

Lessons for the Fifth Sunday of Easter, Year B:

http://lectionarypage.net/YearB_RCL/Easter/BEaster5_RCL.html

I recently binge-watched a Netflix series produced by Jerry Seinfeld, called “Comedians in Cars Getting Coffee.” For each episode, Seinfeld’s guest is a different funny person, mostly actors and standup comics. Jerry picks up his guest in a vintage car he has chosen especially for them, and they drive around talking. They end up someplace for coffee and pie or breakfast and more conversation.

It’s always a pleasure seeing professionals in the same field talking, cracking each other up. The conversations are very funny of course, as they talk about their lives and their vocations. And surprisingly often, the talk is deeply profound as the friends explore the important role humor plays in the world. For example, on the day Jerry interviews Stephen Colbert, things suddenly get existential. Colbert says: “You know, existing is a trial.” And Seinfeld agrees. With all the battles to be fought, he says, “it’s hard enough just being a person.”

What lovely authenticity, from two famous people who have made fortunes being funny. I felt an affirming connection, hearing them admit that life is hard sometimes. There is something so human about the admission, about letting down one’s façade and connecting with others who may be struggling too.

Life is hard. I have been thinking a lot about the role the Church plays in this world, in our culture. The primary narrative in religion for the past several years is the decline of the mainline denominations, that fewer and fewer people are going to church. The other half of this narrative is that more and more people say they are “spiritual but not religious,” that they don’t need church to experience God. Which of course is

true. And this is a frightening trend to people committed to preserving the institution. What are those people doing finding God out there...in nature? We cry. They should be in church!

But I wonder. I don't think this is a time of crisis, I think it is a time of new growth; I think the institution can benefit from this pruning. A lot of good health and growth comes from pruning, as Jesus says today: "I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower. He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit." It is a fruit tree's job to produce fruit. And a tree which does not bear fruit is improved by pruning, cutting back. Pruning can actually save a plant's life.

Life is hard, right? The purpose of the Church—and I mean this parish, this denomination, all people of faith—the purpose of the church is to alleviate the suffering of the world. It is the purpose of the church to welcome, to go out, to meet people where they are. Too often churches are driven by the purpose of filling pews and offering plates. No. The work of the Church is to facilitate, to offer people an encounter with the Holy. I believe that the churches that are failing are the ones who have forgotten this. People leave the church when it fails to feed their souls.

I was in Asheville North Carolina 10 days ago, serving as chaplain for the national conference of the Episcopal Communicators professional group. Our keynote speaker was Diana Butler Bass, a prominent researcher and writer of religion and culture. You may have seen her essay on Gratitude in the New York Times a few days ago.

I was so encouraged and energized by Diana's ideas, and from several personal conversations with her. Her approach suits me, as it is different from the usual post-

denominational handwringing. In her research studies, Diana sees that society may be going to church less and less, but that's not the whole story. She also hears more and more people say they believe in God, that they actively seek experiences of mystery and sacredness. It's not a lack of faith, a lack of belief. It is that, generally speaking, the *church* isn't doing its job.

In Philip's story today in the Acts of the Apostles, we have a case study for what I'm talking about. A great illustration of the right way to do religion.

The book of Acts is the story of building a new religion after the resurrection and ascension of Jesus of Nazareth. It's a new way of worshipping God, being worked out by people who were reshaping their practices and beliefs they had had as Jews. As soon as you start a new organization, you have to work out what everybody thinks the founder intended, whom should we allow to join, what will require of our new recruits? The early Christian church is no exception to this. Most of the New Testament is about the struggle of the early Christian church working out who is in and who is out, how communities are to practice the way of Christ. So here, in Philip's story, we see this wonderful example of the generosity and hospitality that the church *ought* to exhibit.

Philip feels an urge—an angel spoke to him, the text says—he hears a whisper from the Holy Spirit. He gets up and goes where God calls him, down the wilderness road. On the side of the road Philip comes across a guy—a foreigner from Ethiopia, obviously an outsider. And yet this man had come to Jerusalem to worship, so he was seeking something. He is a seeker. When Philip comes across the stranger, he finds him reading from the Hebrew Bible, and again the spirit nudges Philip: “Go over to

this chariot and join it.” The two men engage in conversation around the scripture, and the stranger is fascinated with what he learns. He seeks God, and God finds him.

This is my favorite part:

As they were going along the road, they came to some water; and the eunuch said, “Look, here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?” He commanded the chariot to stop, and both of them, Philip and the eunuch, went down into the water, and Philip baptized him.

What is so miraculous about this story is that Philip could have, at any point, inhibited—prevented—the movement of the Spirit. He could have ignored the angel who told him to get up and go. He could have declined to get involved with this foreigner, this non-Jew (remember all of the first Christ-followers were Jews. The key debate in the early Church was whether or not to admit Gentiles to the fellowship.) Furthermore, a *eunuch* would have been absolutely unacceptable, not allowed to practice their religion, and another apostle might have rejected him. But not only did Philip get involved, reach out and minister to this man... most dramatically...when the man asked to be baptized, Philip did it. It might have been more expected that Philip would say to this foreigner, this unacceptable person, that he needed to get permission from Jerusalem, or you haven't had enough of the pre-baptism classes. But no. When the seeker asked to be included, he was welcomed.

One of the primary things about St. Martin's that attracted me here is that this community is not satisfied with the status quo. There is a heart here, and a commitment to the work of God that extends far beyond maintaining the institution. Please do not misunderstand me: I LOVE the church. I love the Episcopal Church. I love being a priest in the church. I love our structure, and rules. Our governing body and our book of common prayer set many of our practices. We don't get to do just anything we want...if we could, we would be Congregationalists or Unitarians.

But CHURCH is not the end, is it? It is the means to an end. All our rituals, and practices, our ways of doing church...these things have only one purpose: To invoke the love and the power of the Holy One, and to make God known in a world that needs healing. I am so proud of this place, and excited that we are committed not just to *doing Church* but *being the Church*. Being the body of Christ in an active, welcoming, intentional way.

As I look to our future, I want us to deepen our fellowship with one another. I want us to deepen our worship and study practices, as we seek God's desire for us. I want us to be creative and hospitable and deliberate in our welcome of the seeker, the stranger. Life is hard. Church attendance is not required, of course, as we have seen there are plenty of people who find God elsewhere. But we DO have a special purpose, a gift for building community, for offering the world a place for healing and wholeness, a place to experience the Holy. May it be so. Amen.