

St. David's Episcopal Church

Homily - July 19, 2015

When Michael contacted me several weeks ago, his note requested me to address, *“how you've managed to grow and adapt to spirituality, theology, and liturgy, over the years.”*

Rather than attempting to go into various and extended narrative, maybe it would be best for me to simply say that, *“whatever growth and adaptation has occurred, has been a mixture of much reading, cogitation, conferences, discussions, prayers, kicking and screaming, and forward, backwards, and side-ways movements.”* End of story; end of homily. Let's move on!!

However, that's not going to happen. Rather, what I hope to accomplish in today's thoughts with you, is to invite and encourage each of you, to also decide to engage in your own reflections of about how - over the course of your life - you have also grown and adapted in your spirituality, theology, and liturgy.

And while I'm not going to ask for anyone here, who consider themselves to be a theologian, to raise their hand, I do wonder if there would be any

hands raised? I would like to think that I am mistaken in positing that few, if any hands would be raised; however, given how I understand that most persons perceive of theology, I doubt that I am.

So, as a basis for our thoughts together this morning, I want to encourage you to reconsider, and think about how each of us - in reality are, to one degree or another, theologians - insomuch as the discipline of theology originates within, and is the combination of two words with Greek origins: *theos* - God, and *logos* - words or thoughts about God.

To the extent that we ever ask questions about why something in our life has happened as it has; or what is the meaning of events that have occurred in the unfolding of our lives; or as they occur in and across our world - to that extent, we are engaging - both in the asking, and the attempt to answer what we mean and understand by the term - *God* - *i.e.*, *how* do we understand the nature, the character, and what is meant by the sense of respect, dedication, and the idea of discipleship, by which we affirm that God is to be honored in our minds and hearts - *i.e.*, through the living of our lives.

Our many and varied statements may be affirmations; our questions may express doubts and deep longings. Regardless, however, of whether it is in our thinking, or in our reflecting; or in our affirmations, or in our doubts and questions, when we are so engaged, we are participating in the discipline and the process, which is at the heart and soul of theology.

Thus, my fellow theologians, while the three categories – spirituality, theology, and liturgy – can each be conceptualized and discussed as individual categories, I find it more helpful to consider them - not as separate categories; but, rather as over-lapping entities - similar to our viewing images through a kaleidoscope – in which we are able to view evolving shapes, images, and colors, that continually bleed into and feed one another, and as they do so, they invite us to experience a sense of wonder and awe at what we are viewing and experiencing. In other words, one of the meaningful discoveries for me has been the realization that liturgy and spirituality both feed into, and feed off of our theological understandings - as those understandings have grown, deepened, and evolved during the course of my life.

For me, and I believe this to be true for most Christians, this understanding is fundamental, as to why our Bible – the Hebrew Scriptures and the Christian Scriptures, our New Testament, are primary - if not the focal resource for our theological perceptions and understandings.

Had you and I resided in Judea in the immediate years following the life and death of Jesus, and had our decision been at that time to become one of his followers, how would we have initially learned about Jesus - i.e., what he believed, what was vitally important to him, what motivated him why people went in large numbers to hear him, and why he became so deeply revered, respected and followed?

Of course, had we resided in Judea, one possibility is that we might simply have been among those early Jewish persons, who actually heard him read and teach on occasions, or we may have had friends, who told us about hearing and seeing him, and what the impact of his life and teachings had made upon their minds and hearts. And from those conversations, our interest was then piqued and pursued.

However, had we resided in the Diaspora – i.e., Jewish communities outside of Palestine, or if in the early decades following Jesus's life and death, we were among the early non-Jewish converts to Christianity, our learning about Jesus – what he believed, what he taught, and what was attractive and meaningful about how he called his followers to live, would most likely have been learned by means of what, today, we call *oral tradition* – i.e., the many stories and life events about Jesus, that were told and shared by persons who had personally seen and heard him, or who had heard accounts about Jesus and his teachings, told to them by others - which they then shared with interested persons.

My point is that it was into the early 50's - almost two decades after Jesus's death in the early 30's - before there were any writings by Christians, of which we have any knowledge. The first writings about which we have any awareness, were St. Paul's letters to the Christians in Thessalonica - his first letter being written to address the concern and anxieties that persons were feeling and expressing, regarding the fact that Jesus - as they had understood would soon happen - had not yet returned; and during the years that had passed, some of their fellow Christians had died. Thus, their anxiety and concern was what's going to happen to their

Christian family members and friends whose death had occurred prior to Jesus's promised return?

What is critically important for us to keep firmly fixed in our minds, is that these various, early letters of Paul, Peter, John, and the later literary genre, such as the various gospel accounts by Matthew, Mark, Luke, as well as Luke's apologetic and historical narrative - what we know as The Acts of the Apostles - all possess a common thread that is woven throughout each and every one of the writings.

That thread is this: **all** of the several writings, as they addressed the various concerns and reason(s) that was the genesis of their having been written, also express the author's understanding of the nature and the character of God, as that understanding of *God* was perceived as contextually relevant to the issues and concerns that occasioned the writings in the first place. Thus, if one divorces - or attempts to divorce the sense of the nature and character of *God*, as understood within the Scriptural writings - the importance and the impact of what was written to the early Christian community loses most - if not all of its relevance and potency.

However, we also know that not everything that was written by early Christian writers was perceived, over time, to express the most respected, deeply-felt, and widely-held understandings about the nature and character of God.

I well remember, as a young teen-ager, when I first saw all an old family Bible - in which my gg-grandparents had written family birth names and dates, marriages, and deaths - and where I initially saw, felt anxieties, and subsequently learned about the Apocryphal writings that were positioned between the OT and NT - *writings, however, that weren't in my Bible back home.*

That early childhood experience served to plant within me - the initial seed, which has resulted in a life-long interest - not only in the nature and character of our biblical writings, and why they are of critical importance in our “thinking and acting theologically;” but also in how our biblical canon came to include the 66 volumes that we have in our Bible - in contrast with well-known and often-read writings that were not included - i.e., The

Shepherd of Hermas, Clement of Alexandria, and The Didache - to name just a few.

To state it broadly, the understanding that best resonates with me is that our biblical writings - both the Hebrew Scriptures and the Christian Scriptures – contain the most commonly, accepted theological insights and understandings, within the historical contextual setting in which those perceptions were understood to have been formed. In other words, our Bibles contain theological perceptions and understandings, relative to the nature and character of God - that have spoken with meaningful relevance, understanding, depth of meaning, comfort, and hope for our Jewish-Christian ancestors across twenty centuries.

Thus, for me to attempt to think and act theologically, but to attempt to do so without being in conversation with those understandings and perceptions relative to the perceptions of *God* that have informed and sustained “*that great cloud of witnesses*” down through the centuries, has the feeling of being not only a poor choice; but also an impossibility - if for no other reason, because of the question that asks: what is our identity, if

we abandon, or are disconnected from the bequeathed spiritual DNA by which we have been shaped and formed?

Liturgically, I have been most in touch with this focus through reading the Scriptures and through song. In my college undergraduate major, there were two courses that I have found to be of continuing interest and value. One was “The History and Criticism of Public Address,” and the second was “Oral Interpretation.”

My courses in the history and criticism of public address focused my attention to the critical importance of seeking to understand and appreciate, as much as possible, the historical context in which any speech was/is given. Otherwise, its place within the larger context of history will tend to be over-looked, and we will also risk missing the speaker’s principal focus - as well as the significant avenues by which he sought to address his focus.

For example, in his Gettysburg Address, President Lincoln’s hopeful desire, *“that this nation may have a new birth of freedom,”* can not be fully appreciated - separate and apart from understanding his contextual framing of his entire address within the initial birth that occurred, when *“four score*

and seven years ago, our forefathers brought forth on this continent, a new nation conceived in liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.”

Oral interpretation has tended, at least for me, to dove-tail into the lessons that I learned in history and criticism; and particularly so, when I realized that, for several centuries of Christian history, not everyone had literary capabilities. Thus, the reading of those early Christian writings to the assembled community, by someone who was literate, was a significant factor in persons being able to hear, learn, reflect, discuss, and, by doing so, be able to form their perceptive understandings of God and what those perceptions meant for their lives.

Thus, my sense is that the regular reading of Scripture within worship, as well as in private study, is a significant and primary means by which we, too, are able to regularly converse, and to view our theological perceptions and understandings in contrast with our Jewish-Christian forebears - so that through hearing, listening, and seeking to better understand the contextual setting of their lives, and how they heard, perceived, and understood the meaning and character of God, as applicable to the issues

and concerns within those settings; we too - through our *“reading, hearing, learning, marking, and inwardly digesting,”* - may be enabled to better perceive and discern a path for the choices we make - choices that, hopefully, can be made with a more reflective and integrated sense of theological integrity - to the claim of God upon our lives.

It is from that perspective that I have long felt an admiration for Johann Sebastian Bach, who both perceived and felt his role as organist and choir master to be his spiritual vocation, and would often sign his musical compositions with the signature - *“Soli Deo Gloria”* - to the Glory of God.

Or, consider that when Martin Luther wrote, *“And though this world with Devils filled, should threaten to undo us; We will not fear for God hath willed his Truth to triumph through us. Let goods and kindred go; this mortal life also. The body they may kill; God’s truth abideth still; and He will win the battle,”* he was expressing his theology and his faith - both existentially and liturgically, through the powerful medium of verse and song.

One of the ways in which several songs have acquired increased meaning for me, has been through my learning and discovering something about the author's life, and in particular, the life circumstances out of which a song came to be written.

Most of us, I'm reasonably sure, are aware of John Newton's life as a sea-man, and his years of transporting Africans to various ports, where they would be sold into slavery. Thus, his theologically, autobiographical song, "*Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me,*" is a powerful testimony to the sense of God's love and forgiveness - as he came to feel and perceive it.

However, of equal significance, I think, is the epitaph which he wrote, and that is inscribed on his tombstone at St. Mary's, Woolnoth, UK.

John Newton, Clerk
Once an infidel and libertine
A servant of slaves in Africa
Was, by the rich mercy
of our Lord and Saviour
Jesus Christ
restored, pardoned, and
appointed to preach
the Gospel which he had
long labored to destroy.
He ministered,
Near sixteen years in Olney, in Bucks

And twenty-eight years in this Church.

The manner in which a significant number of persons have responded to tragedies and losses in life, through the medium of poetic or reflective verse, that has later been put to music, is also a powerful expression of how the search for hope and comfort through the exercise of actively affirming one's faith in such a manner, can speak - both positively and powerfully.

I'm thinking of the Chicago attorney and his wife, who, one year, had lost a small four-year old boy to scarlet fever; and the next year lost a significant number of real-estate holdings and monies to the great Chicago fire.

Subsequently, he planned a European vacation with his wife and four daughters. However, business concerns delayed the husband/father's departure, and his wife and daughters sailed without him - only to meet with the tragedy of their ship colliding with another in the Atlantic - with only the wife surviving.

As the father soon followed to meet and reunite with his wife in Wales, the captain of his vessel notified Mr. Horatio G. Stafford when they were at the

approximate longitudinal and latitudinal coordinates where the collision had occurred, and Mr. Stafford then went upon deck, where he stood looking out upon the Atlantic's rolling waves, and read a poem that he had written - a poem we know and which we sing as:

*When peace like a river, attendeth my way;
When sorrows like sea billows roll.
Whatever my lot, thou hast taught me to say,
It is well; it is well with my soul.*

For me, there is a meaningful spirituality - as well as an important sense of theological perception - in our musical heritage, that I find to be both informative and positively instructive.

The final point that I want to suggest is - for me, and I imagine that it may have been true for many of you - that I initially heard and understood "spirituality" more from the contextual sense of the need for "*being good*" - i.e., being a good person.

The recent, tragic killing of nine African-Americans at Mother Emmanuel AME Church in Charleston, has evoked a lot of print and comments relating to the sense, "*that evil is in the human heart, and that the significant need*

is to change people's hearts." The perception being expressed is that the critical and meaningful change that needs to happen, is the making of progress in changing individual hearts.

While I don't disagree with the sense "of their being evil within the individual heart," my understanding, now, also includes an awareness that views that individual perspective as being too limited, insomuch as it appears to neglect, and/or to be unaware of the factual reality that, historically, legislative actions have all-to-often sanctioned cultural norms and mores' to be "*the air we breathe, and the water we drink,*" and have served to give a rooted, "systemic sense" to evils in our society, until such times as pent-up frustrations and events, have caused society, as a whole, to awaken and reach "a tipping point" - resulting in social revolution(s).

My introduction to this understanding/awareness was when I was introduced to Reinhold Niebuhr's 1932 volume, **Moral Man and Immoral Society**. Niebuhr, who was a Professor at Union Theological Seminary, had been active in what historians designate as the Social Gospel Movement, while he had lived and worked in Detroit - leading his small congregation to be actively involved in addressing the personal, social and

economic issues of industrialization, as laws and cultural norms within early 20th century, negatively impacted industrial laborers and their families in our nation's large cities.

At a significant level, I believe that the Social Gospel Movement in America both borrowed and adapted for the American scene, what Robert Raikes had begun earlier - in the 1840's in England - during the English Industrial Revolution, when he began Sunday Schools, as a means of providing both literacy and moral education to the young children of laborers in British factories.

As I said when I began, I hope that our shared time together will result in each of you - also choosing to engage in an identical journey of thinking and reflecting about how you, too, have also grown and adapted in your understandings of theology, liturgy, and spirituality.

For my understanding is that - truth as we know and understand it - and particularly, theological truth or understanding - is never completely ours, to an extent that we are enabled to claim that we fully and completely know and understand.

Rather, I believe that it is within a contextual posture of *“knowing in part and seeing in part,”* - as St. Paul expressed it; of *“faith seeking understanding,”* as St. Anselm expressed it; and as T. S. Eliot expressed it - in continuing to *“explore”* - that I believe that we are at our most faithful, best - i.e., we *“never cease from all our exploring, and the end of our explorations, shall be to come around again to the beginning, and to “know” it for the first time.”*

Soli Deo Gloria