



ST BART'S

A Sermon by

The Right Reverend Dean Elliott Wolfe, D.D., *Rector*

Outward-Bound

Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, June 14, 2020

The Second Sunday after Pentecost

Based on Exodus 19:2-8a; Romans 5:1-8; Matthew 9:35-10:8(9-23)

Come, Holy Spirit, and kindle the fire that is in us.

Take our lips and speak through them.

Take our hearts and see through them.

Take our souls and set them on fire. Amen

The English poet Algernon Swinburne once wrote of a preacher, “For tender souls he served up half a Christ.”¹ There’s always a danger that those of us who interpret the gospel will focus on one aspect of the Christian faith at the expense of another. We talk about love and grace at the expense of responsibility and judgement. It’s easier to talk about forgiveness and fulfillment than it is to talk about sacrifice and suffering. And it’s easier to talk about almost *anything* rather than money.

A good deal of what we focus on with regards to Christianity is, for lack of a better word, “inbound.” What we get from God, need from God; what we want from God; how we feel; how energized or how depressed we are. We focus on how close we believe God is to us or how far away; how accepted or empowered we are; how judged or how weak.

Today’s gospel is focused on “outbound” Christianity: the irrefutable call of Christ to act beyond ourselves. This reading from Matthew is a reminder that our faith isn’t simply a matter of how we feel, but

- How we “Go forth into the world, rejoicing in the power of the Spirit!”
- How we tell the world, “The kingdom of heaven has come near!”
- How we “cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons!”

Christ calls his disciples to these ministries, and I know, you may be thinking, “Well, we don’t actually do those kinds of things anymore.” But I think that we do, actually do, these kinds of things. For example, it’s true we aren’t all medically trained as physicians or nurses, but we still have a calling to heal.

- We can still work to mend the emotional wounds of children.
- We can still work to repair relationships that are broken with family members and co-workers. I am so grateful so many of you are watching our live-stream worship services, but I also have to say that there are some of us who need to be calling or writing people with whom we are at odds, and we need to be asking them for their forgiveness. We may need to apologize even before we pray!
- We can all be working on the gaping wounds of racism. It’s not just some bad feeling we have about injustice and racial inequality. There is *actual* work to be done in this area, and, I am told, most of it needs to be done by white people—an opinion I’ve come to embrace.
- We can work to heal feelings of abandonment in friends and partners.

- We can reach out to those experiencing paralyzing isolation and aloneness through a phone call, an email, through one hand-written note at a time.
- Now we may not encounter many actual lepers in New York City, but there are certainly people in our society who are treated as lepers.
- We may not see the demonic around every corner, but evil is often disclosed by the lies it tells. Evil is always false and it always calls to be cast out.

We have been given agency. We have been given capacity. And we have been given direction.

Raising the dead may be a little more challenging, but have you never seen someone who has given up; someone who is completely done? Marriage gone. Money gone. Children alienated. Substance abuse taking over and friends backing away, inch by inch, from the total wreck this life has become. Have you never seen a friend, a family member, a co-worker, sometimes a complete stranger, reach out their hand to help pull them up? Have you never seen someone rise from that kind of grave and become alive again? I have. I have. You see, Christianity is in the business of bringing the dead back to life. And some of us are in graves of other kinds from which we can't extract ourselves, and I believe it will be God, in some human form, who will come to save us.

The Apostle Paul wrote knowingly, "that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us." Indeed, hope does not disappoint us.

Of course, we can't possibly accomplish such things if we're always preoccupied with how we're doing. Our own feelings can't always be our first priority. The difficulty in a pandemic is that we become very focused on our own health and safety. That's a natural and very understandable tendency. We need to care for ourselves responsibly. But we can become so preoccupied with our own welfare that we neglect the needs of those around us. As newscaster Anderson Cooper dryly noted, "It does you no real good to buy up all the hand sanitizer in sight if your sick neighbor can't get any." We are inter-connected, one to another.

There are life-lessons we're learning in this strange season.

- What do you now know about yourself three months into this pandemic that you did not know before it all began?
- What has become more important to you?
- What do you value less?

We actually still have the time, if we have the courage to face ourselves, to learn new things about ourselves.

The English Anglo-Catholic writer Evelyn Underhill wrote, "If we do not at least try to manifest something of Creative Charity in our dealings with life, whether by action, thought, or prayer, we do it at our own cost. If we roll up the talent of love in the nice white napkin of piety and put it safely out of the way, sorry that the world is so hungry and thirsty and so sick and so fettered, and leave it at that, then, even that little talent may be taken from us. We may discover at the crucial moment that we are spiritually bankrupt."ⁱⁱ

Of course, one thing we almost all have in common is a feeling of inadequacy when it comes to our spiritual selves. We always think other people have more significant skills, more important gifts. But who you are and what you bring to this party are crucial.

Now, have a little fun with me, if you will. I'd like to read you a letter that was supposedly addressed to "Jesus, Son of Joseph, at the Woodcrafter Carpenter Shop in Nazareth, in Galilee."ⁱⁱⁱ It reads:

Dear Sir,

Thank you for submitting the resumes of the twelve men you have selected for managerial positions in your new organization.

All of them have now completed our battery of tests. We have run the results through our management evaluation software system and our psychologist and vocational aptitude consultants have met personally with each candidate. The profiles of all their tests results are included.

You will want to evaluate each of them carefully and, as part of our services, we have made some general observations.

It is the opinion of our staff that most of your nominees are lacking in background, educational, and vocational aptitude for the type of enterprise you are undertaking. They do not possess a strong sense of team and we would recommend you continue to search for persons of proven capability and managerial experience.

Specifically, Simon Peter is emotionally unstable and given to angry outbursts. Andrew has absolutely no discernable qualities for leadership. The two brothers, James and John, place personal interest above organizational loyalty. Thomas demonstrates a skeptical and questioning attitude that will tend to undermine morale. We do not understand why Bartholomew is even under consideration.

We feel it is our duty to inform you that Matthew has been given an unacceptable rating from the Greater Jerusalem Better Business Bureau. James, the son of Alphaeus, and Thaddaeus have radical leanings and test as emotionally unstable.

Only one of the candidates evaluated shows great potential. He is a man of ability and resourcefulness who meets people well and has a keen business mind. He is highly motivated, ambitious, and responsible.

We recommend Judas Iscariot without reservation as your controller and number one assistant. All the other profiles are self-explanatory. We wish you every success in your new venture.

Sincerely Yours,
Jordan Management Consultants
Jerusalem, Judea

These, these are the people chosen by God! God did not choose brighter people. God didn't choose more gifted people. God did not choose people of greater emotional resources or deeper spirituality. God did not choose richer people. None of these men were scholars; not a single one of them. None of these men was anywhere close to perfect. Nary a one. They were simply hard-working people who were given a divine vocation and who spent the rest of their lives—and who then gave their lives— trying to fulfill that vocation for the love of Christ. And the disciple with the most obvious gifts turned out to be the biggest disappointment of them all.

We cannot keep finding lame excuses to avoid being an outward-bound Christian. It really is time for us to pick up our crosses and to follow Him. I sometimes hear people say, "God doesn't speak to the modern church as God once spoke to the ancient church. There are no heavenly voices, no angelic appearances." Well, I actually believe God does speak to us and is continuing to speak to the church in our time. You know what the problem is? We just don't like what God is saying.

God is shaking up this old church! The Christian tradition is in the midst of a transition some scholars say happens only once in 500 years. The technologies around us are changing. The sources of authority are in flux. The culture is changing. The financial resources of the church are stretched, and a new generation is skeptical of the value of religious authority and institutions. It is just about the perfect time for a Great Transformation.

It sounds like and it looks very much like the Great Protestant Reformation. And *Institution*—that antagonistic word which simply means an organization we value so much that we work to keep it in place so that the “wheels” of history don’t need to be re-invented every 10 to 20 years—is a key component. We have medical and academic institutions, governmental institutions, business institutions, artistic and religious institutions all because they represent values we hope to preserve from one generation to the next. Institutions are always being re-organized. They are always adapting to the moments in which they serve, and if they fail to re-structure and adapt, if they fail to represent their highest ideals and their truest values, they risk being washed away by the sweeping waves of time and transformation.

For example, I don’t expect we will completely “defund the police” as protestors are crying for in marches that continue across our nation. I do, however, know that when you talk about money you have people’s attention, and I believe there will be a revolution in the way policing is done in this country, because that institution must change.

Karl Rahner, one of the finest Roman Catholic theologians of our age, wrote about the lack of purpose and direction in contemporary society. He wrote, “Every period has its neurosis... and every period needs its psychotherapy. Today we are no longer confronted, as in Freud’s day, with sexual frustration, but with existential frustration. We are suffering not so much from an inferiority complex, but from a meaningless complex with its associated feelings of emptiness.”^{iv}

Jesus said, “The kingdom of heaven has come near.” And we are witnesses to this fact as a chosen people, called by God, given authority by the Holy Spirit, empowered, and finally, blessed and sent.

It’s written in *The Paradise of the Desert Fathers*, Abba Moses asked Abba Sylvanus, “Can one lay a new foundation every day?” The old man repeated the question. “Can one lay a new foundation every day?” And then he said, “If he works hard, he can lay a new foundation at every moment.”^v

So, let us begin in this time, in our moment.

Amen.

ⁱ *Synthesis*, Year A, Proper 6, June 12, 2005, (Swinburne; 1837-1909) p. 4

ⁱⁱ *Ibid*, p. 4

ⁱⁱⁱ *Synthesis*, Year A, Proper 6, June 15th, 2008, p. 4 (from Pulpit Helps, AMG International, Chattanooga, TN)

^{iv} Karl Rahner, *Our Christian Faith: Answers to the Future*, New York, Crossroad, c. 1981

^v *The Paradise of the Desert Fathers, Ancient Text*, authors unknown, (adopted from an abbreviated book by Dr. Benedicta Ward)

©2020 St. Bartholomew’s Church in The City of New York.
For information about St. Bart’s and its life of faith and mission
write us at central@stbarts.org, call 212-378-0222, or visit stbarts.org
325 Park Avenue at 51st Street, New York, New York 10022