

Rev David W. Hodsdon
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Resilience and Re-Representing Christ
Gospel for Today: John 14:1-7
(Lectionary = vv1-14)

We are people of the resurrection, and alleluia is our song.
We are disciples, making disciples, for the transformation of the world.
In all our goings and comings, everything we are and do -- Every. Single. Thing --
should be a re-Presentation of Christ to our world.

These words are credited to St. Teresa of Avila

*Christ has no body but yours,
No hands, no feet on earth but yours,
Yours are the eyes with which
he looks on this world in compassion,
Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good,
Yours are the hands, with which he blesses all the world.
Yours are the hands, yours are the feet,
Yours are the eyes, you are his body.
No hands, no feet on earth but yours,
Christ has no body now on earth but yours.*

In today's Gospel Jesus told his disciples that we know "the way" to the place where he is going, the place to which he will receive us, the fullness of the Kingdom of God, on earth as in heaven. And he told us that HE is that way, - and the truth, and the life.

As people of the resurrection, as followers of Jesus, and yes, as participants in that organization called the United Methodist Church, in all our goings and comings, everything we are and do should be a re-Presentation of Christ to our world - every single thing . Sometimes maybe we do pretty well.

But sometimes we fall down. And so we seek to do better.

In our reading from Acts last Sunday, we heard how the early disciples were, with their lips and and their lives, continually praising God, and doing good, and sharing their tables generously, and how nobody had a bad word to say about them.

It is not when we are re-presenting Christ that people come to criticize those who are called Christians. I have never heard people criticize Christians for being too much like Jesus. Have you? But, they have said things like...

*"I like your Christ, I do not like your Christians.
Your Christians are so unlike your Christ."*

— Mahatma Gandhi

This week in the reading from Acts we learn of Stephen being killed by stoning. What happened between last week and this?

First, we must realize that some time has passed, not just a few days.

We also need to know a bit more about Stephen and the circumstances.

In those days, living was pretty much hand to mouth. A days wage might be enough, barely enough, to feed the family for the day, and that is IF one could find food to purchase. But we also know that there was a time of famine in Palestine near this time, to which Paul was instrumental in organizing a response from Christians in Greece and Asia (eg Turkey today).

Every day, there are “those who are most vulnerable”, and in times of duress it becomes even worse. Among the most vulnerable are the widows. The early Christians in Jerusalem organized to gather resources and begin and ministry to those with needs, those who were most vulnerable.

And initially, some of those who were ethnically different were being overlooked or bypassed. So to this work they appointed Stephen as an overseer, so that no-one would be neglected.

The church recognized that discrimination is not good. In Christ there is no difference ... not based on ageism, or sexism, or classism, or ethnicity (or anything else). We are all children of God. And everyone is given the Spirit of God to enrich the work of the body of Christ, so that we may better represent Christ to the world.

Sometimes the church has been slow recognizing what needs to happen. On May 4, 1956 – only 67 years ago this week -- the General Conference of The Methodist Church voted to grant women full clergy rights. Some churches had done so sooner. Other still have not. And this is not the only place we have failed, and in which some are resistant to change.

Stephen was part of the work of ensuring that the work of the church was inclusive. And he was not only a deacon, serving tables so to speak. He was also a preacher, and gifted teacher. He was active in re-presenting Christ in debate as well as deed.

**So, maybe here he did not do so well.
Or maybe... maybe the lesson is slightly different even.**

Maybe the lesson is that argumentation and debate do NOT re-present Christ. And in his case ... at least one interpretation might be that had he stuck with serving and had not been so energetic in debate, people might not have gotten so mad at him - so mad that they were ready to do him bodily harm, and making him the first Christian Martyr.

The Newberry award winning author, Madeleine L'Engle, has aptly observed... (as I have previously quoted)

*We do not draw people to Christ by loudly discrediting what they believe,
by telling them how wrong they are and how right we are, but by showing them
a light that is so lovely that they want with all their hearts to know the source of it.*

Madeleine L'Engle (2016).
“Walking on Water: Reflections on Faith and Art”, p.172, Convergent Books
and in *Herself: Reflections on a Writing Life*

Maybe Stephen should have just focused on his diaconal work.

Early in my ministry, in coaching me, someone voiced the observation ... “Nobody likes to be ‘told’ ”. This is a good caution to remember. In narration of an experience, I had used the expression “I told them...” and this individual was triggered by it. This is a lesson that we do not know what might trigger someone, preventing them from hearing what we are trying to communicate. We need to be care-full in how we speak.

And, even then we still will make mistakes.

*"I know that you believe you understand what you think I said,
but I'm not sure you realize that what you heard is not what I meant."*

— Alan Greenspan

We also need to be care-full in our listening. We may be oblivious to what they are trying to say, as with Greenspan perhaps. Nuance - the way in which words are loaded (laden with freight) may be different between speaker and listener.

Or, if someone should say something that we find insulting – or if they do something that we find irritating, ... we need to stop, and take a deep breath, and switch off ego, ... we need to remember that what we heard may not be what was intended - at all.

And even if it were what was intended, we can chalk it up to something other than malice on their part. Maybe just ignorance of our concerns; they are oblivious to what is important to us. Being confrontational may not serve anyone well. We want to re-Present Christ in all we do and say.

In a world so torn apart by rivalry, anger, and hatred, we have the privileged vocation to be living signs of a love that can bridge all divisions and heal all wounds.

Henri Nouwen

Paul Bane, of Mindful Christianity dot com, has said

It is not the lack of knowledge, but the lack of love of Christians that cause many of my friends to reject the message of Christ.

But we fail, don't we? We often do not listen well. We are often not careful in how we speak... we often fail to re-present Christ, to love well. Probably there are many causes for our failures.

I suspect one of the biggies is a loss of resilience. I suspect this because I know it is true for me. When my resilience has worn thin, I am more likely to be reactive than to be deliberate in expending extra energy to try to discern the unspoken that is going on. Listening takes work. And it takes practice to do well.

But it is so easy for us to be triggered. Someone uses a word, or expresses a concept that we find troubling, and we react rather than doubling down on listening. Someone is engaging in activity that makes us nervous and we see them as dangerous, and we become reactive. It happens.

This past season, three years of pandemic, has worn on our resilience. Now, coming out of the pandemic, we still observe people getting sick and wonder how much care we still should be taking to avoid getting sick ourselves, or to avoid spreading it.

Our comfort zones are different. And even if personally we might be comfortable with loosening our activities, we might be deliberately acting to protect others with whom we engage.

And we seem to have so little tolerance for differences among us even on this matter, a matter of values, and of prioritizing health and safety, values regarding the value of those around us.

What might we do to work on recovering some of our lost resilience? At this point part of my answer must be to double down on self care. Pay extra attention to matters of nutrition and rest. Pay extra attention to health care. Pay extra attention to giving yourself times of play, recreation, relaxation, whether that is doing some form of art, or vigorous physical activity. Or any thing else to break the pace that is demanding so much of you.

But there is not only the matter of the present and recent past. We also have histories out of which we also carry wounds which may make resilience even more difficult. This week on facebook Justin Coutts offered for our consideration his essay originally written in 2021, entitled:

The Three Medicines of Julian of Norwich.

<https://newedenministry.com/2021/11/14/julian/>

He observed that we are responsible for working on our own healing, whether the wounds were inflicted by others long ago, or inflicted by our own poor choices, or inflicted by capricious circumstances. Then he goes on to describe these medicines offered by Julian of Norwich, that have universally healing efficacy.

The first of the medicines she names is contrition. This is a recognition of the hurtfulness of some of our choices and behaviors, and a turning from them toward God. This opens us to receive the goodness of God. This is not the experience of shame, or even guilt, so much as it is a recognition of how our own choices have been harmful, and how God may help. It is not dissimilar to first three of the twelve steps of recovery groups.

1. *We admitted we were powerless [over our nemesis] and that our lives had become unmanageable.*
 2. *Came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.*
 3. *Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understood Him.*
- From the book Alcoholics Anonymous, at the beginning of the chapter "How It Works."*

The second medicine offered by Julian is compassion. Recognizing the compassion of God means realizing that there never was a time God has not loved us, never a time God stopped loving. God's compassion works to restore the image of God in us that always has been present, an image that is expressed in peace and love. God is the source and foundation of every expression of this image.

When, through contrition, we have realized how wounded we actually are and, through compassion, we have realized how our wounds are easily and willingly healed by God, we are left with such awe and reverence that we cannot help but desire God with all our being. When our entire being is filled with a true loving desire for God, then we will have healed the ancient wound which fills us with false desires.

<https://newedenministry.com/2021/11/14/julian/>

Jesus said "you know the way." And he said "I am the way." Our task as the church, our task as Christians, is to re-present Christ in every circumstance in which we find ourselves; Even those circumstance that might trigger us to anger, circumstances which cause us to feel neglected, or disrespected, or under-valued, circumstances in which we might be prone to tell someone off.

Telling... telling off... debating... proving the other person wrong, ... these do not help the cause of Christ, least of all grow the Church. We are called to re-present Christ, the one who became humble and served. This means we need to seek healing for our own wounds, and we need to tend to self-care so that we may have resilience when circumstances demand it... and resilience is always in demand.

Then, going into the world, we ask, we consider, we reflect on how the scriptures and how what we have heard calls us to act, to change. Not how we might point the finger at others for how they should change, but how WE are being summoned to better walk in the way that is Christ.

*God the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, our only Savior, the Prince of Peace:
Give us grace seriously to lay to heart
the great dangers we are in by our unhappy divisions;
take away all hatred and prejudice,
and whatever else may hinder us from godly unity;
that, as there is but one Body and one Spirit, one hope of our calling,
one Lord, one Faith, one Baptism, one God and Father of us all,
so we may be all of one heart and of one soul,
united in one holy bond of truth and peace, of faith and charity,
and may in all we say and do, with one mind and one mouth glorify you;
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.*

From the Episcopal Book of Common Prayer