

Holy Hospitality

It was a prominent church in the diocese and expectations were high that the search committee would choose the right person as its next Rector. But after an exhausting search, the committee had rejected applicant after applicant for some minor fault... real or imagined.

Exacerbated and at his wits' end, one search committee member presented a letter from a purported applicant that read:

“I should like to apply for Rector of your church. I’ve been a preacher with much success, and I also have had some successes as a writer. Some say I’m a good organizer. I’m over 50 years of age and have never preached in one place for more than three years. In some places, I’ve left town after my work caused riots and disturbances. I must admit that I have been in jail three or four times, but not for any real wrongdoing. My health is not too good, though I still accomplish a great deal. The churches I have planted have been small, though located in several large cities. I don’t seem to get along well with religious leaders, and some have threatened me, and even attacked me physically. However, if you can use me, I promise to do my best for you.”

The member turned to the other members on the search committee and said, “Well, what do you think? Shall we interview him?”

The committee members were appalled. Consider a sickly, trouble-making, ex-jailbird? What a waste of time! Who was that applicant, anyway, and what colossal nerve to apply to our fine church! The member replied, “The letter is signed, The Apostle Paul.”

There is more than a little truth in this parody. St. Paul couldn't seem to please anybody. The Jewish leaders mostly rejected him and some even tried to have him put to death. The Romans put him in jail, whipped and beat him several times, before eventually executing him.

St. Paul had it tough, yet he considered himself one of the most fortunate people in the world because God had called him to share the Gospel of Jesus Christ. What can we learn from his life that will empower our church today?

For one thing, St. Paul took the Great Commission seriously. We Episcopalians are familiar with the Great Commandment to love God and to love our neighbor, but we are not as familiar with the Great Commission. At the end of his earthly ministry, Jesus said to his disciples, “Go therefore and make

disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you” (Mt. 28:19-20).

St. Paul took the words of Jesus seriously. He writes, “For though I am free with respect to all, I have made myself a slave to all, so that I might win more of them.” That was what St. Paul’s life was about: to win as many people as possible to Christ and his church. St. Paul was on a mission. People on a mission change the world.

At the end of World War II, Robert Woodruff, president of Coca Cola from 1923 to 1955, had a mission. “In my generation,” he declared, “it is my desire that everyone in the world have a taste of Coca Cola.” With vision and dedication rarely matched in corporate American culture, Woodruff and his colleagues spanned the globe with their soft drink.

But what is Coca Cola? It’s just flavored soda water. Why is it right for people to feel passionate about a soft drink but not about taking Christ to the world? People still need Christ. The world needs Christ. Our communities need Christ. Our country needs Christ. Technology may have advanced our quality of life, but it has not alleviated the aches of the human heart or the sorrows of so many. These wounds only

Divine Love can heal.

St. Paul felt a passion. He was on a mission. You and I are in this church today because St. Paul was not deterred. He took the Great Commission seriously.

In addition, St. Paul was willing to do whatever it took to win people to Christ. Listen to what he says, “To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law...so that I might win those under the law. To those outside the law, I became as one outside the law...so that I might win those outside the law.”

St. Paul had a “whatever it takes attitude.” You can call it passion. You can call it zeal. You can even call it an obsession. St. Paul would do anything, go anywhere, pay any price, endure any cost, and make any sacrifice to win anyone at any time to Jesus. By his own admission he says, “I have become all things to all people that I might by all means save some.”

Understand that St. Paul never compromised what was at the heart of the gospel. But in other matters – what we Episcopalians term “non-essentials” or matters “indifferent” – he was willing to adapt to the people he was trying to reach. He was willing to do Jewish things to reach Jewish

people. And he was willing to do Gentile things to reach the Gentiles. St. Paul always worked within the culture in which he ministered, and that meant making everyone feel accepted and welcomed. He practiced what I like to call “holy hospitality” – something for everyone.

St. Paul was willing to accept criticism and even persecution because he believed sharing the gospel with both Jews and non-Jews was far more important than conforming to the religious standards of his day. He had this “whatever it takes” attitude to reach people for Christ.

St. Paul also was willing to forego his personal preferences to reach people at their own level of need and understanding. His mission was non-negotiable, but his methods of ministry were always changing. His convictions were rock solid but his way of dealing with people was flexible.

There is an important distinction here between compromising your convictions and minimizing your preferences. A conviction is something that you believe and hold dear that is based on a clear teaching of scripture and taught by the Church. Jesus as Lord and Savior is such a conviction. A preference, on the other hand, is a personal desire that you have, to live your life in a certain way in which scripture is neutral or indifferent. It is a very

dangerous thing to judge ministries, methods and ministers by preferences rather than convictions.

When I was ministering in New Jersey, I heard a story about a woman that was filling out a hospital form. One question said simply, church preference. She wrote out, “Red brick.” Now everyone in this room has different preferences over certain things about church: style of worship, music, Bible versions, use of the Prayer Book, ritual and even vestments. You must be careful not to elevate preferences over convictions.

To be honest, in the Episcopal Church there are many things we do simply because they have always been done that way. We learned these practices as children and have come to believe that these are the only ways to do church – that anyone who does it differently is wrong. And yet, the way things were done in the past may not be the most effective way of doing things today.

There was a little girl who was watching her mother prepare a pot roast dinner. Her mother said to the girl, “Now the first thing you have got to do is cut the end of the roast off before you put it in the pan.” When the little girl asked why, the mother said, “Well, that’s the way my mother always did it. Let’s call your grandmother and ask why she did it that

way.”

When they called the grandmother, and asked why she cut the end of the roast before putting it in the pan, the grandmother replied, “Because I never had a big enough pan for the whole roast.”

If the church is to reach a new generation of believers who are growing up in a world far different from the one in which we were raised, we will need to do everything we can to present the gospel in a way that resonates with their experience and understanding, especially if they are not all that familiar with Christianity. St. Paul had a conviction that I share, that everyone in the world needs Christ. But to share the gospel effectively, we need a spirit that is willing to relinquish personal preferences.

St. Paul concludes by saying, “To the weak I became weak, so that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, so that I might by all means save some. I do it all for the sake of the gospel, so that I may share in its blessings.”

One of the great things about Nativity is that we seem to be so accepting of one another. We all have our preferences but we don’t push our preferences on others. We accommodate each other out of mutual respect and forbearance. I am sure

there are things in this church that some of us prefer more than others. There may even be things that make some of us less comfortable than others. But at Nativity, we put aside our preferences and accommodate ourselves to one another. This is a church of holy hospitality.

A few months ago, a couple searching for a church home came to Nativity and met with me in my office. It was a pleasant conversation, but the couple decided not to join our church. One of them said to me, “I think Nativity is too inclusive. I think you are too welcoming of different kinds of people.” He thought it was a criticism. I think it was a compliment, because it is the same criticism made against St. Paul.

And here is why: someone has suggested that all of life is a dress rehearsal for heaven. Have you ever thought about that? I suspect there will be all kinds of people in heaven. There will be people with an infinite variety of preferences in heaven. There will be “smells and bells” Episcopalians and those who want neither. There will be charismatics, evangelicals, and progressives. There will be Democrats and Republicans, liberals and conservatives, and everyone in the middle. There will be people who want formal Prayer Book liturgy and people who want more freedom and experiment. And if we can't get comfortable with that here, probably we

won't be very happy there.

As I think about all this, I am reminded of John Wesley. He was an 18th century Anglican priest in England. He was not only an Anglican; he was Oxford educated, high church, and very conservative liturgically. He thought the only place to worship was in a church, in a very formal setting, with a very traditional liturgy. You just don't worship or preach outdoors. You do that in church.

But there were poor people, coal miners out in the countryside who couldn't get to church and frankly, probably would not be welcomed. They needed to hear the gospel too. So, traditional though he was, Wesley went and preached in the open fields. He hated it, but he did it. And, as he preached, those coal miners were so moved by the good news of God's grace that tears of joy ran down their dusty, blackened faces.

Wesley had his preferences, but he did not allow those preferences to get in the way of the gospel. And he learned something: he learned that those worshiping in the churches with their formal liturgies and those worshiping in the open fields near the mines were all one people, the people of God. Despite their differences, they had one thing in common: they all were loved by God, and when they allowed that love

into their hearts, they were able to love one another.

Wesley wrote in his journal: “Though we may not all think alike, may we not all love alike? May we not all be of one heart, even though we are not all of one opinion? Herein may all the children of God unite.” That sounds a lot like St. Paul who never stopped loving God, loving people, and reaching out to others.

I think that’s Nativity at our best, and that’s why you and I love being here. This is a place of holy hospitality, a place where we, willingly and joyfully, make this church a welcoming place for all.

Dr. Gary Nicolosi

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Text – I Corinthians 9: 16-23

Epiphany 5, B