

I love my ministry here, and it was great to get away for a while with Marsha

- Given the consuming nature of my work, it's good to remember what the world outside the church is like
- Spending two weeks in California is always interesting—such a variety of people there
- In the Southern California desert we saw roadside bulletin boards and hand painted signs warning that the end of the world is near
- The LA news included stories from Hollywood about Scientologists and other quasi-religious groups

But even more striking is the post-Christian atmosphere of the culture there

- For so many on the coast, the church is dead—they're "spiritual but not religious" and don't see any need to join in a faith community
- Many secular people assume that believing in Jesus is a childlike delusion, an escape from our immediate realities
- To others Christianity is still a flat-earth religion, characterized by people who reject science and believe the world is 6000 years old
- Most of the folks where we used to live aren't offended by our faith—they just find it irrelevant to their lives

The clash between religion and culture is nothing new—people in Jesus' time also struggled with it

- The ancient Greeks raised scholarship to very high levels—the application of human knowledge and philosophy was very important to them
- This conflicted with the received biblical traditions of Israel, especially for Jews who traveled and were educated in the wider Mediterranean world
- The Wisdom tradition late in the Old Testament period sought to integrate faith and understanding
- For example, just after the passage we read today, the book of Proverbs proclaims, "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is insight." (*Prov 9:10*)
- The Letter to the Ephesians also picks up this theme, saying "Be careful how you live, not as unwise people but as wise...do not be foolish, but understand." (*Eph 5:15*)

I think most of us are searching for ways to apply the wisdom of our religious tradition to the challenges of the world we live in

- Most Episcopalians are thoughtful, well-educated people—we don't tend to suffer from a conflict between faith and understanding
- But I had an uncomfortable “wake-up call” on my trip, sitting in the lobby of a tire store in Oroville, California
- We had driven more than two thousand miles by the time we reached our daughter's house, so I guess we were lucky to have a flat tire in her driveway
- We ended up getting new tires, a process which took hours and left me sitting next to a local man having work done on his pickup

This man had moved out of San Francisco to a large property in the foothills

- He seemed to be a major extrovert living isolated and alone, because without any prompting he talked nonstop for half an hour about his home, job history, political opinions, and so forth
- Finally he stopped for a breath and turned his attention to me: “Where are you from? What do you do there?”
- When I told him I was a pastor he asked what kind, and when I said Episcopal he immediately replied, “Oh, you're the ones with that sex thing going on.”
- I groaned when I heard that, not sure whether to laugh or cry

It wasn't his fault, of course—everything he knew about the Episcopal Church came from newspapers and internet blogs

- But it's so frustrating to see the faith community I love reduced to such a pathetic sound bite
- You've heard me preach quite a lot—wouldn't you say it's more about Jesus than sexuality?
- And I know that you're faithful people who come here to celebrate your blessings and be spiritually nourished for the week ahead
- It's so sad the way we get pigeonholed by the agendas of the media, which seems to have no interest in understanding our faith

Sometimes on the road Marsha and I end up watching cable TV news, and I have fantasies of someday being one of the talking heads at the table

- After the others finish shouting at each other the moderator will turn to me, and I'll say that "in the Episcopal Church, people with different opinions not only coexist, but actually appreciate and learn from each other"
- But somehow they haven't called me yet, so I'd like to use this opportunity to share with you what I love about being an Episcopalian
- Every Christian proclaims Jesus Christ, crucified and risen, but we have vastly different ways of doing that
- It's important for us to be able to speak about our church, if we want to share the real picture of who we are
- I want to talk about the balance of tradition and change, and of the unique gifts we have to offer the world around us

First of all, I love our ancient patterns of worship

- They connect us with the very first Christians, and distinguish us from today's entertainment-based community churches
- It's so important to celebrate Eucharist together—rather than trying to explain God, we participate in Christ's saving actions
- Our Gospel reading referred to the mysterious nature of the Eucharist: "Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you." (*John 6:53*)
- It's far bigger than us—our concerns and understandings—as it should be: after all, we're talking about the Son of God
- The Letter to the Ephesians summed up what we're about here: "giving thanks to God the Father at all times and for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ." (*Eph 5:20*)
- That's what I try to do, not just on Sunday but every day of the week

I also love our heritage of biblical interpretation and theology

- The rich Anglican tradition, going back almost 500 years, encourages us to think and reflect, to form and test our opinions
- Unlike other traditions, our clergy and hierarchy don't tell members what to believe—hopefully we challenge you to make the effort to engage with the sacred wisdom of the Scriptures
- We're not satisfied with the easy answers of biblical literalists—we recognize the need to interpret these ancient writings for the modern world—we embrace scholarship as an aid to growing in faith

- That leads me to our tradition of theological tolerance: respecting the viewpoints and conclusions of others
- We try to embody the essence of the Bible's Wisdom tradition by integrating faith and understanding
- Our theological and worship traditions are a big part of the reason I'm here

But we all know how rapidly the world is changing, and we need to find ways to bring our traditions into the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

- I love the way the Episcopal Church has embraced the leadership of women during my lifetime
- Women have always been mainstays of the church, but for far too long they've been kept on the sidelines
- Our church was formed in 1789, by some of the same people who wrote the United States Constitution
- But democratic ideals took a long time to penetrate the church: when I was growing up women couldn't serve on vestries—they finally got the right to vote at the national convention in 1970

Consider the large denominations on either side of us—the Roman Catholics and the Fundamentalist Protestants

- In both cases, the involvement of women in leadership is strictly limited
- Changes in the Episcopal Church over the past 35 years have opened up opportunities for women—St. Tim's has been blessed with outstanding female clergy and lay leaders
- Though the transition was difficult for many people, I can see now it was a good change, and today's young women have new kinds of role models at every level of the church

Another positive change in my lifetime was the adoption of the 1979 *Book of Common Prayer*

- It introduced so many things we now take for granted: the use of contemporary language in worship, a greatly expanded scope of Bible readings (especially the Old Testament), Eucharist as the primary Sunday service, Baptism as an activity of the whole community (with expectations for how we serve in the world), and the inclusion of youth and children as full members of the Body of Christ
- In creating our prayer book, scholars drew upon ancient Christian manuscripts to renew our worship tradition
- Their work is a gift to carry into the 21<sup>st</sup> Century—in my opinion, another change for the better

Change in the church is always difficult, especially when it isn't handled in a thoughtful or pastoral way

- But when we can find a balance, affirming the heart of our tradition and embracing changes which spread the Gospel, it vitalizes our faith community
- After telling his disciples a series of parables, Jesus said that “every scribe trained for the kingdom of heaven is like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old.” (Matthew 13:52)
- The Episcopal Church carries vast treasures from the past, which can help us to live a vital faith in the days to come

We mustn't let the agendas of the media pigeonhole us around certain postures and issues

- We also can't let ourselves fall into the trap of demonizing people who see things differently from us
- People around us who thirst for deeper spiritual connections need to know the good news about the Episcopal Church: of the depth of our worship and our thoughtful interpretations of the Bible
- They need to know that we're growing into the new century, carrying forward the riches of our tradition
- Every one of us is going to have to spread that word—no one's going to do it for us—if we don't do our part, something precious will be lost

And if you run into any TV news producers, be sure to give them my number—I'd love to have the chance to speak on our behalf

*Michael Carney  
St. Timothy's Episcopal Church  
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