

All Saints - Presentation in the Temple 02/02/2014

In the Name of God. Amen

Good Morning!

Today we have a set of scriptural texts that may be less familiar to us for they are appointed for the Presentation of Jesus in the Temple. The Presentation has a fixed date of February Second, so we encounter it only every seven or so years on a Sunday. Yet, the Presentation is of such importance that it takes precedence over the regular Sunday lections. In our case today, over the Fourth Sunday after Epiphany.

What gives it such importance? Let us take a closer look.

As devout Jews, Jesus' parents have brought him to the Temple in Jerusalem to fulfill the Law. Luke has conflated three ancient ceremonies into one occasion in order to drive home the point that Jesus belongs in a pious Law-abiding family that is part of the faith community that observes all the obligations to maintain faithfulness to the Covenant between God and God's people.

Behind these liturgical rites is the deeper truth that adherence to the Law through participation in worship is the outward expression of deep faith embedded in the Tradition and the eternal longing of the heart.

As I reflected on these passages one word kept recurring to me as implicit to an understanding of them. The word is BELONGING. Belonging rooted and grounded in the long and rich tradition of Covenant and manifested in Temple worship. Belonging is a basic human need. The famous American Psychiatrist William Glasser, wrote: *"We are driven by five genetic needs: survival, love and belonging, power, freedom and fun"* Belonging, not in the sense of possessing, but in the sense of being an integral part of something that we willingly embrace as we celebrate our participation in its life. Many of us are here today to once again affirm and celebrate our belonging to God and this community of faith. Some of us are seeking to find our way on our spiritual journey and find we have more questions than answers, and some of us, I do hope it is a VERY few, are considering the odds on who is going to win the Super Bowl!

The Second Vatican Council's Dogmatic Constitution on the Church states: "**Belonging** to a people has a strong theological value. In the history of salvation, God has saved a people. There is no full identity without belonging to a people. No one is saved alone, as an isolated individual, but God attracts us through the complex web of relationships that take place in the human community.

Now I want to speak plainly about my growing conviction concerning belonging and the church in the here and now.

There is an historical perspective termed The great reversal. The idea is that sometimes, turning the world on its head, beginning the story with the end in mind, or locating ourselves 180 degrees from where we started, can make all the difference. A flattened world becomes a spherical globe. The sun becomes the center of our galaxy, not the Earth. And the White House - a structure that was built on the backs of slaves to house the most powerful and influential person in the world - becomes home to our first African American president.

Throughout history, we see these radical shifts in perspective and re-ordering of "truths" that cycle around and around, again and again ...and in church history, it is certainly no exception.

One-time parishioner, historian and theologian, Diana Butler Bass writes that for several centuries now, Westerners have generally assumed that faith and religious commitment - *of any kind* - begins when one

assents to a body of organized doctrines. Ordinarily, the seeker or the newcomer is concerned primarily with questions of BELIEF: What does this religion or this church have to say about what I should believe ...about God, about worship, politics, or service to others?

Next in line come the questions about BEHAVIOR: What are the explicit *and the implicit rules that I'm expected to follow?* Am I supposed to give the church 10% of all that I have, vote a straight party ticket, come every week, and stop cussing?

And lastly come the questions of BELONGING: Can I get on board with this? Do I fit in here? Yes or no? If the answer is yes, well then, I guess I must belong. If not, then I should probably try something else.

For many - if not, for most of us - this is how we got here. There was something compelling about the beliefs or practices of All Saints that drew us in and enabled us to grow in relationship and in community with one another, so that after awhile, we felt like we belonged here.

But the times, they are a changing ... And scholars, through their research, and young adults, through their practice, have realized that this pattern that's evolved of **believing, behaving and then belonging** to a church or spiritual community is actually quite odd. Other than

joining a political party, there simply aren't many other types of communities that people like you and me join by *first* agreeing to a set of given principles. Bass says Instead, today's spiritual seekers are much more concerned with **whom** they find themselves in company, with **what** they should do with their lives, and with **how** to go about ascribing to a faith that people like Dr. King, Desmond Tutu, Eunice Kennedy Shriver, Mother Theresa and so many, many others have devoted their lives.

So, not only have the questions that we ask of our spiritual and religious institutions changed, but so has the order of their relative importance: cultivating a life of faith is now a matter of belonging first, behaving second, and believing as the result of the first two.

Imagine, for a moment, joining a sports team or a community garden.

Does anyone ever show up to one of these groups and ask around to see if the soccer players actually "believe" in the game of soccer, or what the gardeners "hold to be true about gardening"? No. Not likely. If you want to play soccer, you find a coach and team. If you want to join in on the community garden project, you find someone who's already involved to help shepherd you into the fold.

The first step in becoming any of these things - an athlete, a gardener, an educator, an engineer, a theologian, or a bread baker, for that matter - is to form a relationship with one. The next step is to **learn by doing**.

Simply put: this is the path of transformation ...and this is exactly the type of path to which Jesus calls us...."Follow me", he said.

Christianity didn't begin with a confession, rather it began with a sense of belonging: a summons into friendship, a call to community, and an invitation into relationship based on love and service.

Jesus asked the disciples to do something: to follow him ...to get to know him, to learn from him, and then eventually to go out into the world and do all that he had taught them - heal the sick, release the captives, and proclaim God's dream and God's vision for all of Creation.

And as they did, the world changed ...and so did they.

But what about us? How might any of this inform our understanding of who we are as All Saints-by-the-Sea, and who we'd like to be in the future? Well, I think we begin with the obvious: if we are at all concerned about growing this community, then it goes without saying that we've need to pay attention to the ways that others are paying attention to us. And if it is true, that for many people who are not yet a part of our

community, having an observable and palpable culture of relational "belonging-ship" is now *more important* than what it is that we say we believe - theologically, ideologically, and otherwise - then I think it's clear where we need to be investing a lot of our time and energy - into relationships and into projects and ministries that lead to real and concrete transformation ...not only of others, but of ourselves.

The Parish Profile process has helped us look at how we might be church and do church together, both now and in the years to come. And a significant part of this work has been focused on discerning, *What exactly are some of the beliefs and values of this community?*

Our beliefs are vitally important - they help to define who we are, and in many ways, they become the pulse of any community's identity. But where we are challenged is in expecting that anyone will come running, or even walking across the street to join us, simply because we've come up with some well scripted, accurate description of who we are. In the past, people may have flooded the doors once they heard the news, but not anymore.

The hard truth is that people of the generations below me, and they are

increasing all the time , just don't care all that much about how communities of faith label, or even define themselves -progressive, evangelical, blended, charismatic, liberal ...whatever. Instead, what they care deeply and *passionately* about is how the community is living out of and living into its convictions: How is the stranger being welcomed? Who is the community following? What is the prophetic message that's being proclaimed? And why in the world might any of this spiritual and religious talk matter at all?

And what's fascinating to me, is I suspect these were the exact same kinds of questions that Jesus' earliest followers were asking of him and of his growing community as well.

People need and want to belong....and people are searching for communities where belonging is important. The younger generations are not apathetic and lethargic. They are interested. They are energized. And they are ready to join in! The catch is ...they have to be convinced that we - the community of faith they are visiting or that they are checking out on the internet - are just as curious about and as committed to journeying with them as they are with us. (And when I say "convinced," I don't mean convinced by our words, but convinced by our actions.

There is an old churchy phrase: "We'll take you wherever you are, but we're never content to leave you there." We say this, because on some level,

these echo the very words of Jesus: *Come, and follow me. We're going somewhere, and I need you.*

Get energized about the adventure, and who your traveling companions will be. Ask your questions, and be curious. Sink your teeth into the life, and the hope, and the dreams of All Saints by-the-Sea, but don't be satisfied to end your work here. Reach out, and seek to be transformed.

Welcome the stranger in, and let us grow this community by building relationships of meaning, trust and self-offering love ...and then get ready to be surprised.

For it is in our belonging, that we become who God means us to be. **Amen**