

Dear Friends,

It is so tempting to get it exactly backwards.

And the temptation is to think that in the relationship between church and people, it is the job of people to support the Church—out of a sense of duty, family tradition, taking on an adult role, or because we value the various products the Church offers. Along with other socially useful nonprofits, community service organizations, or institutions that seek contributions and then distribute them to worthy recipients, the Church, this view suggests, has an honorable place.

And, within the Church, it is tempting to think that our job is to give people what they want. Take polls or surveys, maybe even have a focus group, or in some other way make up a list of what people want, and then devise programs to meet the articulated desires of the market, with something like total customer satisfaction as our goal.

If we were inventing a church ourselves, these views might well be core principles.

**A Magic—or a Holy—Kingdom?** But the view of the New Testament is that the Church is created by God to meet God's goal of bringing the news of God's values, principles, and methodologies (God's "kingdom" was the way Jesus talked about this) to a world which is in serious trouble. If we think the world—personal, national, and global—is just fine as it is, then there is no point in reading any further. The Church is God's response to a pressing problem; it is not a nonprofit volunteer organization casting about for various good works to accomplish.

In the Nicene Creed we affirm our belief in "one holy catholic and apostolic Church." Both "catholic" and "apostolic" limit our freedom to do whatever we want—to be "catholic" is to be part of a community which transcends the limits of local geography and present time, and to be "apostolic" restricts our range of choice to what is consistent with the teaching of the first generation of the followers of Jesus.

**The Freedom Paradox** Rather like a couple choosing to be faithful to one another in marriage, we choose to restrict our freedom for the sake of making the life we seek. The paradox in both cases is to get what we most desire, we voluntarily abridge our freedom. In fact, in the Collect for Peace (Prayer Book, p. 57) we explicitly identify "perfect freedom" with "serving" God. In ordinary life, being a servant is the opposite of being free. Christians struggle with the seeming contradiction that if we really want to be free, taking on the role and the mindset of a servant is our best, and maybe our only, hope.

I'm not saying I particularly like this, but it's pretty clear that this is what Jesus and his first followers believed, taught, and lived. (Philippians 2:3-13)

*New York Times* Op-Ed columnist David Brooks, in the January 17<sup>th</sup> issue of *The New Yorker*, observes that even our culture is re-evaluating the relationship between freedom and happiness:

There's a debate in our culture about what really makes us happy... is summarized by, on the one hand, the book *On the Road* and, on the other, the movie *It's a Wonderful Life*. The former celebrates the life of freedom and adventure. The latter celebrates roots and connections. Research over the past thirty years makes it clear that what the inner mind really wants is

connection. *It's a Wonderful Life* was right. Joining a group that meets just once a month produces the same increase in happiness as doubling your income. ("The Social Animal," p. 28)

Just imagine what coming to church every week could offer....

**Steve Jobs, David Brooks, and Jesus of Nazareth walk into a bar.....**So asking people what they want, giving it to them, and calling it God's will is exactly the opposite of what God created the Church to do. Steve Jobs of Apple operates on a similar principle. When asked about what market research he had done to develop the iPad, he replied, "None. It isn't the consumers' job to know what they want." (*New York Times*, 1/19/11, p. B1) I wonder what it would take for the Kingdom of God to be as compelling as an iPad. And yet something like that happened in the first century when the word about Jesus went viral in the eastern Mediterranean and with no supporting infrastructure could be found in most of the urban centers of the area and many rural areas as well. No one was asking for repentance, but everybody wanted it.

Jesus begins his ministry not by asking people for input, but by telling them to repent—that is, change—literally it means "turn around"—and believe that things really can—and need to—be better than the way we have made them. "Repent," Jesus says, "for the kingdom of heaven has come near, is 'at hand'." (Matthew 4:17, Mark 1:15). And the time to do this is now, Jesus says, not sometime in the indefinite future.

**Why should we think this is a good thing?** And, maybe most challenging of all, Jesus says that this challenge is actually good news. I confess that most of the time when someone gets in my face—metaphorically or literally—and says I have to change and change now, my first reaction is not "Gosh, what good news!"

The Good News is that things can be substantially better for us. The more troubling news is that this improvement is not going to happen by magical intervention, but by a change of our hearts. We would like to win the lottery, but winning the lottery is not "at hand"—we have no control over that and not only is it unlikely to happen, but even if it does, it is unlikely to improve what we value most about our lives. A change of heart, on the other hand, is completely within our grasp and, once done, has the ability to make our lives substantially better. What if the promise of the Kingdom is in learning to look at ourselves and our lives through the eyes of God?

In the same *New Yorker* article cited above, David Brooks offers this critique of the limits of the vision of our culture:

Many members of this [educated, successful] class, like many Americans generally, have a vague sense that their lives have been distorted by a giant cultural bias. They live in a society that prizes the development of career skills but is inarticulate when it comes to the things that matter most. The young achievers are tutored in every soccer technique and calculus problem, but when it comes to their most important decisions—whom to marry and whom to befriend, what to love and what to despise—they are on their own. Nor, for all their striving, do they understand the qualities that lead to the highest achievement. Intelligence, academic performance, and prestigious schools don't correlate well with fulfillment, or even with outstanding accomplishment. The traits that do make a difference are poorly understood, and can't be taught in a classroom, no matter what the tuition: the ability to understand and inspire people; to read situations and discern the underlying patterns; to build trusting relationships; to recognize and correct one's shortcomings; to imagine alternate futures. In short, these achievers have a sense that they are shallower than they need to be. (p. 26-27)

Brooks suggests that even those for whom our culture works best are not fully equipped to address some of the most important questions of our lives. Playing this game the best we can does not provide what we most need. So maybe we ought to try another game. Maybe we should repent.

But to what should we turn? Or, how, then, should we live? The Church is the place which exists to offer a serious, achievable, and reasonable alternative to the culture we develop on our own. The Church, rather like a 12-Step Meeting, is our support system in seeking and maintaining a way of looking at the world according to God's perspective rather than following even the best of human insights.

**How can what makes so little sense be right?** For our lives actually to improve, alas, requires giving up many of the reasonable, common, and generally held attitudes, practices, and behaviors on which we have based our lives. Right after Jesus calls people to repent and follow, he sits down and delivers an astounding series of counter-cultural, counter-intuitive teachings which we call The Sermon on the Mount: Blessed are the poor (*are you kidding?*) Blessed are you when people revile you (*OK, so how can I be sure not to be blessed by this guy?*) Don't think I'm some revolutionary to let you off the hook from what you've been taught—whoever teaches that is at the very bottom of God's kingdom. (*But I thought you were going to set me free from all of that?*) If you even *think* about being unfaithful to your spouse, you're already guilty. Someone hits you? Don't put them out of action, give them a second shot...

Read the whole speech and see if any of it makes sense, compared to what we have been taught by the culture, at first encounter. (Matthew 5:1-7:28)

Jesus' basic point is to get different lives, we need to live our lives differently; to get a new result, we need a new methodology. Hence when Jesus looks around and sees all the distress, the first thing he says is "repent." He doesn't dispatch us to fix social or political systems—though repentance will inevitably have an impact on how we relate to public life. Anglicans abolished slavery in the English-speaking world because the first thing they did was to repent. "Repent," he says, "believe in the good news," and "follow me."

I think the temptation is to get it exactly backwards. We want God to give us what we want, when seeking what we want has put us in the very place from which we seek to be delivered.

**Another round, or born again?** I think we are tempted—I certainly am—to view God as something like the spiritual version of an energy drink—something that will give us that extra edge to work harder and longer, run faster, think more quickly, and win. Only with God is it to be more happy, to be more secure and serene, to be strong, hopeful, loving, and at peace. I think God does, indeed, offer that life, but the way to it is through repentance, through transformation, or, as we say in baptism, through "dying" to the old life so we can be born "again" into a new one (Prayer Book, p. 306-307).

Asking God to bless and empower us for our agenda is to get it exactly backwards. To get it right, we come together around scripture, using our God-given reason, listening to our tradition, and seeking the full experience of God in Word and Sacraments. We repent and thereby take our first step towards the Kingdom which is not just at hand, but being offered to us in the outstretched hand of the one who desires nothing more than to lead us to the life we most desire.

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