

Vespers Homily

The Last Sunday of Epiphany

February 7, 2016

Psalm 50: 1-6

Mark 1: 29-39

In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Let us begin with a question or two:

First question: Are you a “cradle Episcopalian?”

Second question: If not, what brought you to the Episcopal Church?

Third question: In both instances, what has kept you here?

Personally, I am a convert. My first memory of any church was the First Methodist Church of Irving Park in Chicago; it seemed to be an enormous church to a very little boy.

My father was in Europe defeating the Nazis, so my mother and I sat on sort of a padded bench in the very back of the church. In retrospect, I realize that was to make a quick exit in case I lost interest in proceedings I could hear but could not see.

Hearing was the key to the service; it was highly verbal. The minister was Dr. Minion who, when met at the back door of the church following the service, looked to my memory remarkably like Woodrow Wilson. I supposed that was Dr. Minion whose voice I heard during the service.

I suppose the service lasted an hour; most of the service consisted of the invisible Dr. Minion preaching, then a few rousing hymns, a prayer and freedom. I don't remember having to stand or otherwise

move during the service; I don't remember anybody having to stand or move. This was my introduction to worship.

My father's return from the war meant moving to Arlington, Virginia, in the Washington, D.C., area. There we attended something called General Protestant Services at the chapel on Fort Myer. According to United States Army regulations all persons except Roman Catholics and Jews are General Protestants. The chapel was small but not too small, historic and quite beautiful; it provided a good visual distraction from the Protestant ministers who, even to a young boy, lacked enthusiasm for the service. I suppose they were all Methodists and Presbyterians and Lutherans filled with nostalgia for their own prayer books and hymnals. I'm sure no Episcopal priest would behave so.

The service was much like that of the First Methodist Church of Irving Park, word-oriented, highly verbal, focused on the minister and his long, and often very long, sermon. It was theatrical. The congregation, rooted to their seats, played no part in it. It might easily have been presented to an empty theater. Consequently, when old enough to make such an assertion, I faded away from church for a few years. My parents did not seem to mind.

I had a friend in high school named Darwin Terry. This was at Fort Sheridan, a beautiful old army post on Lake Michigan about twenty miles north of Chicago.

Darwin was the son of the Post Chaplain who happened to be an Episcopalian. His father conducted all those General Protestant services, but, in addition, early each Sunday morning he celebrated an Episcopal Eucharist. Darwin invited me to attend one, just to see what happened.

If you, too, are a convert, you may remember your first Episcopal service. It was a revelation. It wasn't simply that there was actual color in the little chapel, hangings, and vestments, but there was a joyful sense to the service. The sermon was relatively brief and was actually

interesting. The minister, the chaplain, the priest, appeared fully engaged in celebrating. The focus was not on him or on his sermon but on the bread and wine of Holy Communion. Most amazing of all, the congregation, a very small congregation, was engaged and participating in the service. They actually knelt for the prayers even though there were no kneelers. They said the responses, and prayed out loud. It was church, real church.

If I were to answer the question, “What brought me to the Episcopal Church,” I would say the Sacraments and the sense of participation, actually being engaged in worship, actually participating in the Holy Eucharist. I had grown weary of being preached at for one hour, or more, once a week, while doing nothing. I realized that I was no longer, and perhaps had never been, a General Protestant.

The Episcopal Church is a sacramental church; what binds us together is what we do, not just what we say we believe. We certainly read the scriptures, four readings at every Eucharist, and we hear a sermon, hopefully based on one or more of those lessons, but the heart of our worship is the Sacraments, “outward and visible signs of an inward and spiritual grace.”

If I were to ask you, “What are those outward and visible signs,” you might say baptismal water, holy oil, a wedding ring, all of which are true. However, over the years I came to realize that there really is one more universal sign that is present in every sacramental act. It’s the sign of “touching.”

When Episcopalians are baptized, a priest touches them with water and with holy oil; when they are married, a priest places his hand upon the bride and groom’s heads in blessing; when they are very sick, a priest touches them, making the sign of the cross on their foreheads in holy oil—it’s called Unction. When they die, a priest will make the same sign in Extreme Unction. When they are confirmed, a Bishop lays his or her hands on their heads, touching them. When an Episcopalian is ordained, the Bishop, and all priests present, do the same. At the Eucharist the priest lays his or her hands on the bread and the wine, invoking the Holy Spirit and God’s blessing.

What do you suppose brought all those people to Jesus in this reading from Mark? Mark would have us believe that it was Jesus' preaching, speaking with authority. Jesus was a good preacher. I'm sure it's true that people were attracted to hear Him; that's why they came. Actually, there must have been many good preachers in Israel then. John the Baptist is but one example of ones who deplored the failure of the Jews to serve God and called the people to repentance. There is a reference in Amos to groups called the "Prophets' Sons" who traveled the country, much like a revival. Like a revival, they were the entertainment of country people and villagers.

What made them stay? We might call it contact or presence or touch. Unlike any other, Jesus takes the hand of Simon's mother-in-law, raises her up, and she is healed. Jesus touches the eyes of a man born blind, the tongue of a mute, the ears of one who is deaf. Jesus lays His hands upon the lame, the leper, the demoniac, and they are healed. It isn't verbal or theoretical. It's real and physical and wonderful. Of course they stayed with Him, and the following grew with each moment of His healing presence. In the presence of Jesus they found actual, physical contact with the divine. God was that close.

Personally, I stayed because of that closeness, that presence of God in the sacraments that I felt in that chapel, a presence I had never felt before, never experienced in all those years of being preached at. I was confirmed an Episcopalian at the Fort Sheridan chapel by the Bishop of Chicago.

The Army takes photos of everything, and a few days later I received a black and white, eight-by-ten glossy of me kneeling before the bishop, his hands laid upon my head. Many years later my mother, the General Protestant Methodist, gave the photo to Happy, saying "This is the day he lost his religion." How true.

In His Holy Name.