



ST BART'S

A Sermon by

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Faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.

Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, September 6, 2015

The Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost—Based on James 2:1-10 (11-13) 14-17 and Mark 7:24-37

This past week was a particularly full week. Between end-of-the-month statistics for the soup kitchen and pantry, preparing check requests, and writing a sermon, I didn't have any time to get my beard trimmed. And I did not have time to get on my bicycle. The fact that my beard needs trimming needs no explanation. It is, as they say, as obvious as the nose on my face. In fact if my beard gets any longer it may soon cover the nose on my face. For those of you who are visiting or are returning after a summer vacation, the fact that I did not get on my bicycle all week may not seem nearly as urgent as getting my beard trimmed, but it is. For those of you who haven't heard, I—along with several parishioners and our friends—have committed to ride my bicycle 285 miles from Boston to New York, beginning on September 25, to support Housing Works in their efforts to end the AIDS epidemic. I scheduled myself to ride on Friday because, in addition to everything else, I was already scheduled to spend Saturday from 9 am to 5 pm—that would be the whole beautiful day, but I am not complaining—locked in the City Harvest warehouse in Long Island City studying food safety. And so the only other day for a ride was Friday and the weather channel was calling for scattered thundershowers. Now the reason that I really needed to ride this week was that I have listened to the Weather Channel too many times this summer and made plans to stay home even when the weather turned out to be really quite nice. And so this Friday I went ahead and rode. Throughout the day winds would blow, the sky would darken as clouds rolled in, and I kept riding. In the end it never rained and I had a great day riding. So much for the Weather Channel.

On Saturday, to my great surprise, the class let out early, and I had just enough time to make it to my barber. I jumped onto the train and the trains were all working. The large groups of pedestrians were flexible as I ran down the street, and I made it to the barber in plenty of time, thinking to myself how great it is when everything works together—until they don't. The barbershop was closed. My first thought was one of frustration, and that thought is not one that I can share. But all of a sudden my thought changed. After all it is Labor Day weekend. How nice that my beloved barber who works so hard to keep me and so many others trimmed and shorn has gotten an early start for his holiday weekend. My thoughts and feelings do not always change in such a positive direction so quickly, but like the winds and clouds that swept into the area on Friday, this time I ended in a good place. It reminded me that my thoughts and feelings are just like the weather. Too often I have been constrained by nothing more than thoughts and feelings.

As soon as I finished my last sermon in August I began to prepare this sermon by looking up the lessons appointed for today, and when I saw the gospel I had lots of thoughts and feelings. For you see, I had preached last year on the story of the woman with a daughter and an unclean spirit. It was not a bad sermon, and I did wonder if I could reuse it. I then remembered that these are published and available on line. And that as a priest, I am supposed to listen to what God was saying to me today through this scripture and not just pull one out of the file. And so I put the file away and went ahead with my preparation. That continued until this week on Tuesday, when I received an email from the Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church and the President of the House of Deputies. It was a letter calling for all of Episcopal churches to participate in "Confession, Repentance, and Commitment to End Racism Sunday," at the invitation of the African Methodist Episcopal Church. They included some helpful resources for preachers and for changes to the service to assist in participating in this observance.

Personally this call seemed like very little action and a little too late. How much can one Labor Day Sunday change things? After all, I had been working on my sermon and had a clear outline in my mind. Evidently I was not the only one to have these thoughts and feelings. The Internet lit up with clergy complaining of the limited time during a week before a holiday weekend to make such changes. In order to still the winds and gathering clouds of clerical discontent, the Bishop of this diocese sent out another email. In his email Bishop Dietsche reminded us that this was an invitation from the historic Black Churches and that even if we were on vacation or if our sermons were completed and service leaflets had already been printed, it would be good for our diocese to participate in this observance. On the other hand, if we needed more time to prepare, we could participate on some other Sunday.

Earlier this year the unedited manuscript of a novel was published. "Go Set a Watchman" was initially billed as the sequel to the great American novel "To Kill a Mockingbird" by Harper Lee. "To Kill a Mockingbird" describes life in a small Southern town in the 1930's as seen through the eyes of Scout, an eight-year-old girl. After publication in 1960, "Mockingbird" became a phenomenon. Harper Lee won the Pulitzer Prize, the book was adapted into an Oscar-winning movie, and it has been read by junior high and high school students for more than 50 years. Although "Go Set a Watchman" was initially billed as a sequel, because it describes many of the same characters some 20 years after the events described in "Mockingbird," it turns out that "Watchman" was written first and "Mockingbird" is a product of the editing process.

In "Watchman," Jean Louise Finch, previously known as Scout, has dropped her childhood nickname and returns to her small Southern town as an adult woman who has been living in New York and is dismayed by the racism and prejudice she discovers. She and we are shocked to discover that her father, Atticus Finch, who had defended an unjustly accused African-American man in "Mockingbird," is now a member of the White Citizens' Council. In his review, Richard McAdams of the University of Chicago Law School, has described the White "Citizens' Council" as "the business class analog to the Ku Klux Klan that sprang up in the wake of the Supreme Court's Brown vs. Board of Education ruling. Throughout the South these Councils worked to preserve segregation by exploiting economic power." Many readers and reviewers have been disappointed by the surprising discovery that their heroes from "Mockingbird" were embedded in and even supportive of the racist and unjust system.

McAdams describes the process of encouraging Harper Lee "to shift gears and develop the story of the young Scout as a regrettable effort to avoid controversy, to make the novel more polite and palatable." McAdams concludes that if edited, "Watchman" "might not have been as popular as "Mockingbird," but it would have been a better novel."

I am not sure that I agree. I do believe however that thinking about "Mockingbird" as a more edited story can inform us in many ways. First it can help us to think about ways to approach difficult social problems such as racial and economic injustice. The editing of "Watchman" into "Mockingbird" reminds us that human beings are complex, and that even beloved Atticus Finch is not quite the hero he appeared to be when we were younger. Ordinarily the complexity of difficult social problems, our feelings of guilt and the thought that inevitably our responses will be imperfect and could even be harmful, can overwhelm us to the point of inaction. Like myself and the other clergy who viewed the invitation to participate in the Sunday of Confession, Repentance, and Commitment to End Racism as too little too late, one can let one's thoughts and feelings stop one from meaningful participation. It is after all much easier to complain about leaders and their leadership than it is to do something. But this is not the way of Jesus. Jesus got involved. Jesus set out to change the world, and he did.

Secondly, understanding the way written works develop and are edited can inform the way we view Scripture. For example, the story from the Gospel of Mark this morning is earlier and less edited than the one we read last year from Matthew's gospel. This does not mean that it is necessarily closer to the words of the Jesus or better or worse than the story in Matthew's gospel. The understanding that two of the earlier gospels include this story tells us that incorporation of people considered as different or aliens to the initial Jewish congregation of Christians was an important issue for the early Christian community. The issue of incorporation of new people considered as different or alien by Western democracies—that is, the immigration crisis—is no less important for the Christian community today. And make no mistake about it. The immigration crisis is an issue of racism and economic injustice, and it is a matter of life and death, as we were reminded this week.

The complexity and enormity of the immigration crisis in Western Europe or in the United States is overwhelming, but we must not let our thoughts and feelings stop us from doing something. The way of Jesus is to do something, and it is contagious. The faith of Jesus teaches us that no matter what we do and how wrong it may be, we can confess and repent and maintain our commitment to end racism and economic injustice, and ultimately we will be effective.

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