

April 15, 2012

The Second Sunday of Easter

Acts 4:32-35

All Saints' Episcopal Church, Atlanta, Georgia

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This Easter we have been blessed once again with what is almost a cliché at this point and that is mainstream journalism underlining the reality that we are in a post-Christian, post-Modern age and that the institutional forms of church are corrupt, hypocritical, out of touch with modern culture and sensibility, soft on sin, too judgmental, too liberal, too conservative and so on. The Roman Catholic journalist Andrew Sullivan has penned an article for *Newsweek* under the headline *Forget the Church. Follow Jesus*. The edition has a cover picture of a kind of hipster Jesus. The article seems to applaud Thomas Jefferson's attempt to edit difficult or distasteful stuff out of the Bible in order to get at what is really important. The author makes the old assertion that the old mainline has been replaced by the new evangelicals without acknowledging that this is all still moving around declining numbers of Christians overall in the West. He appears almost embarrassed by being involved in this attempt to sell mainstream magazines with edgy religious stuff. He writes: "I have no concrete idea how Christianity will wrestle free of its current crisis, of its distractions and temptations, and above all its enmeshment with the things of this world."¹

In another popular outlet, *The Huffington Post*, a singer, songwriter, blogger and self-professed long-time atheist tells why he became a Christian. He 'found a community that defied Christian stereotypes'. He 'found his voice' through being encouraged to share 'couple of songs that were meaningful' to him. He 'found deeper meaning in this life, rather than worrying too much about what comes after that'. And he found a 'sense of belonging' in a group of people passionate about the things that mattered to him. They didn't have to agree with him, ask him for money or ask him to sign his name in "some official book". He thinks churches assume that things like preaching, music programs, small groups, denominational identity, doctrine or creeds, nice carpets, bathrooms and gardens are "critical to their transformation", but they are not the things he cares about.²

Just about anywhere we turn we can find someone opining about spirituality, religion, God and usually the impending death of the Church. We really ought to be thinking about these things as we consider whether or not to pursue a capital campaign in the near future. Today is the day of our annual parish meeting and we will conduct (we have conducted) business around that and other matters between services. But here we are invited to think about the church and what it means to be church, especially in light of our utopian reading from the *Acts of the Apostles*. We have heard Luke recount how all those who believed were of one

¹ *Newsweek*, April 9, 2012

² <http://www.huffingtonpost.com/christian-piatt>

heart and soul, how they shared everything in common, and how material goods were distributed “to each as any had need”. Most scholars consider it unlikely that such conditions ever prevailed in the church. Indeed much earlier testimony from the letters of St. Paul suggests that there was conflict from day one. Nevertheless there is a kind of truth in this description. It is the truth that goes with falling in love, a time in which everything makes sense and an overwhelming sense of generosity and grace takes hold. We are hearing a memory of heady days, expressions of confidence, meaning and hope of the kind that we frequently hear from people who have given themselves the gift of time to explore their faith as adults and who return from the Adult Enquirers’ Retreat filled with the Holy Spirit. But we also know from scripture and from observing the world around us that in time relationships become structured in some ways. There may be constitutions and canons or there may simply be norms and habits of the heart. Either way, community, be it made up of two people who have fallen in love and decided to be together for the rest of their lives or made up of people who give testimony to the resurrection of the Lord along with the apostles, community becomes structured, so that the community can thrive. It is equally true that unless those structures are examined and shaped anew for new times and new challenges, they can easily become strictures, serving only to choke the life out of the community.

What we hear from the world around us is that Christian community expressed as belief, creeds, doctrines and rules is being rejected by great swaths of people. Similarly many reject what they perceive to be Christian as judgmental, illiberal, outdated and wedded to conservative causes. And what we know is that much, if not most, of what goes on here is life-giving, transformative stuff for us when we pay attention to our own growth in faith. At the heart of what we do is gather around this Table with all sorts and conditions of humanity to tell and enact the story of what really matters, allowing us to see and develop compassion for the victim, to stand with those who suffer and to share in each others’ joys.

Sisters and brothers, we are living in an age in which, if we want this community to be vital ten or fifteen or fifty years from now, we must take neither All Saints’ nor our own faith for granted. What I will be looking for and thinking about in the coming year –even as we talk about how to reorient or physical space toward what really matters, paying attention to entrances, exits and pathways, --I will be talking about how we can be conscious about our own faith such that we can invite others to join us with integrity, and perhaps find themselves falling in love with ‘great grace was upon all those in the community of Jesus.’ What we can do will not be expressed as a series of rules from on high, but as areas of spiritual practice around which we can develop our own expectations of ourselves. We can start with worship. How often do you expect yourself to be in church? Once a week? Once a month? Christmas and Easter? Whenever you are in town? What happens when we get clear about our commitments is that we begin to organize our live around them rather than trying to fit something important in around the edges. And when what we consider important includes increasing our own capacity for faith, then we will find that God really does work to transform us into

the people we imagine ourselves to be at our best. We could also talk about prayer and study, engaging in community, practices of service and generosity and caring for those in need and so on. Because, in the end, the church is not an institution first and foremost. It is the community of Jesus, gathered and made visible through practices that make sense to us as we interpret the gospel today. The church described in *Acts* exists today but is made manifest with different practices to express the great love that flows when we testify to the resurrection and find that great grace is upon us all.

In a time of silence, I invite you to consider your own commitments about worship. What makes sense to you? And if you have a clue, ask God's grace that you may live faithfully toward that commitment. In silence and in response to the gospel and for the sake of this community of faith, let us pray...