



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 12, 2010

Belonging and Believing

Max, the adorable Church Dog has been having a tough time. It started when all of those packing boxes showed up in our house in California. He turned into the Velcro Dog. I would see him eyeing those boxes as though he was wondering whether or not he should stow away in one of them. And then the boxes showed up in his other refuge, my office at Faith Episcopal where he had reigned supreme for six years. On the big packing party night, we sent him on a sleep over, it seemed wise because then the suitcases also came out. When the morning came for us get in the car and go, he made it his business to get in the car early and nothing short of the Jaws of Life were going to get him out.

Throughout the trip, we had to be careful not to leave him alone for long in any of the motel rooms because instant panic would set in. One time, all I did was to make a short trip down to the car to get something and by the time I returned he was sitting by the door making a truly pitiful noise, a cross between howling and keening. As little as he liked motels, at least we stayed with him. When we got to family, even that changed. We went out to dinner and left him. His confidence was waning. He had become insecure because did not know where he belonged.

What I didn't realize was that other dogs could sense this – first my son's dog Lexie, a large pointer mix who doesn't have an aggressive bone in her body, attacked Max, twice. Then it happened again with another dog, near the rectory. Apparently, not knowing whether or not you belong somewhere can not only cause angst in oneself but creates an opportunity for others to take advantage of your insecurity. At any rate, Max is doing better now and is showing signs of his old confidence. He's pretty clear he belongs here. Now if those squirrels would stop mocking him.

Jesus created a model for us of radical welcome, inclusion, and belonging. Today's Gospel reading shows us why those who were society's castoffs flocked to him because, and I am paraphrasing slightly, Jesus told them, "Come to me, all you who are weary of not belonging and I will give you welcome." Jesus told the tax collectors and the prostitutes and the other undesirables that they belong to God, without having to offer sacrifice at the Temple or knowing all of the laws or not eating the wrong things.

But see what happened when Jesus said, "you all belong here"? There was disapproval and condemnation of him and of those whom he sat and ate. Poor Max was attacked for having no confidence – Jesus adversaries attacked people who dared to believe in the confidence that Jesus gave them. Funny isn't it?

Peter and I have a very dear friend, Phyllis Tickle who is the former editor of the religion department for Publisher's Weekly and the author of many books herself. She is something of an expert on what is going on in American Christianity right now. Apparently the Judeo Christian tradition renovates itself about every 500 years. The last time we called it the Protestant Reformation. What we are currently experiencing is being called The Great

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Emergence. Something new is flowering in western Christianity, something that draws on centuries of tradition and enfolds new things from our time. We are asking new questions.

In her book *The Great Emergence* Phyllis identified one of the significant changes that is taking place. Heretofore, Christianity has operated on an expectation that one must first believe, believe that Jesus is who we say he is, believe in the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, heaven, hell, original sin, you name it—there are lots of things that Christians have been told they must believe in to be considered a Christian. Then there all of the behaviors that came with being a part of the church – regular attendance, sometimes under threat of some sort of exclusion, knowledge of scripture or the particular tenets of one’s denomination, ways of praying, obedience to an identified authority and many other things, sometimes even down to the people with whom you chose to break bread. Behavior was categorized as sufficiently Christian or not.

Finally, once all of the requirements had been met, one was allowed to belong. How many of you remember when children could not receive communion until they had been confirmed at age 12 or so. They were told that they couldn’t fully belong until they had passed a test of age and church approval. They were a part of the old believe, behave, belong formula which according to Phyllis is being turned around. What is emerging is the opposite; “belong, behave, believe.” We now welcome those who have decided they want to belong, even if they are not completely familiar with Episcopal traditions and practices and are not sure even what they believe. It all begins with a desire to belong and an assurance that the doors and hearts of God’s place are open to all.

I saw first hand what happens when children know that they belong in a church. One of the reasons traditionally given for having children wait to receive the sacraments is that they are just too young to understand them. I always ask parents if they would withhold Thanksgiving dinner until a child could tell them what a pilgrim was. I don’t think so. The wonder of this “belong, behave, believe” model is the way it works. The children at Faith Episcopal in Laguna Niguel were our greatest teachers of Eucharistic theology. For them it was the mark of belonging and they taught their sense of belonging to one another (and more than a few adults I imagine). Claire, who tended the nursery, told me that she couldn’t even say the word communion ahead of time because they would bolt from the nursery in their excitement to take communion. There was Julia, the femme fatale of the nursery, who took it upon herself to monitor and instruct all newcomers, placing their hands just so, explaining that you don’t eat it right away, you wait and put the wafer in the wine. She was most concerned about Miles and Cooper who were to be baptized with their mother and as a family had decided to wait until that time to receive communion. One day, Julia could take it no more, and tugged on the sleeve of my alb and in her best stage whisper said, “they need to learn how to do this!” Well, Miles and Cooper did more than learn, and after they had been baptized, they couldn’t wait to participate themselves. Miles became fascinated with the whole process, watching me closely during the Eucharistic Prayer and quivering with anticipation as he stood around the altar to receive. His brother was just as joyful. One day, Cooper kept his wafer, marched into the nursery and held it up to Claire and said “this is heavenly bread!” He was four at the time – I ask you, do any of you understand it any better? What Cooper and Miles and Julia knew is that they belong and from that they will engage the matter of belief.

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But here is what makes the most sense of the model that Phyllis describes as the new way for Episcopalians to view their faith practice. Belonging comes first, and with our belonging we get to participate in the behaviors that symbolize that belonging, as Miles, Cooper, and Julia so aptly demonstrated. Belief can follow both belonging and behaving, but did you know that the root of the word believe is actually *belove*? True belief is a heart thing, it's not about facts or whether something can be verified, it's about giving your heart to something and it all begins with belonging. In this post post modern world of ours we are used to encouraging people to form their own beliefs, but in the Church, belief simply starts with love. It's the focus of Jesus' two great commandment, and it is what we can all believe in, practice, and share. I know I love and believe in all of you.