



TRINITY EPISCOPAL CHURCH

on the Branford Green

May you find Christ, Community and Compassion within these historic walls.

Sermon preached by Rev. Sharon Gracen

September 5, 2010

Asking Questions

There was once an arrogant young man who was seeking a rabbi with whom he could study. He knocked on the door of the first teacher he considered worthy of his time and said, “I want you to teach me the whole of the Torah while standing on one foot.” The disinterested rabbi closed the door, emphatically. He approached the next teacher on the road and said, “I want you to teach me the whole of the Torah while standing on one foot.” Offended by the young man’s apparent lack of seriousness, the rabbi shook his fist and said something like “Get outta here, you punk!” Not to be discouraged, the young man sought out the most famous teacher of his day, Rabbi Hillel and made his request. Hillel looked him in the eye, picked up his left foot and said, “Love God, love your neighbor. All the rest is commentary.”

Apparently Rabbi Hillel understood that big ideas can be presented simply. I believe that it is the very ones that can be said while standing on one foot that are the most important. This morning’s reading from Deuteronomy contains one of those ideas. God said, “I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse. Choose life.” That’s pretty clear advice from God and a good understanding of how God would like us to behave. Simple, straight forward. But as with all simple concepts, once you dive down into them, there is a world of conversation awaiting – that’s the commentary part Hillel was referring to, and it can be important too. We could begin in this passage by debating the meaning of the words life and death. I do not believe that it means a literal choice between being alive or being dead. It refers to the way of life and the way of death. So we must consider what the way of life looks like.

The foundation of the Old Testament is the story of a people called into relationship with God and with one another. The many laws of the Torah—what Hillel would call commentary, are the guidelines and limits set so that God’s people could and would live together justly and peacefully. So the way of life involves keeping our relationship with God and tending to the health and well-being of the community. In the time of the Book of Deuteronomy, the people lived in tribes. They all looked out for one another because they all depended on one another. If someone was hungry, the community saw to it that they had something to eat. If a woman was widowed and childless, she was taken into a relative’s home so that she had status and security. When anyone fell ill it was the concern of everyone. The way of life requires sacrifice for the good of the community.

The way of life is not separation or isolation—that is the way of death. The way of death is self-centered, self-promoting, and unconcerned with others. This path does not promote care about those in need or those who come after. It is contradictory for people to claim to love God and then turn their backs on what God loves. To do so is to be isolated from God and spiritually dead.

So there are two way of being, that of life and that of death – you choose. Which of course, leads us to the consideration of choice...that’s a big theological concept. Are we really free to choose, to transform ourselves? Or are we cosmic puppets, chess pieces moved about in

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some game that we cannot see? A lot of Christian language falls into the category of human helplessness in the face of sin and evil, sort of a “we’re fallen and we can’t get up” kind of thinking. Well, I don’t like that, and I don’t believe that Jesus thought of us as helpless. Indeed, he spent a lot of time empowering people to know the way of life and to choose it. In every moment, we have choice, about what we think, about how we respond to life’s annoyances and adversities. We choose how generous we will be. We choose whether or not we will forgive. Understanding the difference between the way of life and the way of death informs our choices.

I told you last week that I would call upon the wisdom of my theology professor, Clark Williamson, from time to time and here he is again. Clark always says that there are only three questions in theology; who is God? Who are we? And what do we do now? It kind of simplifies things. Two thousand years of Christian theology have managed to muddy the waters and also to obscure the simple truths. We even give them fancy sounding names to make ourselves sound smart; things like substitutionary atonement, works righteousness, prevenient grace. Isn’t it silly? It doesn’t need to be so complicated. All we as a faith community need to concern ourselves with are Clark’s three questions, Who is God? Who are we? What do we do now? Because we are a Christian faith community, it’s even easier. We start and end our pondering of these questions with Jesus. Our knowledge and experience of Jesus tells us about the nature of God. If God is love, Jesus defines that love as welcoming, liberating, challenging, self-giving and self-sacrificing.

How you think about God is important. The big question might as easily be what, rather than who, is God. We have traditionally referred to God with the vocabulary of personhood – as if God were a being specifically located somewhere, usually out there. This can give us the thundering, angry judge or the more comforting father. Which ever person image you use will color your relationship with God.

But you might think of God in a very different way – as the pervading spirit or energy that creates, animates, and sustains everything. This God is not out there but within everything. It is the mystery in which we live and move and have our being. Who is God? It’s a simple question that can give us conversation material for a long, long time.

And so it is with the next question, Who are we? Here we have to start with “who is the “we” we’re talking about? All of humanity? American humanity? Christian humanity? Connecticut humanity? Trinity humanity? All of those need to be investigated, for they will bring nuance to your understanding. Again, Jesus comes to our rescue. If we define any sub-set of humanity from a Christ perspective we introduce glory and perfection into the mix. In one of the Eucharistic Prayers available for us to use, there is the phrase, “in him, we have been restored to the glory intended for us.” How many of you know that you are glorious? One of my missions here at Trinity is to remind you of it often.

Nowhere is our opportunity for choice greater than in Professor Clark’s last question; “what do we do now?” This is the question that gets to why you are here, why we are church, what we are about. It surprised the Transition Committee when the first thing I did after having accepted the call to be your new rector was to give them a summer reading assignment. One of the two books, from Marcus Borg, is called *Jesus; Uncovering the Life, Teachings, and Relevance of a Religious Revolutionary*. Along with Clark Williamson, you will hear a lot about Marcus Borg. I think he is one of the giants of progressive theology. The gist of his Jesus book,



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which I invite and encourage you all to read, is that Jesus' mission was to transform the world into something that looks like God's kingdom. As the church, we are the inheritors of this vision and mission.

So, the answer to the last question "What do we do now?" is easy, we transform the world! I'm up for it; how about you?