

“Words have consequences”

Annual Address of the Interim Rector
Holy Trinity Episcopal Church, Wyoming, Michigan
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If we have learned anything over the past weeks, it is that words have consequences. When we speak to a friend, a relative or family member or when we write or post a comment on our favorite social media, we had best mean what we say and say what we mean. No one enjoys being taken to task for words spoken and heard in ways unintended or discovering too late that words can hurt.

Many Christians, especially preachers use scripture for their own ends rather than do the exegesis to discover the meaning of the words within the time and context of those words. Unless you know who was speaking to whom, when it was said and what was going on at the time you have very little clue. Using scripture outside of the bounds of its meaning is not a 21st century phenomenon.

To perceive what is truthful, we must take the time and energy to be fully informed and not stop when we find something with which we agree. Hiding from being informed can increase one’s vulnerability. I am beginning to believe that healthy cynicism is more reasonable than ignorant gullibility.

Words have consequences. Samuel could have hidden from his call as the profit to the Kings, but he did not. Not wanting to know truth also is not a 21st century phenomenon, but it sure is a 21st century problem.

Nathaniel in our Gospel reading had totally convinced himself that he knew more than anyone about the character of people from Nazareth, so much so that he remarked with a smirk no doubt “Can anything good come out of Nazareth.” Nathaniel was convinced that the Son of God could not possibly come from a place as horrible as Nazareth. That was racist and ignorant, it was not, however, unusual for that time or ours.

In this day, churches need to be who they are. Naming themselves something different, becoming entertainment venues, producing professional videos and slick advertising, hiring preachers that in a different age might have been involved in snake oil sales...seems to work. My speech teacher used to say “wow he says nothing, but he sure says it well.” Before being seduced by the glitz, I think I hope people do not stop digging: how does the church treat people of color; how does the church treat LGBTQ people; how does the church spend its money?

We are the Episcopal Church. Often the first words spoken by members of the Episcopal Church is an apology for being who we are, or a joke. If you see four Episcopalians gathered in one place you will always find a fifth; catholics who flunked Latin and on it goes.

Our church with all its attempts to light a new torch have an unmistakable habit of keeping that light securely under a basket. We get worried about sharing who we are. We need to stop that.

Words Matter.

Honesty Matters.

Transparency Matters.

Episcopalians do not welcome people in and then tell them their lifestyle is bad and that they must conform to be like us. We recognize that all people are created and loved by God, and that our church welcomes all people in every way without judgement. We do not throw the Bible at people.

Before one can stand-up for what one believes, one should fully understand what they believe. Not mere slogans and emotional tugs. No bullying, no duress, no tears...truth.

That is my fear about modern day evangelical and mainline Christianity, that we live in a time of a dumbed-down faith and dumbed-down churches and dumbed-down traditions. Faith is more than disconnected and sometimes thoughtless theological platitudes. Faith is more than using and abusing scripture as tools of seduction to gain access to inner feelings and checking accounts.

When Biblical study and the teachings of Jesus become options; when the Holy Eucharist is the last of the various possibilities of how to spend Sunday, or when (and this is not original) our children know the names of the 9 reindeer but cannot come up with the names of 5 of the 13 disciples, we have a problem, we are victims and we are products of a dumbed-down faith.

In my elder statesperson status, I pray for a church that does not hide from the positions it takes. I pray for a church where the parish is the center of life-long Christian learning.

I do not want, nor will I participate in politics from the pulpit, but I will not shrink from the gospel of our Lord nor hide from its light. We must not subvert the gospel to what we want to hear or add words to the gospel that are not there. In order that we do not allow that kind of subversion to take place, we need to continue to learn until the day we feast forever at God's table in God's home.

Interim Rector's, unlike seated Rector's, do not try to push a vision during this one opportunity a year to speak and not preach. What I can do is tell you what I plan to be doing over my time with you:

*exciting paperwork. So that when the next priest comes along, he or she will not have to be burdened with getting all of it done. We will be moving fully into REALM as our parish database so that will keep me busy too.

*structure. This is almost as exciting as paperwork. When a new priest arrives, they want to have a good understanding of how the parish does what it is supposed to do. The Vestry and various lead people need to know how all the pieces of our puzzle fit together.

*youth. During this pandemic, I am particularly concerned about our parish youth. For them, church may have stopped existing. This parish has a goodly number of youth members. I have started the formation of a Moms and Dads group to help me work in finding creative ways to continue the necessary Christian Education for our kids. This is not something we should do; this is something we must do. Kids are not the church of tomorrow; they are the church now.

*future. What does it mean to have a part-time priest? What options are out there for our future? How do we make sure we provide the most complete due diligence as the Vestry moves closer to the next chapter in the life of this parish?

*reality. Transparency is easy, it is hiding that is difficult. During my time with you I will be honest and in every way I can, I will make sure that our leadership is transparent. That means saying what needs to be said as clearly as possible even when it means that those who hear it will not appreciate it.

Just as words have consequences, not saying something also has consequences.

I suspect I join several of you in thanksgiving that 2020 is past. I know most all of us are hopeful and yet cautious about 2021. These tough times continue to be difficult, we have a few more months of being careful. Jesus calls on us to love one another without exception. As difficult as that may be for us, it is the only way. Love is the only way. Transparency is the only. Believing in the gospel is the only way.

Allow me to conclude this address with a few suggestions on how we might move further into this new year together:

Let's wash our hands as often as we can, let's wear our masks, let's keep our distance from one another, even those we love until everyone has received the vaccine; let's stay away from large groups and let's get that vaccine. I know many are nervous, but it is the best way for all of us to get out of this awful time. I want to see you all in church without masks singing loudly. I know you do too. It can be done.

Instead of thinking about all the "cants" of this time, I would encourage us to think about all the "cans" such as:

I can tell the people around me how much I care about them and love them.

I can check in with people more often especially children and learn to use technology, even if I do not like it.

I can spend time praying for those I love.

I can put myself out and receive communion every week – it isn't the way I like it, it is not the best, but Jesus is inviting us.

I can speak well of people, those that agree with me and those that do not.

I can pray for those silly people who do not think exactly the way I do. (pardon a little sarcasm).

Truth is, we can do so much more than we think and if we are just thinking about the cants, we miss the whole story.

Our words, our actions matter. We have been blessed now let our words and our actions be a blessing to others.