

the temple, rightside up

mark 12:38-44 / November 7 2015

Last weekend was an incredible experience for me. As most of you know, Bishop Michael Curry was installed as the presiding bishop of the Episcopal Church. He was the first African American bishop of North Carolina and is now the first such Presiding Bishop. Bishop Curry offers something to which we in North Carolina have become very familiar, a profound message of witness and (yes) evangelism, one that is deeply faithful to our Anglican tradition.

And of course, he can preach the doors off of any church, including, and perhaps especially, the cathedral in Washington that on Sunday was filled with 2800 souls. It was big time liturgy in the Anglican tradition. As the *adapted* saying goes, you couldn't swing a thurible without hitting a bishop, a verger, a priest, a deacon, a lay delegate, or an acolyte. (A thurible is the thing that makes the smoke). It was incredibly diverse – black, white, latino, native American and more, and let me tell you, folk sang those hymns. We heard high Anglican hymnody. We heard a gospel choir. We heard native American chant. We heard the gospel read in Lakota. We had smell, bells, croziers and aspergilliams (or aspergillia). And all of these are parts of our rich Episcopal tradition.

Many of you watched it online, and if you haven't I hope you will. I have to say that I realized as we were driving up that even with the joy of this weekend I had to acknowledge my own grief about losing Michael Curry, or at least losing an intimate connection to him. Our bishop is the pastor to the priests, and he's the bishop who ordained me. More importantly, his witness - from the pulpit I'm standing in now to the convention floor to his public witness beyond the church doors - is something I'll miss. My hope driving in was that this weekend, being present at his installation, hearing him preach one last time (for now) would help to bring some closure to my grief at losing Bishop Curry.

Well, that didn't work. His message did not leave any closure. It left me wanting more.

It made me realize that if you come to church seeking closure, you've come to the wrong place. I entered the vaulted space of the cathedral in Washington (properly called the Cathedral Church of St. Peter

and St. Paul, not the “national cathedral”) expecting, albeit sadly, to see a chapter end. Well, maybe so, but this was so much more of a beginning than I expected.

I won’t repeat his whole sermon: you should go and listen to it. But I will share with you his charge to us, was that we can stop worrying about the Episcopal Church, just as we can stop worrying about the Diocese of North Carolina or even St. Andrew’s. Bishop Curry reminded us that we are first and foremost the people of the Jesus movement in our world and in our day. Just as those first disciples left their vocations, their homes and families to become a part of a movement of love, compassion, and ultimately resurrection, we are called to step away from our lives of (you name it: fear, narcissism, apathy, alienation) and instead follow Jesus. We can be fearless in naming who we are exactly – we are the Episcopal Wing of the Jesus movement – but first things first. We are here to follow Jesus.

We follow Jesus who time and again in the gospels turns the world upside down. Because – and I’m stealing straight from the sermon – the world upside down is actually God’s world, right-side –up. The first shall be last, which as we all know turns the world upside down, which is actually right-side up. We follow Jesus in emptying ourselves, in giving ourselves for others, which in a world of looking out for number one is as upside down as can be, but we know is actually right-side up.

Bishop Curry reminded us that the real work of the convention that elected him was committing ourselves as a church to two things: one, to the work of evangelism, of growing a movement, not trying to reclaim our 20th century status, but rather to grow the church as followers of Jesus in our own particular traditional – yet – expansive Episcopal kind of way. Two, our church has committed itself to the work of reconciliation, in particular the work of racial reconciliation.

We’ve got to be authentic, and loving, and willing to risk ourselves to make God known. I think at St. Andrew’s we’re on the right track: when we offered a chance to talk about gun violence a few weeks ago, our Sunday Class size more than doubled. That’s a good sign, isn’t it?

So I went into this wonderful pageant of an installation service expecting to have my grief soothed with some big hymns and fine preaching. I got those things and more, but I was not soothed. I was inspired, but also challenged and more than a little bit unsettled.

Maybe that's what our services are always supposed to do. I am reminded of Annie Dillard's powerful words about how worship in its truest form isn't supposed to ease our minds. Whether we're thinking about race, or money, or inclusion and welcome, or evangelism, or grace, or sin, we often ignore just how disruptive these ideas are:

On the whole, I do not find Christians, outside of the catacombs, sufficiently sensible of conditions. Does anyone have the foggiest idea what sort of power we blithely invoke? Or, as I suspect, does no one believe a word of it? The churches are children playing on the floor with their chemistry sets, mixing up a batch of TNT to kill on a Sunday morning. It is madness to wear ladies' straw hats and velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews. For the sleeping god may wake someday and take offense, or the waking god may draw us to where we can never return.”ⁱ

Last Sunday, I could have used ushers with life preservers. I'd have been in good company. The gospel tells of an encounter with Jesus where crash helmets and safety gear would not have been out of place. Jesus does a number of things here that are neither comfortable nor proper.

First, he said in teaching: *Beware the scribes*, a group of people whose class and status brought them special treatment and great wealth, often at the expense of those who had little to give. He said this in front of a room filled with scribes. Did you get that? He said this in front of a room filled with scribes. That probably went about as well as you'd expect.

Then, he sat next to the treasury and watched as people put money in. When the wealthy scribes ostentatiously posted some big numbers, he introduced to them the concept of the denominator. That's very impressive, he said, but what really matters is the widow who put in everything she had. The disciples were probably reaching for their life vests right about now, or at least identifying the nearest exit.

I'm not going to say much about this, but Jesus did not plant the widow outside the door to come into the room at just the right time, to make a point. And though we are in the midst of our own stewardship campaign, with one week left to ask you all to make a financial pledge of support, I did not plant this story in the service either. This is simply the

lectionary reading of the day. There's more meaning here than just a stewardship reading – Jesus did not then turn to his disciples to hand out the pledge cards, but I'm grateful for what it does have to tell us about giving.

It give me a chance to offer one last reminder of what we're doing differently this year for stewardship. Our goal is not to meet a certain number, or for that matter to get you to meet the needs of the church. Our stewardship goal is to deepen each person's relationship with Jesus through the use of time, talent and finances God had entrusted to us all. For most of us, me included, this means increasing what we give whenever we can. That's why we talk so much about proportional giving, and even teach the joy of what we call the tithe, the gift of 10%.

Of course, the widow kind of blows the notion of the tithe out of the water, doesn't she? She put in two coins out of two coins, which the mathematicians among you will say is a lot. This is a story of two contrasting views of wealth. We see that money can be used to prop up, to feed ego, to secure status (or so we think), but in so doing will diminish and strain the vital bonds between us and God, between us and neighbor. *Or*, our use of money can be an expression of our trust in God, a way to build the community and the kingdom of God, a way to strengthen our ties with one another.

Perhaps the deeper truth of this story is the poverty of the scribes. You see, the widow is one without means, or status, or prospects. Yet she is at peace. All this is incomprehensible to the scribal class, but it is to the likes of the widow that the kingdom of God belongs.

Jesus had walked into the temple, and to the chagrin of those gathered, turned the place upside down. Which is really, right-side up.

This story fits our time so well. It's a kind of plumline ,a measuring stick. Who are we in this story? Are we members of the scribal class? Are we the widow? Or are we somewhere in between? Of course most people listening to Jesus that day in the temple were likely somewhere in between the two, and we're mostly there as well.

But we have to acknowledge that the individualism and narcissism of our time has taken a bigger toll than we want to admit. We live in a world of a self-centeredness that is so constantly reinforced – where all

children are above average and everyone's precious opinion of themselves must at all costs be soothed – that the widow, in her selflessness but also in her joy, is all but invisible to us.

We have inadvertently crowded out the very possibility of this kind of relationship with God, the generous, trusting and openhearted relationship with the one who created and sustains every single one of us.

But once the crash has happened – between Jesus and the scribes – and the dust settles and we can take off our helmets, what is left? To me, all that is important and all that remains is the simple joy of the widow. She knows that she is safe in God's hands. She knows that she has nothing to prop up, no ego to feed, no status to secure. She knows that she belongs, she simply belongs, to God.

Our world, and the world of the scribes, has been turned upside down by this woman who probably didn't even know we were watching her. Which is really, as Bishop Curry says, right-side up.

¹ Annie Dillard, *Teaching a Stone to Talk: Expeditions and Encounters* (New York: Harper & Row, 1982), pp. 40-41.