

What do you do when things aren't working out?

*Sermon preached by the Rev. William McD. Tully, Rector,
at the eleven o'clock service, February 6, 2011: The Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany.
Based on Matthew 5:13-20*

Do you bear down and try harder? Do you try different things, embracing a changed way of looking at the world or making changes in your methods and priorities?

I think we've all heard the definition of insanity attributed to Einstein: it's doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results.

There's an alternative to those stark choices, sort of a combination. You take a good look at what's good and reliable in what you've been taught *and* at the same time make some changes in the way you put your beliefs into practice.

We're given a glimpse of that approach to living in today's excerpt from Matthew's gospel. When you read how Matthew has gathered Jesus' words into a compelling teaching collection that earned the title "Sermon on the Mount," you can just begin to sense the context in which he worked.

Matthew, as we know, built on Mark, the first gospel to be published, and on an earlier source of carefully preserved sayings of Jesus that had been available for some years. But when you put them side by side, you sense the urgency of Matthew's task, that of answering the question, What do you do when things aren't working out?

Consider: the Jesus movement after Jesus was a Jewish movement, and as much as it was fueled by the spirit and distinctive life and teaching of Jesus, it was also concerned with the essence of the Jewish teaching tradition, the Torah.

Listen again to how Matthew has Jesus speak:

"Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill. . . . unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven."

Jesus spoke vividly and memorably, using images like salt and light, urging people to restore their saltiness and famously urging them to build things that can be seen: "a city build on a hill cannot be hid," he said. And, "let your light shine before others."

Matthew knew how critical it was not just to preserve and teach the words of Jesus but also to find new ways to live them. After all, the Christians, still partly thinking Jewish and living Jewish, were just as devastated as the Jews at the destruction of the Temple in the year 70, just a few years before the probable date of Matthew's gospel book.

We know that Judaism was just beginning the process of *reinventing* itself as a teaching and practice centered on the synagogue and the home. Those earliest Christians were *inventing*—building a template for living both faithfully and adaptively.

That's what I'm arguing for in your life and mine, and certainly for the Christianity we consciously live out right here as a church.

Adapt or die, that's the choice. Sounds pretty stark, I know, but if you're even a half-believer in what science has discovered about all living forms, you can begin to appreciate that it's the hard truth.

What our species has done over the eons, is a clue—not the actual reason, but a clue—to our inner and spiritual lives. When things aren't working well, or working at all, for you, it's insane *not* to take stock and then adapt where necessary.

Matthew had a second big concern. He was conscious of an early Christian claim that had begun to cause a crisis in the young movement. The earliest Christian writing and teaching by Paul and others had implied or said directly that the end of history and the second coming of the Christ would happen within the lifespans of the first followers. That had not happened, a

fact that was as painful and obvious as the rubble of the great Temple.

Matthew pulled together the teaching of Jesus so that his community could live on it and pass it on for the long haul. We still have Christian preachers who try to inflame their followers as if the second coming or rapture or judgment is about to engulf them. It's a threat, it's false, and it won't work. The equivalent threat is that you can't change or adapt the laws and customs of the community.

You *can*, and even the most conservative believers have done it and are doing it.

To do so is the essence of the Torah, with generous measure of salty salt and bright light, and always, always with the grace and love Jesus brought to the situation. That faithful adapting is what forms our tradition, not every letter of every law.

But to adapt you have to remain honest and self-aware, and you have to know the tradition you're adapting. That's why we keep doing what we're doing. We're bringing the tradition to this generation—with the salt, the light and the love.

We go to a lot of trouble to arrange the conditions, the space, the welcome, the intelligence and the pure heart to tell the story. In keeping that story alive and telling it engagingly, without threat and without the claim of inerrancy, we create a space where you can ask the questions and launch the search which is every person's life journey.

A parishioner told me that he'd recently been in a business conference, one he was dreading, fearing that it would be as deadly or shallow as consultants usually are. Instead, he sat up and listened when the speaker said simply, "Before you start working on your workplace, there are two questions you have to ask: Who are you? And, what's your story?"

Not a bad place to start when you have to ask the question, What do you do when things aren't working out? Just as this place isn't a bad place to start to adapt your life, with some salt, some light and lots of love. *Amen.*

©2011 St. Bartholomew's Church in The City of New York.

*For information about St. Bartholomew's
and its life of faith and mission at an important American crossroads
write to the parish office, 325 Park Avenue at 51st Street, New York, New York 10022,
or call 212/378-0222. You can also visit us on the web at www.stbarts.org.*