

The Last Best Hope of the World

One day a couple by the name of Herman and Mary were riding along in their new car. Mary spoke up and said, “You know, Herman, if it weren’t for my money, we probably wouldn’t have this wonderful new car.” Herman just sat there and didn’t say a word.

As they pulled into the driveway, the couple quietly admired their new home. Mary said, “You know, Herman, if it weren’t for my money, we probably wouldn’t have this new house.” Again, Herman just sat there and didn’t say anything.

They got out of the car and walked into the house just as the new furniture was being delivered. “You know, Herman,” Mary said, “if it weren’t for my money, we probably wouldn’t have this new furniture.” And once more, Herman didn’t say a word.

It happened again as the couple sat down in their new entertainment center, propped their feet up on easy chairs and watched television on the big screen. “You know, Herman,” said Mary, “if it weren’t for my money, we probably wouldn’t have this huge entertainment center.”

And with that, poor Herman had had enough. He turned to

Mary and said, “I don’t want to hurt your feelings, Honey, but you know if it weren’t for your money, I probably wouldn’t be here either!”

What is it that brings you here? Why did you choose to become a part of Nativity?

I presume you are here this morning because you take church seriously. You have options, choices about where you worship God, or even if you worship God at all. Yet, with all the choices in the Scottsdale, Cave Creek and Phoenix regions, you have chosen Nativity. Why?

Although the Church of the Nativity is only ten years old, it has both heritage and history on its side. Nativity is an ancient-future church. We are part of the Diocese of Arizona, which is part of the Episcopal Church in the United States of America, which is part of the Anglican Communion, which is part of the Catholic Church dating all the way back to the time of the apostles. We are here because of those who preceded us just as those who follow us will be here because of us.

The historian-philosopher Will Durant, in his book *The Story of Civilization* praises the early church for its resilience in the face of enormous challenges. He writes: “There is no greater

drama in human history than the sight of a few Christians, scorned and oppressed by a succession of emperors, defeating the strongest state that history has known. Caesar and Christ had met, and Christ won.”

Durant wrote in tribute to the faithfulness of the church to its mission, a faithfulness that was lived in the face of immense persecution.

We, like the early church, are called to proclaim an unchanging message in a changing world: that God exists and creates everything; that Jesus Christ is the center of all human life; that the Holy Spirit guides and empowers us to face whatever challenges come our way; that the Bible is the primary source of faith and practice properly interpreted; that the purpose of the Church is to transform lives in the power of God’s love in Jesus. We do this by adhering to both the Great Commandment and the Great Commission to love God, to love people and to reach out to others. That, in a nutshell, is what it means to be a Christian.

In a day when there are so many in our society who want to tear down, tear apart and divide people one from another, the church is that one organization that champions reconciliation and love and forgiveness and acceptance. Here in the church, mean people are taught to be kind,

selfish people to share; proud people to be humble, sorrowful people to become joyful. Here in the church the unlovely are loved and the undeserving are respected, and people on the margins are welcomed and listened to. Here bridges are built instead of walls. Here you belong despite your color, nationality, financial position or politics. Here is where people of good faith have the opportunity to make a better world.

The church is a miracle. There are some 300,000 churches in this country. We often ignore them, heap scorn on them, or accuse them of being irrelevant or out of touch. All of that is sometimes true but what would we do without the church? If all the churches we had known, loved and counted on in trying times were suddenly removed, what would happen? I believe the country would coarsen rapidly, lose its compassion and civility, and become cold and unfeeling to the weak, the vulnerable and the poor. We would substitute the Christian social ethic for one of utility or survival of the fittest. Who would pick up the slack of comfort not given, conflicts not resolved, trouble not listened to? Who would affirm the high dignity and precious worth of every human being as a child of God? And who would absorb the stresses and strains of the human condition that the church routinely absorbs?

Of course, Christians are not perfect but one of the most worn-out excuses for non-participation in the church is to say that “there are so many hypocrites in the church.” That may be true, but can you think of a better place for a hypocrite to be? At least in the church there is the chance that the Spirit of God might move someone from hypocrisy to sincerity. The church is not a museum for the display of saints but a school for the nurture of sinners.

One of my mentors when I was writing my doctoral dissertation was Dr. John Rogers, the former President of Trinity School for Ministry in Pennsylvania. Dr. Rogers liked to greet students by asking, “How’s it going, sinner?” He was right – we are all sinners, but in Jesus Christ we are forgiven sinners – and that makes all the difference. Perhaps we should have a sign in front of our church that says, “Sinners Anonymous: All welcome!”

With all the talk of church growth strategies these days, the most effective way for us to reach people is to demonstrate to them, by the quality of our lives, that we have been with Jesus and that he has made us whole.

Someone once said that there are five gospels, four of which people never read, but the fifth they see all the time, which is us. We are the hands and feet of Christ, St. Teresa of Avilla

said, and that is true. We are to show the compassion of God to a world that needs every bit of compassion.

A young woman, a medical resident, lost her child. She later became the head of Pediatric Cardiology in a large university hospital. When asked what lead her into pediatric cardiology, she responded by saying that the day her baby died, the pediatric cardiologist who was her supervisor and teacher reached out to her. She said, “He came over to me the day my baby died and put his arms around me, and I remember thinking he’s the only person who did that.”

We proclaim the gospel with power when we busy ourselves putting our arms around people who suffer and offering a wide embrace to all. The mission of the church is clear: to love God, to love people, and to reach out to others. In some ways, the church has never had a greater opportunity to do that than we have today.

If you ask me what has been the great strength of Nativity these past ten years, I would answer: its openness to people, all sorts of people, no matter who they are or where they are on their journey of faith. Nativity is what I would term a “church of the open door” where everyone is welcomed, and no one is made to feel outcast. The message of this church is that we are glad to have you here and we want you! We need

to build on that kind of openness and become the kind of church that reaches out to both seekers and believers in a way that engages the culture but remains true to the gospel.

Think of the Celtic missionaries, for example, that evangelized much of Europe during the Dark Ages. They remained faithful to the gospel message but were willing to adapt their methods to different cultures. Thanks to their efforts, all of Europe became Christian.

We need the spirit of the Celtic missionaries today, especially since Nativity is a new church development. Is it possible for us to adapt our way of being church to more effectively engage the culture, while remaining at our core authentically Episcopal? What would such a church be like?

It would be a community that is theologically and biblically sound, caring and nurturing, socially relevant and electronically connected. It would be an open and inclusive faith community that is ready and willing to support people in their spiritual journeys. It would see itself as a Christian witness in a pluralistic neighborhood whose goal is to connect with people who are “spiritual but not religious” or even “spiritual but secular.”

Nativity would be a church that would heed the advice of the

ancient Chinese poem:

Go to people.

Live among them.

Learn from them.

Love them.

Start with what they know.

Build on what they have.

At an Episcopal conference designed to reach millennials, a young leader kept pressing his audience, most of whom, were over fifty, to think in new ways about reaching a younger generation. Finally, one participant said, “I guess you want us to start thinking outside the box?” To which the young leader replied, “What box? In my generation there is no box.”

I am asking the people of Nativity to start practicing ministry beyond the box – to go beyond our own self-restrictive thinking and engage people at their own point of need and understanding. We cannot expect people to come to us, as if this was the 1950s. In the 21st century we have to go to them. We need to know their hopes and dreams. We need to appreciate their lifestyles and time commitments. We need to understand who they are, what they want, and why, up to now, the Episcopal Church has not been an option for them.

How can we add value to their lives and make church a worthwhile experience for their families?

Peter Drucker said, “Focus on the customer” – what does the customer want? We may not like the word customer, so let’s say instead “focus on those precious children of God who have yet to know they are precious children of God.” How can we build a bridge between their world and ours?

A sales trainer asked his audience if they liked strawberries. Yes, they all said, delicious. Then he suggested that they go fishing and use strawberries as bait.

“But fish don’t like strawberries,” said one of the trainees.

“But you do,” replied the trainer.

“But I want to catch fish,” said the trainee.

“What do fish like then?” asked the trainer.

“Worms,” said the trainee.

“Do you like worms?” asked the trainer.

“No,” replied the trainee.

“Then,” said the trainer, “don’t sell what you like, sell what they like.”

How often do we in the church go fishing with strawberries? We have the kind of worship services that appeal to us, the kind of ministries that appeal to us, the kind of programs that appeal to us. There is nothing wrong with any of these, but we rarely stop to ask, what are the needs and the preferences of the people Christ has called us to reach? We need to be willing to focus on the world’s needs and the world’s preferences and not our own. We need to stop fishing with strawberries. We need to think of ourselves as what we truly are – a new church development whose mission is to take God’s love in Christ to people, not on our terms but on theirs.

Two men were at the site of a large church that was being destroyed by fire. The first man said to the other, “This is the first time I ever saw you at church.” The second man responded, “This is the first time I ever saw the church on fire.”

Dear people: our mission as the church is to set the world on fire with God’s redeeming love in Jesus – to love God, to love people and to reach out to others. The church is the last

best hope of the world. The question for us is: How can the church best respond to what God is doing in the world today? That is a question all of us have to answer together.

For my part, I think we can start by allowing God's love in Jesus to expand our vision, to stretch our boundaries and to break down the barriers that prevent us from taking risks and reaching out to others. Perhaps what we need to do most is to invite Jesus to be part of our church, listen to him, do what he tells us to do, and be what he calls us to be.

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Text – Mark 1: 21-28

Epiphany 4, B