

Sermon – Fifth Sunday after Epiphany

1 Corinthians 9: 16-23 & Mark 1: 29-39

The COVID-19 pandemic has just past its first anniversary. Over 450,000 people have died in the United States, millions more have been infected, many will carry the scars of infection for years to come, vaccine rollout has been slow but is improving and we all carry an amount of trauma related to the year we have just lived through. Life for all of us is different now, in all sorts of ways, than it was. We can't go back and we have to look forward, embracing the experience and planning better ways to live.

This past year has also seen significant upheaval in church life, from new ways to worship, to learn, to experience God and new ways to be community, when face-to-face time has been limited. Church life is very different now and we can't go back to being what we were before the pandemic, except to say the message of the Good News of Jesus Christ hasn't changed. We have changed and how we live as Christians in our community has changed. People's views on church has changed and their experience of church over the past year has changed. How are we going to adapt to this new paradigm?

Well, the church has adapted to a changing world since the first house churches were formed after Jesus untimely death. The house churches evolved into community churches and then into bigger and bigger churches and cathedrals, catering to more and more converts, especially after Emperor Constantine decreed Christianity as the state religion in 312 CE. As a worshipping community we have to face up to change just as many communities of faith have had to evolve when confronted with these significant life challenges.

The early Corinthian church experienced its fair share of change. Some of the issues that they dealt with are laid out in the two letters the Apostle Paul wrote to them in the later part of the first century of the common era. It was a time of great uncertainty. It was a time of persecution by the occupying Roman forces. It was a time of questioning about the Eucharist, and the nature of God and Jesus and how to live life as a faith community, outside of the cultic worship of the empire. It was also a time of division in the Corinthian church.

The Apostle Paul became aware of the challenges of the Corinthian Church and wrote to them to encourage them as they tried to build community. In the excerpt we heard from Paul's recorded first letter he speaks to the church about the commission that they have been given and the obligation they have to proclaim the life of Jesus Christ. He reminds them that the good news is free of charge.

Paul also reminds them that in taking on the commission of Jesus they are to become slaves to the people, so that they might bring more people to know Jesus Christ and his message of hope and salvation. He essentially tells them that to introduce Jesus, they need to go to where the people are and not expect that they come to them. For Jews they would need to meet them in

the synagogue. For gentiles it might be the marketplace or the guild meeting houses. For the prisoner, it is the prisons. Paul was willing to go out, to meet people and to get to know them by relating to them where they lived, worked and socialized.

Paul's message is one that should resonate with us today. It certainly is relevant for us as a church charged with a commission from God in a changing world. Change has come to our community by way of the pandemic and the economic fallout. Change has also come in the form of gentrification which will result in the wholesale change of our neighborhood as some 18,000 new residents move to the new apartments being built over the next few years.

Coping with wholesale change on the scale that is confronting our church is not easy. Our preference probably is to curl back into our shell and wish and hope that life would return to what it was a few years ago. It is hard to accept change and church folks in the Episcopal Church find change to be very hard as we seem to have a preference for hanging onto the old ways of worship, welcome and community engagement. The church no longer is the center of most people's lives. The pandemic has supercharged how the church is to change to continue to engage our neighbors with the good news.

This Sunday, many of us will gather online for our first online Annual Meeting, but the approx. 180th annual meeting of the parish. It is a good time to reflect on what is happening around us and what change we need to make to continue our life together with the Holy Spirit and to flourish.

We worship in a beautiful building that has been financed and built by many worshippers here over the past 150 years. It is an ornate stone building that represents the way many churches were designed and built in the 19th century. We would build something very different today. Our current renovation projects will exhaust close to \$6m of valuable funds to care for and adapt the building for the next 50 odd years.

This church building, as beautiful as it is, is not the worshipping community. It is a symbol that a faith community exists here but on its own it is just a well-crafted, maintenance intensive stone building. The Holy Spirit exists here because we exist here. We gather for worship, we gather for prayer, for support and to build each other up, to explore our faith together and to outreach to help our neighbors. If we are to meet people where they are, as Paul reminds us today, then we have to go out to them to bring them the good news and not just wait for people to come to us.

How do we become visible slaves for Jesus, taking the good news to our neighbors? First we have to know who are neighbors are, who lives in our community, what are their needs and concerns, what questions do they have about their spiritual lives, what life issues are they wrestling with. Second, we need to meet them in person. We can do this by connecting with them in community forums, in our jobs or in the supermarket. We can reach them by inviting them to volunteer at our outreach ministries, to come and nurture their souls through sacred

art and music, through stillness and prayer. We can connect with them by offering ways of worship and connecting, that are new and speak to them where they are.

Finally we need to build trust with our neighbors that we will welcome them as they are and that we will put aside our own cultural bias to engage with people who are very different to us. We have to be brave and courageous to take the good news to our neighbors. We have to be willing to try new ways of connecting and being the beloved community in the midst of a changing community. We can't rest on hope for a return to old ways.

Jesus was always on the go, somewhat restless in his ministry. He desired to meet people where they were at. As we know Jesus' ministry in his home town was restricted as he met with a lot of skepticism from those familiar with his upbringing. Jesus found he was much more effective when he went to where the people were.

In today's gospel reading we hear of Jesus visit to Peter's house where he healed Peter's mother and cured a lot of the visitors that thronged to see him. But the next day after a period of early morning prayer with his father, he headed out with his disciples to other towns where he knew he needed to go to bring more people to know him and his father. He travelled far and wide, accompanied by his closest friends.

We too need to get out of our church building and meet our neighbors in the community. We have entered a major transitional phase in the life of The Church of St Luke and St Matthew. What we will be in a few years time, will hopefully look different than what we are now, or have been for the past 20-30 years. In the 1950s and 1960s when some of you joined the church, or your parents or grandparents joined the church, was probably the last time such a big transformation happened here. It was a time when the white church gave way to the new residents of this part of Brooklyn who were mostly African Americans and Caribbean Americans.

During that transition the culture of the parish was transformed as well. The cultural bias was skewed white but it changed to skew black and brown. Certain institutional cultures however, tend to linger and get passed down through the generations without anyone really understanding the impact. For instance, a parishioner recently shared his life story with me and his many years at the parish. He told me that when he first started attending as a young boy there wasn't anything happening here during the week and so he went to Brown Memorial Baptist Church.

Well, it was the same perception I had when I came to you in 2012 as a seminarian. Not much was happening during the week. And I'm afraid to say the culture of being a predominately Sunday church remains. It is something we need to change as our transition evolves. We have to ask ourselves, why isn't there more things happening here during the week? What is holding us back?

We have much to learn about ourselves and our past especially ways the parish has evolved and met change over almost two centuries. We have to learn about our cultural biases and how they might be preventing us from meeting and welcoming the new residents of the neighborhood. We have to do the work the Apostle Paul called us to do, to go out and to meet people where they are and engage them with the good news of Jesus Christ and his message of hope for a new world and salvation for all.

Are you ready for this journey? It is not the work of the priest alone. It is work for all of us, all Christians, all the time. Join us, as we make this work much lighter by sharing the load and celebrating the good news about this wonderful, and engaging man named Jesus.

Amen.