

A New Business Plan for Christianity

*Sermon preached by the Rev. F. M. "Buddy" Stallings, Priest-in-Charge,
at the eleven o'clock service, May 6, 2012.
The Fifth Sunday of Easter.
Based on John 15:1-8.*

A couple of weeks ago I read an article in *Foreign Affairs*, and I haven't stopped talking about it since. In many ways the article is not unlike many others of such scope written over the last four decades: the mainline church is shrinking. This is not news to us in the Episcopal Church. For many years members left churches like ours for big, conservative, mega-churches. Somewhat arrogantly we often concluded that such people really needed to go anyway. After all, "they" didn't cherish our music like smart people do; "they" were seeking easy answers while we were offering nuanced, complicated and brilliantly ambiguous responses to life; not as progressive as we, "they" needed something we just didn't need—and so we released them with our blessings, our greatest regrets sometimes being the money they took with them. It was not we at our best, and some might—in fact some do—say that we deserve our tumble from the top of the denomination pile!

But here is the interesting new statistic. It is not the mega-churches to which people are fleeing any more. In fact, the Southern Baptist Church, for years the almost guaranteed growth leader, is slipping in membership. Another bastion of growth is also struggling. The Catholic Church in this country continues to get larger, but the growth is largely the result of immigration, and more specifically, Latino immigration, a fact not to be diminished but recognized as something other than straight growth within the culture. The demographic showing the most growth is a category of individuals who when asked their religion respond "none." Of course, of this group some are atheists and some are agnostics, but most in this group claim to be spiritual in a way that is neither tied to nor nourished by the institutional church.

Why—you may wonder—am I taking all this time to tell you about this trend in the world of U.S. religion? Here is my reason. I believe this shift signals a deep and penetrating need of people just like us: the desire to be connected in a way that is meaningful, transformative, and somehow helps us make sense of what life is about. I want to be—in fact want all of us to be—a part of responding to this need within others and ourselves. And, call me crazy if you wish, I also still believe in and hold out hope for the institutional church. (By the way St. Bart's is clearly institutional—those of us who work here sometimes think it is the mental institution!) I know full well that church is not the only way that God moves in peoples' lives, but it remains a critical one, the absence of which would seriously diminish the world. If the church is not something in which we can truly believe, then we need to change it. If it has become something that feels only slightly connected to the rest of our lives, if it has become something that we just dally in when our "real" lives are what really matter to us, if it has been a long time since we have even thought of inviting someone whom we care about to join us in church—not to evangelize them but because we love them—then there is little wonder church is becoming less and less important and more and more anachronistic in our culture.

I am preaching on this topic particularly this morning because I believe imbedded in this old story about Philip and the eunuch, we find a delightful, joyful and sometimes overlooked event that speaks directly to how the church occasionally goes off track.

Philip, led by an angel we are told, began to talk to the Ethiopian eunuch. The fact that Philip was led in this way is not as far out as it might seem. This is an ancient way of saying, as we might, "something just told me to talk to this guy." We do that all the time. Much has been speculated about the presence of the eunuch in this story, "speculated" being the operative word in the sentence. My personal take is that the writer of Acts wanted to show that Jesus' message is for everyone, even a eunuch, who though not without a function in the society of his time, was far from the kind of virile, successful, upright convert most organizations were seeking (then or now). Even with allowance for different nuances of

meaning through the millennia, he was at the least a member of a sexual minority; he was black; he was from another culture; and most certainly he had not been through the baptism preparation class!

As there is about most of the books of the Bible, there is dispute about when Acts was written; some recent scholars date it as late as 25 years into the second century. By that time, and to some degree even at an earlier date, there were already in place a defined ecclesiastical hierarchy and a process by which things were to be done. Some version of the Catechumenate was in place, a three-yearlong process of preparation for adult baptism. We in the church sometimes speak of it with some sort of odd nostalgia. I am not sure why; it actually sounds pretty dreadful to me. Catechumens for much of the three years were kept totally separate from their more advanced Christian brothers and sisters; at other times, they were allowed to join for what we would call the liturgy of the word but were ushered out before Communion—no holy meal for them, not yet, for they were not fully prepared. After three years, they were formally admitted through baptism into the life of the church, receiving for the first time their Communion.

Now, contrast that with Philip's action: he met a man who was truly searching. It is not a stretch to assume that this eunuch's life had not been exactly perfect. Philip immediately began to tell him all about Jesus. My guess is he said, "My friend, Jesus changed my life; he made me whole in ways I didn't know I could be, and it thrills me to tell you about him." Continuing down the road together, the eunuch hanging on to every word, they came upon some water, and the eunuch said, "Look, here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?" Without batting an eye except to blink through his tears of joy, Philip said, "Not one thing; come into the water with me. Just as you are, you are loved." This story excites me about the church; it makes me want to tell the sad, lonely people I know—some like me who are becoming Christians, others who have no religion—that God loves us and wants us to know how deeply we are loved.

When I was in seminary, which wasn't in the Dark Ages but just twenty years ago, I was taught that baptisms could only occur on five days during the year: All Saints, Easter, Pentecost, the parish's patronal feast, and the Baptism of our Lord. Even then, when I was trying to be good, I found that hilarious. As an entrepreneur I find it stupid to make it as difficult as possible to get in, to limit initiation into the church, which is what baptism primarily is. Our numbers are shrinking, and we are saying, "Oh, sorry, we just had baptism last week; you have to wait five months" or "We are sorry your only living relative lives on the other side of the world and will be in New York City only one week this year; that's just not a baptism date." Brilliant business plan. More importantly, as a theologian, I find it to be utterly inconsistent with the wideness and immediacy of God's love, smacking of rules as though it is our responsibility and pledge, as worthy ones, to protect God from the least worthy ones.

The church is in a struggle for its life, a struggle that this simple little story only begins to tell about. My very own seminary, I suspect, still teaches that there are only five *appropriate* days to receive the GIFT OF BAPTISM; and I know it teaches that communion should only be offered to baptized Christians. Officially, our diocese is still conflicted about same sex marriage. Really? We will not survive unless we repent from our proprietary inclinations, coming instead to understand the sacraments as God's gifts to all and ours to share. Sacraments are not diminished when they are shared; they explode with love and transform the world in the process.

Even in a church like St. Bart's, my brothers and sisters, we must always remember that we are the church, not the powers that make decisions about who is in and who is out; we are the church! And a vine that comes from God gives us life and holds us together.

In the name of God: *Amen*.

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