

Blessings and Woes

Epiphany 6 C February 17, 2019 St. Stephen's Episcopal Church, Belvedere.

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Let it be the Gospel of Christ that is preached and the very word of God that is heard.  
Amen. Please be seated.

When preparing to write a sermon two things, always cross my mind:

What must it have been like to have been there that day? To hear Jesus's words in person.

And I also wonder, how do these words and events from so long ago, speak to us today?

Dave and I were fortunate to travel with a group of pilgrims from Grace Cathedral for a guided tour of Israel last May.

Many of the places we'd read about in Scriptures, all our lives, I can now see clearly because we visited them.

Someone said that traveling to the Holy Land is as if you'd written to a pen pal for years. (Some of us are old enough to remember having pen pals). You've exchanged letters (Some of us recall writing letters) and then you fly halfway around the world to meet that person. That's how the Bible has come alive for me.

In our Gospel, Jesus is addressing a crowd of people who have lived for years under the brutal occupation of The Roman Empire. They're disenfranchised. They're helpless and unable to control many facets of their own lives.

In your lifetime, have you ever known people who've been disenfranchised? People unable to control many facets of their own lives? People who are legally discriminated against and oppressed? They're all around you in your daily lives and even standing before you at this very moment.

During February each year we celebrate Black History Month. This is a celebration of the rich history of people who helped to build this country while suffering under legalized discrimination and worse but whose stories are so rarely told. Although living with the woe of racism they still were blessings during their time and continue to be so today.

Thomas Jennings was the first black person to receive a patent. It was for something he invented called dry scouring which we today know as dry cleaning. Born a slave and later freed, with the earnings from his invention, he was able to buy his family's freedom.

Imagine for a moment that your family is living under the brutality of slavery and there's not a thing you can do about it. Even the laws of your country are against you. Imagine having to buy your family's freedom. The next time you're at the dry cleaners, say thank you to Thomas.

Alice Parker patented the first central heating design in 1919, making use of natural gas to warm our homes for the first time. Think about Alice the next time you flick the heat on and thank her because you don't need to go outside and chop wood or haul coal to stay warm.

Dave and I like many of you have home security systems. In 1966, a nurse named Marie Van Brittany Brown created an early version of a home security system. She rigged up a motorized camera that recorded her home entryway and projected the images onto her tv. She also worked out a microphone system so that she should could communicate with visitors without opening her door, much like the Ring doorbell on the market today. When you go off on vacation or even just to bed at night, knowing your house and everything in it is safe, thank Marie.

Next time you are at a stop light and it turns green, thank Garrett Augustus Morgan for inventing the traffic light and while you're at it, thank him for inventing the gas mask too. Hopefully you won't need one of those anytime soon.

Ever wear an Izod LaCoste polo shirt? Well you can thank French tennis player Rene LaCoste for that design with the iconic alligator on it. He was such an incredible player that others tired of practicing with him so he invented the automatic tennis ball machine.

These are many disenfranchised men and women (I've only mentioned a few) who had countless woes that were legally set against them and yet they went on to be blessings for us today.

Just as in Jesus's day, many people in 2019 are still looked at as the other. And yes even here in California. Even here in Marin.

In 2014, I was in the process for ordination and working as a chaplain for Marin General, a job I love and still do today. I was asked to see a Mr. Jones.

When I arrived, his roommate, Mr. Smith, told me his neighbor spent a lot of time in the bathroom and would likely be in there for sometime. Well, Mr. Smith and I soon struck up a conversation.

He told me about his family and his career. He also told me he'd been ordained a Roman Catholic Deacon twelve years earlier. I told him I was seeking Holy Orders as an Episcopal Deacon.

We talked about different projects he'd done and changes in the Church over the last decade. He was very excited about Pope Francis who'd become Pope a year earlier.

When it was time to leave, I thanked him for sharing his stories with me and let him know I'd enjoyed our impromptu visit. I then walked to the other side of the room and left my card with a note for his neighbor, Mr. Jones, who had yet to emerge from the bathroom.

As I stepped towards the door to leave, the Deacon said to me "Would you mind if I ask you a personal question?" Well, we'd had such a lovely visit that I told him I didn't mind at all.

But his question was something I never expected and will never forget. His question took me out of the dreamland I'd created and it brought me back to reality. He said, "What's it like to be a Negro?" Sometimes when I think I've come so far, it hits me over the head like a ton of bricks and I remember there's a long way to go. Sometimes I forget that people don't always see Alberta but instead see me as "the other."

But that doesn't mean we quit. It means we keep going forward working towards the beloved community that Dr King hoped we'd have someday. If you have been excluded, because of your age, because of who you love, because of your sex, the color of your skin, because of the country you were born in, because of your faith, because of finances or because of decisions made by others, take heart. You're in very good company.

AeroMexico is standing up to bigotry and I applaud them for attempting to break down barriers by bringing Mexicans and Americans together. In doing so, they remind us that we aren't so different afterall.

They've come out with what I think is a brilliant commercial. In the commercial, the interviewer travels to Wharton Texas, (which is about 680 miles from the Mexican border) and asks residents there if they'd consider traveling to Mexico for a vacation. One of the residents gave an emphatic: "No, way". Another said: "Let me stay here in peace and let those folks stay on their side of the border."

So, AeroMexico decided to find a way to change minds and get Americans to fly to Mexico. They offered the people of Wharton free DNA tests. The residents were told, whatever percentage Mexican the DNA tests reveals you are, that's the flight discount to Mexico you will receive. The results are in.

54% of the Wharton residents discovered they had Mexican ancestry.

In the video, (you can Google it) you should see the shock that registers on their faces when shown DNA evidence of their Mexican heritage. These are the same people who

wanted nothing to do with Mexicans and had made that abundantly clear before the tests were done. Now they've discover they have Mexican ancestry.

How different the world might be if we took down the barriers -the ones in our minds and the ones we've put up that separate us and prevent us from knowing one another, from truly seeing one another. How different the times we are living in would be if all could have lived free, been allowed education, equality and freedom.

The late Sen. John McCain, in his posthumous letter said, "We weaken our greatness when we hide behind walls rather than tear them down."

Circling back to the beginning of this sermon, I wonder: How do Jesus's words speak to us today? Well, I can tell you how they speak for me by leaving you with a quote from our former First Lady Michelle Obama's book, "Becoming".

Quote:

"What's better for us? Do we settle for the world as it is, or do we work for the world as it should be?" End quote.

There's both blessing and woe in those words, my friends.

Dear Lord, Help us to choose. Amen.

AeroMexico Commercial:

<https://youtu.be/2sCeMTB5P6U>

<https://www.cnn.com/travel/article/aeromexico-dna-discount-travel-ad-video/index.html>