

St. Augustine's in-the-Woods Episcopal Church, Freeland WA

Annual Meeting Sunday – January 21, 2018.

Sermon for the day ~ Nigel Taber-Hamilton

It's a marker of being human that as a community matures we move beyond small, loose confederations of self-interest into more organized bodies. The more organized these bodies become the more structure develops. The more structured these communities become, the more they take on particular characteristics, some of which, include:

- They become **hierarchical** – the classic pyramid. There are layers, where authority and power get concentrated upward, toward the top of the pyramid.
- When they become hierarchical, there's a **power imbalance**. Relationships between those at the bottom and those at the top are automatically privileged toward the latter. As I said last week, being white, male and straight are inherent advantages in our North American culture. The insidious effects of any sort of privilege are magnified in mature institutions.
- Developed institutions are almost always **more conservative** than individuals. Change is almost always hard for institutions – the “We've always done it that way/we've never done it that way before” identity. The institutions that survive are the ones who deal with change well. The institutions that deal with change badly tend not to survive.
- The older these bodies, these institutions, get, the slower they move, **the less they can handle change**, as if a body's joints are seizing up, as if the sinews are atrophying – what someone has described as the “red tape crisis.” You end up with longer and longer lists of how to do and how to not do stuff.

The Church is an example of this sort of institution. We are now struggling out of that identity to address massive change on a scale never experienced before. *Institutions like this more easily inhibit the faith we proclaim, inhibit proclaiming the faith.* One of the central markers of Christian faith – that comes straight from Jesus himself – is that we strive not to live out of hierarchy and privilege, not to be ruled by institutions, not to allow ourselves to freeze up. In fact, one of John's Gospel's central claims is that the ossified, privileged, controlling, hierarchical structures of 2nd Temple Judaism have been replaced with free and free-flowing access to God in Jesus. The sluggish rivers of the religious flood-plain have been replaced by the energetic, fast-flowing mountain streams of a faith reborn, a time when *“justice [shall] roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream”* (Amos 5:24). The good news about this metaphor is that the mountain stream receives its water from the rain that's evaporated ocean water, an ocean fed from the sluggish flood-plain's waters. Our community's functioning is cyclical, in other words, rather like the phoenix – who, according to Greek mythology, is reborn to a new life arising from the ashes of its predecessor.

However, the opposite of institutional coagulation is something akin to anarchy! The total absence of some form of structure, the failure to develop or follow a shared set of agreements about how we live together, ultimately and quite quickly ends in chaos.

What's needed is balance. An institutional structure that frees rather than confines, that encourages rather than disheartens, that inspires rather than inhibits.

For us as people of faith, that balance comes by taking the best of Jesus and the best of Paul. Jesus is more toward the unstructured, fluid end of the spectrum, a charismatic leader not in any way invested in the minutiae of community organizing; Paul is more toward the well-structured, organized end of the spectrum. Together, they offer a blueprint for how we can live together as a community.

I don't have enough time to say in detail what that all entails for any community of faith – including ours – but there's one core principle that underpins it all: that any community following Jesus should be marked by an unwavering commitment to the egalitarian principles lived by Jesus and systematized by Paul.

- Paul conceptualizes Jesus' egalitarian vision in two ways – you've heard me mention them a lot! In Galatians, he tells us “there is no longer Jew or Greek...slave or free, male and female...[we] are all one in Christ Jesus,” which, in our day means that race, economic status, gender identity – or anything else – cease to be significant within the community of faith.
- And the second way is in his simple phrase describing the new community birthed from Jesus as “the body of Christ.” It is exactly the right metaphor, because it underpins Jesus' vision and transforms it into practical reality. Here's the basis on which we're called to operate: that we each have different roles, but no one role is more or less important than any other role. It's not only about treating each other with mutual respect, its about treating each other as equals.

In the 21st Century Church in general, and in our Episcopal expression in particular, we struggle to meld the consequences of 2,000 years of history – and the institutional, hierarchical Church that has emerged – with Jesus' and Paul's vision. We are an institution; we do have hierarchy, we do sometimes allow power imbalance to affect how we relate to each other, we do sometimes struggle to treat each other with mutual respect as equals. As someone at the top of that pyramid, I am guilty of doing exactly these at times – please forgive me. It also means that some of you will not come and talk with me about things that weigh on your hearts – I can only say that I hope you can find a way to come and talk. And it means that some of you have occasionally operated out of your own sense entitlement - privilege - about your place and others places in this community. We can't live that way and expect to survive.

This struggle between institutionalism and radical, chaotic communalism I've just described is playing itself out in many ways and in many (if not all) places....all places: not just this church most churches, not just this institution but most institutions, not just this culture but most cultures. When institutions become hidebound, hardened, unresponsive, even callous, we look for more compassionate, flexible, responsive alternatives. When free-flowing, unstructured movements become chaotic, we look for more organized, ordered, structured alternatives.

In our day, when the perfect storm of labyrinthine institutional paralysis and dramatic cultural change go hand in hand, it's not surprising that we might want to bury our heads in the sand, even if the imperative to act is clear. Fearing the future, it can be easy instead to yearn for the halcyon days of yore when all – we remember inaccurately – was well, all was good. Fear is a terrible thing; it paralyzes, distracts, destroys. Remember the first letter of John? “Perfect love

casts out fear.” (1 John 4:18). Only out of the context of a community that places love at the center can we move forward.

One way of expressing our contemporary quest is to ask a couple of questions: how do we balance the moribund institutional identity we-the-Church (all denominations) have inherited with the dynamic quality of the faith of our forebears? How do we retain our core Christian identity in a time of dramatic cultural change and yet also be responsive to that change in ways that avoid irrelevance? These aren't the only questions, but they're two of the most vital ones.

Please don't think I'm going to tell you the answer to these questions right now! On the other hand, I'm not going to let you forget them, because if we don't start trying to answer them now, there won't be any “we” left to do so in the not too distant future.

There is more to say, and I'll be saying it in the Annual Meeting - I invite you to come and eat brunch and participate in it.

Rector's Comments to the 2017 Annual Meeting

In my sermon I talked about institutions and about change. What's tricky about institutions is that they don't always function the way we human beings do! We act differently. For example: how do we deal with death? The great 18th Century English writer Samuel Johnson once said (and I'm paraphrasing, here) that “there's nothing like the prospect of your imminent death to focus your mind!”

The thing is, institutions don't always, or often, get focused at all, in the face of imminent death. Or, perhaps, they get focused on the wrong thing.

Here are two examples of two secular organizations that were unable to answer the challenge of change. Pan Am, and Sears & Roebuck.

By the time Delta bought Pan Am the only thing Pan Am owned were their routes, and the gate-slots at the airports they served. They'd sold off everything else – all the real estate they owned, including the Pan-Am building in New York, they'd even sold their planes – the ones they flew were leased. They had responded to the challenges they faced – which appeared to be financial – by selling off stuff.

Sears has done the same thing – they sold their “craftsman” line of tools to Black and Decker, and they've been closing stores for years (look at Alderwood and Everett – gone!). There was some suggestion about whether they'd even make it to Christmas.

In both cases, these two companies identified the challenges as financial, and they did what most organizations do when they identify a challenge as financial – they sought to cut expenses; they cut employees; they sold off stuff; they dipped into their reserves, until there was nothing left to sell. Until there was nothing left but to wind up the business. For the person who thinks the tool they have is a hammer, everything looks like a nail.

Compare those two with, say, Southwest, and Starbucks. They have flourished where competitors have failed. And they continue to do so. They continue to do so because they have proved themselves capable of understanding the challenges they face in a dramatically changing world and being responsive to those challenges. To put it another way, they've explored, first, the nature of the challenges they face, and then developed the tool or tools to respond to those challenges.

For some institutions – especially those that have been around a long time, like the Church – responding to change is something that frequently only happens when these institutions are put under some sort of threat, and most especially when it is a financial threat. It requires some sort of prod to get us to act, and money (or lack thereof) is a very big prod. Recognizing the 'prod' is part of being able to respond to it in positive and life-giving ways. Not recognizing the prod (or not wanting to recognize the prod – the “head in the sand” response) will lead any organization's members to ‘act-out’ as a way of distracting ourselves from the deeper issues. For instance, the response by a small part of the Episcopal Church to the consecration as a bishop of a gay man in a committed relationship – Gene Robinson in New Hampshire – was to a greater extent driven by the changes happening in our culture – changes that seemed to (and probably did) threaten “the way things are” – than to any theological position. It was a “battleground of convenience” that promised the possibility of success in defending what was considered to be most important, rather than acknowledging the much deeper and more important issues which were (and are) much harder to address.

How do we respond to change? Most often, we start by trying what we've done before in response to the challenge of change. Those who study change refer to this as a “technical response.” Sears, Pan Am, etc. And we often respond that same way even when it is transparently true that the last time we tried that same response failed to solve the underlying problem. Simply closing stores is an end game that results in institutional death. No doubt the plethora of “technical responses” in our culture is the source of the familiar quote that “doing the same thing over and over and expecting a different result IS the definition of insanity!” Maybe we do this because we don't know what else to do.....

The truth is that if you want different results than what you are getting, you have to try different approaches. These different approaches to change are known as “Adaptive responses.”

Are we, as a community challenged by dramatic change and an uncertain future, going to respond technically, or adaptively? This isn't, incidentally, a question just for St. Augustine's in-the-Woods Episcopal Church – we are a part of the institutional expression of Christianity and all institutional churches are facing this same challenge, whether it's the Lutherans, Methodists, Presbyterians, Roman Catholics, UCC, etc. etc. – we're all in the same boat, we're all facing the same challenges.

So what are the challenges we face? Most obviously, financial. See what I said about Pan Am and Sears! Is that challenge – finances – the primary challenge? Or is there a deeper challenge, or challenges, of which the finances are a result rather than the cause? I'd say ‘yes’ to that question.

What are those deeper challenges?

- **Relevance** – to our local community on South Whidbey, to the broader contemporary culture
- **Authenticity** – does who we are and how we live – as individuals and a community – reflect who we claim to be as followers of Jesus? Inauthentic would be the old saw about the person who is saintly in church then goes home and beats their spouse.
- **Involvement** – you can't 'hire' a solution. A new rector is not going to be your salvation! Your parish leadership – the vestry – will not solve this on their own. Good leadership does just that – leads the whole body. It is the whole body, however, who must participate in both addressing the issues and implementing a solution.
- **Realistic expectations** – adopt them! Or, to put it the other way around, surrender your unrealistic expectations.

The way forward

I'll be leading some workshops about leadership and identity later this year. Watch for more information, and please plan to attend. Be a part of the future of this place!

Lastly

There are lots of positives! This is – you are – a wonderful, welcoming, warm, committed community! You – we – enjoy each other. You are good people! And we have a wonderful, mostly new, debt-free facility, which is well-maintained and in great shape. We are in a wonderful place. We are aware of our challenges, and we have the talent to address them. I believe the future is bright.

A FOOTNOTE ABOUT OUR FINANCES

In light of all I have said – in my sermon and previously in this meeting, I want to walk you through our finances. Nancy Ruff can answer any technical questions, and our vestry members are here, too – and I know they'll feel free to chime in if necessary.

Please hold any questions to the end, unless what I'm saying doesn't make any sense.

THIS YEAR'S BUDGET: The current pledged amount as of January 28 is **\$252,993.95**. This is virtually the same amount as 2017, though the make-up of pledges is different. When estimated Sunday "plate" giving – about \$15,000 – is added the total estimated annual income for 2018 is \$268,000. However, our annual budget is \$299,000, leaving an approximate deficit of **\$31,000**.

Another way of describing that gap between projected income and expenses is an **11.6%** (including plate) or **12.3%** (not including plate) shortfall. If we decided as a community to fix the gap through increasing our pledges then each of us who pledged would have to increase our pledges by 12.3%.

This is the third year in a row we have had a shortfall – your leadership has, in the past, chosen to finance this gap out of our reserves. We will be working to address this situation

during the coming year. However, this is now an established pattern, and one that has to be addressed by going beyond traditional “technical” fixes– this is already “bare bones.”

That leads to another question I want to try to answer for you which naturally flows from examining the annual budget figures, which is this: what are our financial resources beyond your yearly support?

OUR FINANCIAL RESOURCES: there are **two places** where we have resources

- 1 The first is in our various endowment funds, which we have placed for some years with the **Episcopal Church Foundation**. The ECF uses State Street Global Advisors. The ECF has \$320 million under management. You’ll find our figures on page 14, but for simplicity’s sake, here are some ball-park figures for you:
 - a) We have about \$450K in our almost-completely untouchable Permanent Endowment
 - b) We have about \$540K in our somewhat more flexible Quasi-Endowment. We can **ONLY** borrow for operating expenses, for instance.
- 2 The second place where we have funds – “reserves” if you will – is in our local bank, specifically a contingency fund that totals about \$116K. This is quite a bit more flexible.

It is not hard to figure out that if we keep having \$30K deficits, then the contingency fund is going to be gone in about 4 years. That is unsustainable in the long haul and not particularly responsible either.

Respectfully submitted
Nigel J. Taber-Hamilton, rector