

At the recent House of Bishops Meeting Presiding Bishop Curry spoke of the Time of Covid, of the complicated emotions of loss and lament, anger and fear, pain and frustration. “We are living in a narthex moment, he said between the world we knew and whatever is being born,”

He spoke further of a re-formation in the church: a time before collusion with the empire, a time when the church that looks something like the Way of Jesus, a church that lived into ‘narthex,’ letting go of the ways things were, to behold the way things could be.” Curry continued that such a church would not be “formed in the way of the world but formed in the way of Jesus and his love.”

“A community of small gatherings and congregations of all stripes and types, a human tapestry, God’s wondrous variety, the Kingdom, the reign of God, a beloved community, no longer centered on empire or establishment, no longer fixated on the preservation of an institution, no longer propping up white supremacy or in collusion with any entity that hurts or harms any child of God or God’s creation –

By God’s grace, a church that looks and acts and lives like Jesus. “Welcome to narthex, and welcome to behold a new heaven, a new Earth, a new you, a new me, a new we.”

Many Christians find interfaith or intercultural work both troubling and threatening. Allow me to go deeper, many Episcopalians find interparish work challenging. We don’t venture too far from home.

We have a rooted theological resistance to the notion of pluralism. We feel safer in our own neighborhood with our own people, culture, and language. Pluralism becomes heretical wherever the church continues to be infected by Constantinian, Empire based assumptions about its privilege and power within society. We Christians historically have not been welcoming and hospitable to cultural outsiders. We interact defensively. Problems to solve, guilt to assuage, not brothers and sisters to meet. We fail to open ourselves to the possibility of learning from the other.

Mark's Gospel today is direct and to the point. Our greatest individual and social addiction is the will to dominate.

John boasts that he forbade an exorcist who was not one of the disciples following Jesus to stop the healing. Jesus rebukes John, good works that support our mission or ministry should be welcomed whenever and by whomever they occur. For those not against us are for us.

Jesus undermines any attempt by the church to claim an exclusive franchise over the practice of justice and compassion. Jesus calls us through discipleship to transform ourselves and to transform society.

The Arrogance of John's objection lies in its attempt to erect boundaries around the exercise of compassionate ministry. Rather than attacking John's incomprehension directly, Jesus gives three reasons why the disciples should not hinder the exorcist.

The first is that anyone who engages in a healing practice in Jesus' name cannot soon afterwards speak ill of him. The second that those who are not against us are for us.

The third and most significant, is that Jesus validates outsiders who provide the simplest act of hospitality. A cup of water given to anyone who bears the name of the Messiah. *whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you bear the name of Christ will by no means lose the reward.*

Simply put, John, Peter and the others are worried about who within the group is more powerful, or competing with those outside the group for Jesus favor. Jesus insists however on welcoming all those who do the works of mercy and justice.

Jesus harshest rebuke is reserved for those who scandalize the little ones who believe in me, the little ones who are routinely victimized by patterns of hierarchy and exclusion. We should understand this as those who believe in Jesus and have humbled themselves like little children

it would be better for you if a great millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea.

Jesus continues with the instructions to remove whatever gets in our way to becoming disciples, to amputate offending body parts: hand, foot, and eye. Certainly troubling.... We remember that Jesus through the eyes of Mark has been very clear and direct, to follow me you must be prepared to forfeit your life.

In a world of violence and institutionalized inequality, the choices are stark. We either embrace the fire of recovery and reconciliation or live in the hell of addiction.

Mark's Gospel today continues the unambiguous formation guidelines for becoming disciples. The disciple's self-seeking arguments about rank and conflict, the fear of outsiders who do good works, and dire warnings concerning personal behavior within the beloved community are not acceptable. There is not a lack of clarity.

We do not think of Mordecai as a displaced person, His family had been exiled from Jerusalem (Esther 2:6) by King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon. He assumed the responsibility of Esther, his orphan niece, who became favored in the king's eye and ultimately made queen.

Mordecai embraces his homelessness, his role as outsider. He refuses to come indoors. While King Achashverosh cavorts in lavish parties and in time Esther takes her position as the new queen, Mordecai lurks in the city square, at the palace gates wearing only sackcloth.

The King is comfortable inside the walls, where he lives. He is powerful and rules over 127 countries; nevertheless, he must ask his servants who is in the courtyard just outside. He is not aware or sympathetic with the outside world except through the eyes of his servants.

Outside the gated community Mordecai sees the treachery invisible to those who live within. It is Mordecai who hears of the plot by Haman to murder the king, and the Jewish People. It is Mordecai who reports to Queen Esther of Haman's plot to murder the Jewish people. Outside, Mordecai experiences the brutality that is invisible to those who live powerful and protected within the gated community.

At Esther's party, Esther tells her husband that Haman wishes to destroy him and her people. Achashverosh storms enraged out of the party into the garden. When he returns, he orders that Haman be hanged.

On Purim, the Jewish community honors the heroic actions of Queen Esther, who reversed Haman's evil plot to annihilate the Jewish people. Mordecai who is given great power and responsibility by the king, proclaims a new celebration, a celebration of gift exchanges across the pluralistic community, and of alms for the poor. Purim is a festival of turnabouts. Jewish History is one long story of seeking refuge. To be honest, human history is one long story of seeking refuge.

Esther was successful by quietly and forcefully engaging a diplomatic solution with her husband the King and building a homeland within a foreign empire for the fate of her Jewish family.

These were not easy conversations for her to have, and neither are they easy for us in our current conflicts. Her story is a challenge for us, to be courageous like Esther – to embrace what makes us uncomfortable and to act in spite of OUR fear.

Our collaboration with state oppression and repression of immigrants and minorities is a haunting legacy from the Inquisition to the Holocaust, and to this day on our borders. The current events at our southern borders are without exception reprehensible, and not consistent with Jesus Way of Love.

The theology of repentance guides us to reject religious entitlement, and the historical sins, of our ancestors and our own contributions. A theology of Reconstruction believes the church will be made stronger by its dis-establishment from privilege and empire. When we reject Christianity's identification with the dominant culture, we will remove the barriers to interfaith, interdenominational, and intercommunity collaboration.

It is not our responsibility to debate and forcefully change every person's point of view or to reprioritize their values with one civil conversation. It is however our responsibility, determined by our Baptismal Covenant to initiate those conversations. Jesus in Mark's Gospel cannot be clearer; there is no ambiguity.

Mariann's wisdom bears repeating yet again, we can live with peace at the center of our being even as we are called to purposefully engage the turbulence around us.

And likewise, Bp Curry, We can live in a narthex moment, between the world we knew and whatever is being born." We cannot go back to where we were....

We are becoming a new and *re*-formed church,
the Episcopal branch of the Jesus Movement—
individuals, small, gathered communities and congregations
whose way of life is the way of Jesus and his way of love,
no longer centered on empire and establishment,
no longer fixated on preserving institutions,
no longer shoring up white supremacy or anything else that hurts or harms any
child of God.

**By God's grace ... we will reclaim our Christian identity as a spirit driven, counter
cultural, underground movement. This is our Kairos moment.**

Queen Esther saved thousands of lives. We too have that authority – one
personal interaction at a time – the power to change hearts, minds, and like
Esther governmental structures. To open our arms to the outsider, the
immigrant, the refugee, and open the gates of our country and live into the
promise of the Statue of Liberty, co-creators of God's reign of heaven.

With Grace and God's help we will live into our commitment to walk in Love as
Jesus loves every one of us, without exception or exclusion. We are beloved, we
belong, and we are becoming a church that looks and acts like Jesus.