” *Star Tribune*, June 7, 2019.

³ Ibid.

Bishop Curry, who said that Episcopalians would be terrified to “witness,” wrote a book called *Crazy Christians*. In chapter one he says this:

The Christians who are crazy enough to think they can change the world are the ones who do. My friends, we need some of those crazy Christians. Sane, sanitized Christianity is killing us . . . We need Christians crazy enough to believe that God is real and that Jesus lives. Crazy enough to follow the radical way of the gospel. Crazy enough to believe that the love of God is greater than all the powers of evil and death . . . crazy enough to believe, as Martin Luther King Jr. often said, “The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.” Christians who are crazy enough to catch a glimpse of the crazy, transforming, transfiguring, life-changing vision of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.⁴

Amen.

⁴ Michael Curry, *Crazy Christians* (Morehouse Publishing, 2013).