

What is “true” teaching”?

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My thoughts this week have centered on faith, what we believe and children. This morning in just a few moments I will baptize our newest member so as I looked at our passages for today I began to focus on our passage from Ephesians. This passage contains words that we have already said this morning in the opening acclamation. We began this service today with the call to one body, one spirit, one God and Father of all that contains an essential essence of what we believe.

For four nights this week we hosted an average of 55-60 children for our Vacation Bible School. The children heard of four people called by God to some form of ministry. There were four people who all were called as young people, Samuel as a prophet, David as a king, Mary as the mother of God and the little boy with the loaves and fishes from the feeding of the 5000. All were called by God and all had gifts for their ministry given to them by God. This is the theme of the middle section of our passage from Ephesians today. I spend a great deal of time and care in crafting what I said to this gathering of children from pre-school through 5th grade.

I really enjoyed the freedom to be creative in the four stories that I told. We did not buy our VBS curriculum this year. Mary Lou Crifasi, Nancy Smith, Katie Sacshé and others from our diocese created our own program this year. I was truly glad because this meant I did not have to rewrite a lot of questionable theology that I often see in the commercial VBS programs. Most of you have no idea how much rewriting and revision I do every year to the programs we buy. Why, because the image of God that so many of these programs teach is not one I want to plant in the minds of young children. We had one curriculum one year that was so focused on the cross and Jesus' suffering that the snack one night was a cookie in the shape of a hand with a hole in the middle and red frosting. Can you imagine the damage to a young faith with this? You can't make that kind of nonsense up!

The real problem is that so many of these programs dress up Christianity into an insurance policy to cleanse us of our sins and make sure that we get into heaven. They do this by saying there is only one way, the way of that publisher or denomination. Many of the flashiest and most attractive programs come from very very conservative groups and the dress up faith as the way to avoid punishment. They make no room for diversity of belief or acceptance of our own spirituality.

They come from an approach that we must be united in the face of the devil and the evil secular world. We however need to start with the premise unity does not necessarily mean uniformity. Strength and resilience can come from diversity. The Anglican Church and our own Episcopal Church was born out of a compromise by Queen Elizabeth I and we hear this every week in our communion service as I consecrate the bread and wine.

The words of institution in all our services say this: This is my body and do this in remembrance of me. In Elizabeth's time there was huge division about whether the bread and wine were changed, transubstantiation as the Roman Catholics taught, consubstantiation as Luther taught or simply a remembrance as the Protestants believed. People literally died over this argument. Elizabeth faced with putting together a deeply divided nation following the reign of Queen Mary said that she did not want a window into a man's soul. She simply wanted her people to worship as one people. This was the start of our church as the via media, the middle way and it dates back to 1559. This however makes for a church that is a little messier than others.

Desmond Tutu once said if you dislike organized religion you should try the Episcopal Church. We are a messy lot to be honest. We tolerate and accept many views on many things. Doctrine does not come down from on high. I once heard that a deputy to General Convention was asked what do Episcopalians believe. He replied, "Christ has died, Christ has risen, Christ will come again. Everything else is open for discussion."

All of this relates to the Ephesians passage that says we are called to follow true teaching, but that can be a challenge when there seems to be little agreement about what the true teaching is.

The answer can be found in verse 15. Here is the message translation. "God wants us to grow up, to know the whole truth and tell it in love—like Christ in everything. We take our lead from Christ, who is the source of everything we do." Earlier this week Br. Mark Brown from SSJE sent out his word for the day:

Compassion

How can we lift up Christ in our hearts and in the world? I think this is done most compellingly by keeping the focus on the person of Jesus himself. The way we live is given shape by love for others and compassion for their suffering and concern for their welfare.

-Br. Mark Brown

If you were to look at everything we do as a church, every doctrine we consider and believe through this lens I think it would be very hard to be led astray. I go back to my thoughts on curriculum for VBS. Is what we do something that I would want to teach our youngest and most vulnerable pre-school member? Is this an image of God and Jesus I want to provide for our children? Or is what we teach

and do going to be something that will require years of theological remediation if the person even comes to church as an adult.

I do believe that this is at the heart of the disinterest in organized religion of the millennial generation. One characteristic of this generation according to all sociologists is that they have a very sensitive sense of hypocrisy. They see the teachings of Jesus, but they see Christians acting in anything but like Jesus. And they are not alone. I see this same scepticism in some of my generation who are unchurched or have walked away from institutional religion as well.

Going back to my theme a couple weeks ago, we must be crazy enough to actually behave like Jesus. We must as Br. Mark says keep the focus on the person of Jesus and live lives shaped by love for others and compassion for those for whom Jesus had compassion

That's the type of church I want to leave to our newest members. So now it is time to welcome little Sadie into the household of God.