

The Last Sunday after the Epiphany

February 2/3, 2008

Sermon: The Rev. Jill Williams

This is transfiguration week and perhaps I should cover that, but this week God has challenged me to reflect and experience, and enter into dialogue with, these texts through Peter's eyes in the epistle lesson. I spent part of this week on a spiritual retreat to process everything that happened at my ordination and celebration of my first Eucharist. Now, some of you are probably picturing me sitting with an old nun in a convent somewhere, eating small meal portions, holding to a vow of silence, and reading my Bible and praying for two days straight. And to that I would say, have you ever met me? I would go crazy in that kind of retreat.

Instead, I took off for New York City, where I stayed with friends, went to Eucharist every morning and evening prayer every night. I took dance classes, saw a show, and prayed my life. And, it was a holy experience. God revealed to me the strangest juxtaposition in the life I led for three days in New York City. It seemed to me that during the entire trip God was calling me to notice how the secular world views the church. I began each morning with the Eucharist at St. Barts in midtown Manhattan and then for the rest of the day God would call me to think about church from a different perspective, the perspective of those not plugged in. I don't want to call them non-believers because that is not what they are, while certainly extremely spiritual and committed to Christianity, these people are simply suspicious of Church. Over and over again I experienced the juxtapositions of my own search for Christ, which includes church and worship, and the search of other Christians who were very suspicious of my organized religion.

While I attend Eucharist and evening prayer each day for spiritual renewal, Peter, Dave, Becca and Lisa and sing their hearts out to show tunes more spiritual for them than any church service. I have to admit I enjoy a good show tune myself. That is where they found God... that is where they saw hope. For them those songs are spiritual. The hymns we love seem a distant second to Sondheim's contention that no matter what no one is alone. Or Jason Robert Browns Belief that we can all birth a new world if we have a spirit like Mary. God is present to them, but where is the church in their music?

While I am praying quietly as I walk down the crowded streets of the city there are others who cry out loudly for the needs of others. I meet a man collecting money for hungry children. "I give all my money through the church," I say ...their reply, "how will the church help these children?" Now, I know we do wonderful work with missions and outreach, but that is not how the world sees us.

While I am ready and waiting to give an account of the hope that is within me, thousands of people flock to the theatre to see Spring Awakening the tony award winning musical. A show about what the church will and won't discuss. A show that makes a real life statement, that dares to discuss those things in the world which seems uncomfortable to us, sexuality, poverty, parenting, abuse and the place and role of God and the church in these things. Let me just tell you the show is wonderful, but it does not look at the church in a favorable way.

Why is there such a disconnect between how we who know and love the church see ourselves and how those outside these walls view us. Think about it. When was the last time you saw a movie or play that portrayed the church in a favorable light? Over and over again God blessed me with the chance to look at us through the eyes of those on the outside. That is exactly the point of view we get from today's Epistle lesson. In this lesson Peter is trying to defend against criticism of the church. There are two kinds of prophecy in the church. The first is prophecy

directly from God, like what we hear from Amos. The other kind of prophecy comes from receiving a sign like Jeremiah, or a dream like Zechariah, or a vision like Ezekiel. This second kind of prophecy must later be interpreted through the power of the Holy Spirit. This is where the trouble begins. Those who are suspicious of the church claim that the Holy Spirit is, in fact, not interpreting these signs and dreams and visions, but rather personal interpretations that serve the individuals needs or tells the groups only what they want to hear. They ask one of the most basic questions. How do we know your telling the truth? How do we know this is really from God?

I think that those are good questions. I mean, anyone who hasn't actually experienced it, how do they know? In fact, aren't they the same questions we ask today? How do we know when God is calling us? How do we know when God is saying to do a new thing? How do we know who to listen to? And Peter answers them. He assures them that this is the real thing. That he himself has seen and can attest to the reality of God. Stop and think about that for a minute. Peter can attest to having seen God first hand. He says believe me because I know it's real. His faith is abounding. We don't know whether the people believe him. We hope they do, but this passage doesn't say either way. The fact is that I'm not even sure that's what matters. What strikes me most about this passage is that Peter is ready to engage with the world. A world that is not comfortable, a world that has questions, that wants answers, that is unsure. Peter can say with conviction I believe and I want to talk to you about why. I heard it with my own ears. I have been attentive and seen God working in the world around me. I've experienced God working through the prophets. God has been part of my life and my world.

For Peter God is not a distant God. For Peter God is real, so Peter can engage with the world because he knows he is not alone. He brings along God.

I want to read you the following passage of reflection from the NIB on this passage. "God's delay in fulfilling prophecies and promises of Christ's return can make them seem like myths. Often we wonder about the truth of the promised parousia because God has not acted to fulfill that promise in nearly two millennia...our doubts may surface in times of personal crisis. They are fueled by growing public problems that seem to threaten the very fabric of life on this planet, problems like the depletion of natural resources at an alarming rate, the continual outbreak of wars and ethnic violence, the emergence of super viruses and the complexities involved in making even small steps forward."

Now, are all of those things true? We are in a world that faces war and destruction, that faces terrorism and natural disaster. We are in a world dealing with the continued misuse of God's precious resources for us. BUT! But we are Christians in that world. Now, we may look around and see that Global warming seems to be affecting us at an alarming rate, but we need also to see the millions of hands coming together to rectify that. People are recycling more, being more fuel-efficient and starting to think twice about what we waste. That is the work of God! We may see war and destruction and get frustrated by the lack of love for one another, but we also see those who reach out in the violence to be a voice of peace, of freedom, to talk and fight and care that the world could be something better. That is the Holy Spirit. And, we can see the natural disasters that have left destruction and homelessness and poverty and we can see the hands that reach out to provide for those that have nothing, the hands of love reaching out to help. Those are the hands of Christ.

I think what those outside the church accuse us of now is not seeing Christ in their world. That somehow God can only appear to us inside these walls or in these pews, but this is not the only place God resides. We come to church not because God meets us at church rather we come to church because this is where we thank God and worship God for meeting us all the time. We are

called to engage with the world as Peter did. We need to be ready to answer questions. We need to think about the things around us that make us doubt and to find God even in the midst of confusion. One reason that the unchurched see us so differently is that we seem to be disengaged from reality. How does what we do in this place week after week apply to them? We can speak about community and family and education and worship, but unless we can extend those principles from this place and into the real world then that's all it is ...speak...words. We must be a people willing to be both church and world. Engage in the things which are uncomfortable, challenge ourselves to see God in a new place and then extend all of that to those who don't yet know what it means to be church.

Being the church doesn't mean coming to St. Francis once a week and participating in Eucharist. Being the church means finding God in all that we do. It means being something different than what the world thinks of us. We need to be the church everywhere we go or we start to look like what the world accuses us of being: hypocritical, indifferent, and archaic. But, if we can see God in all the world and, like Peter, articulate that kind of faith to those outside these walls it will seem like a radical new thing, but we know that it is simply the mission of the church from the first saints to the chorus we join in with now. We will be the body of Christ here at St. Francis and arms that reach outside these walls. The world accuses us of being blind to God in the midst of them. We are not blind! What do you see?