

The Rector's Column for November 2010

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Dear Friends,

Not long after the news of Tyler Clementi's death became public, St. Elizabeth's received a call from Garden State Equality, a group dedicated to advocacy for equal rights for all people regardless of their sexual orientation. Ann Dowling, our administrator, took the call, and they asked her if they might rent space to hold a "town meeting" at St. Elizabeth's in response to Tyler's death and the circumstances which seemed to have led to it.

Because according to the canons (rules governing our operations), decisions concerning the use of the building are given to the rector, she passed the call to me. As I spoke with Garden State Equality's representative, I found myself thinking of all of the reasons why I might tactfully decline to make our building available: we are difficult to find, we have limited parking, I did not know anything of the organization, holding 'town meetings' is not the sort of thing we normally do.

The terms of the choice So I continued the conversation, asked a bit about the organization and the purpose of the meeting, and, as we talked, I found myself thinking about the words of the Baptismal Covenant. Phrases like "respect the dignity of every human being" and "seek and serve Christ in all persons" and "seek justice and peace for all people." Not long ago we had a gospel reading on Sunday in which Jesus came in for some fairly sharp criticism from those people who thought of themselves as respectable because he was consorting with others whose manner of life fell outside of what the self-identified religious people considered appropriate. In each of those stories, Jesus makes it clear that he came to offer what he had to whoever came to him seriously to seek it.

Samaritans, gentiles, tax collectors—these were all people whom good religious people would either openly shun or, if they were more polite, might find a reason why it simply would not be possible to accommodate them right now. I wish we could help. Maybe some other time.

Siding with the Pharisees The uncomfortable fact is, I often find myself identifying with the Pharisees in those encounters. (Similarly, in Holy Week, I find that identifying with Pilate's perspective, especially in the Gospel of John, is the strongest and most subtle temptation of those days. I mean really, "What is truth?" is a pretty interesting question.) But I have spent enough time reading and thinking about these stories to know that when the lines are drawn, Jesus is looking across at the Pharisees, not standing with them, and, in that instance, I want to be one of those people on Jesus' side of the line.

So I told Garden State Equality that they would be welcome to come to St. Elizabeth's. I said that our conditions were that the gathering would be a meeting, not a religious service, and that those same core principles of the Baptismal Covenant—which I summarized to them—would be reflected in the organization of the event. If their agenda was to vilify, attack, or demonize, the meeting could not be here.

Rent and partnership They gladly accepted and reiterated that what they had intended to do from the outset was entirely consistent with the position I had outlined. They asked what we would

charge, and I said we would make the building available to them, with whatever logistical support we could offer, without charge. We have been blessed with a great building, and that blessing has been given to us to use for our mission.

And I had a practical reason for making the space a gift and not a rental. When we rent space, our relationship with our guests changes. They, not without cause, believe that it is theirs to use without much reference to us because they have paid for it. That understanding diminishes our ability to participate in decision making about the event—we might have detailed agreements spelling out all of our requirements and conditions, but my experience has been that working with people we can trust, and keeping in close touch with them, produces a better outcome. When our guests are grateful for the use of our space, they honor our generosity by a generosity of their own, and at the end we have become partners in a shared work. It is a form of outreach, and our custom has been to limit these shared ventures to collaborations with organizations—usually non-profits—whose goals resonate with the principles of St. Elizabeth's and the Episcopal Church.

Providing space to outside groups is complicated because what happens here is often thought to originate here. Once we invited Garden State Equality to come to St. Elizabeth's, some assumed that we were doing a funeral or a memorial service. Others assumed that I had organized this whole event. But I also began to receive calls and emails from people who had heard that we were hosting and thanked St. Elizabeth's for stepping forward with the offer we made.

Raising the stakes The staff of Garden State Equality were efficient, graceful, highly organized, and very professional. They were scrupulous in asking about what would be appropriate, and they respected both the letter and the spirit of that to which we agreed. We had set up the Parish Hall for the gathering, but as the time approached, it became clear that the numbers would far exceed what we could accommodate there. They asked if we could have the meeting in the church, and suddenly the stakes felt much higher.

But I went back to my first image of Jesus and the words of the Baptismal Covenant. If everyone in Tyler Clementi's circle had respected the dignity of every human being, the meeting we were having might well have never been necessary. And if we stand for respecting the dignity of every human being on Sunday, how can we with any integrity not step forward to promote it throughout the week as well.

What changes the rules When the lives of anyone—but especially the lives of young people—are at stake, if we can help even a bit, moving a little outside of our comfort zone becomes not only reasonable, but maybe even close to obligatory.

Joan and I were both there to welcome people as were other members of our parish leadership. One woman near the end of the program spoke with deep feeling about how important it was for a church to welcome such an event because houses of worship are often stereotyped as being unwelcoming to gay and lesbian people. And, similarly, people who actively practice their religion often have equally shallow and narrow stereotypes about gay and lesbian people. In the course of that Thursday evening in early October, I think we contributed a bit to exposing the error of that kind of stereotyping.

Most of the people there were new to St. Elizabeth's, though there were many familiar faces as well—other Episcopal clergy and clergy from Ridgewood of various traditions, members from other

Episcopal congregations, from other Christian traditions, and from other religious traditions beyond that. Many who were present were not active in any church or other place of worship.

The spirit of the place But I was struck by how many thanked me, how many said how beautiful the Parish Hall and church were, and how many commented on how welcomed and included they felt. I found myself wishing that everyone who contributed to the construction of the Parish Hall, and everyone who continues to support our day-to-day operations could have heard for themselves the heartfelt thanks of those we invited into the space entrusted to us by God, and built and supported by the generosity of generations of Episcopalians at St. Elizabeth's. I think holding the meeting in a space so obviously designed and used for the worship of God contributed to the atmosphere of the evening—the setting itself seemed to encourage a kind of behavior and speech in which commitment to justice was passionately evident, but, at least to me, that passion seemed to be foremost an invitation to identify, and stand, with those who were suffering. There was, for me, an unexpectedly generous spirit which pervaded the entire evening, a generosity and graciousness which I do not always see when deeply held views on controversial subjects are addressed in secular public settings.

The church was full that night. People were standing in the aisles, folding chairs filled the narthex. The Village assigned two police officers—a man and a woman—to ensure safety both in traffic and inside the building. The Fire Department came by earlier in the day to ensure that everything to make the building safe for a large crowd was in place (It was!). The Chief of Police stopped by to be sure that we had everything we needed from him, and to show his personal support.

Question and Answer At the end of the evening one young man asked what part of the Christian tradition we were from. He then asked when our Sunday services were, and then, very tentatively, asked if it would be OK if he came some Sunday. Of course, the heartbreaking part of this encounter was that he wondered if he would be welcome at St. Elizabeth's. And as I thought about it, I realized that my profound hope is that if he did join us some Sunday morning that he would feel as welcome and included then as he did that evening. But I admit that I did wonder. Being sure that whoever comes to us feels respected, honored, and fully welcome would be a good goal for us all.

And, of course, there were difficult moments in the evening, too. A father of a gay son spoke of hateful—no other word for it—graffiti at Ridgewood High School that week. Parents and young people told their own stories of being treated with anything but respect. And to a person they spoke with dignity, power, and grace. Many spoke with frustration at the limitations of seeking to ensure justice and peace for all people through state and local laws and the workings of school administrations.

The potential and limits of the law Certainly our laws could be better and enforced with greater vigor and vision. But, with St. Paul, I think that the law has only limited ability to set right what is most amiss with ourselves or our world. It is our hearts, souls, and spirits which need to be stronger, not our laws.

And I think we flee to the law because we do not know how to fix our hearts, or because we are afraid of what changing our hearts might mean. What might we lose which we now think is essential for having a good life? What might we think we would have to give up which we now cling to openly or in secret?

It is much safer to talk about laws—that conversation has the illusion of rationality and shores up the belief that if we just get the rational part of this properly addressed, our work will be done. Jesus and the Church he called into being to continue his work take a more complex view. The Pharisees, and even Pilate, can be seen as highly rational people. They may even be good people—at least in some of the stories. But the world view they embrace and propound does not produce the lives—individual or collective—which they seek.

If education, sports, the arts, games and entertainment, cultivation of self-images, and being in constant communication with one another made us better, our lives and the life of the world would look, and be, much better than they are.

As a culture we have relegated the religious life to the margins of optional personal observance. And the consequence is that we live in a world in which although God is no less present, we are nevertheless increasingly unaware of God's will, God's ways, and the profound and pervasive personal and social benefits of being people whose hearts are fixed on God.

If we were in an area decimated by cholera, we would not hesitate to address inadequate disposal of sewage. But when the causes are spiritual rather than physical, we suddenly become timid, giving our top priority to not giving offense to a culture whose choices have produced the situation in which kids, and not just kids, are dying. We believe that the physical is real and universal (germs in this instance) and the spiritual is a matter of personal choice. Tyler Clementi did not die from germs, viruses, or physical contamination. Even though the old language may make us uncomfortable, I think what killed Tyler is what we are talking about when, in baptism, we “renounce Satan and all the spiritual forces of wickedness that rebel against God...the evil powers of this world which corrupt and destroy the creatures of God...[and the] sinful desires that draw [us] from the love of God.” (BCP, p. 302)

Jesus weighs in We tend to think that the greatest dangers to us are physical. Jesus thought otherwise. Matthew remembers it this way: “Then [Jesus] called the crowd to him and said to them, “Listen and understand: it is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but it is what comes out of the mouth that defiles.”...But Peter said to him, “Explain this parable to us.” Then he said, “Are you also still without understanding? Do you not see that whatever goes into the mouth enters the stomach, and goes out into the sewer? But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this is what defiles. For out of the heart come evil intentions, murder, adultery, fornication, theft, false witness, slander. These are what defile a person, but to eat with unwashed hands does not defile.”

Focusing on the heart more than on the law or the risks of physical contaminants seems to be Jesus' agenda, and a church seeking to be his faithful disciples will take a similar stance.

We seek renewed hearts—what the Bible calls hearts of flesh rather than the hearts of stone we seem so often to develop. And with those renewed hearts we seek, in the name of the God who gives us those new hearts, to be people who stand firmly for respecting the dignity of every human being, who are resolute about opposing all of the forces which corrupt and destroy the creatures of God, and who are unremitting in our personal dedication to seek justice and peace for all people.

Why are we surprised? And one particularly challenging element of those promises is their universality. I sometimes wish we were only expected to seek and serve Christ in all persons who were themselves committed to that same project. Or to respect the dignity of every human being prepared to extend that same blessing to others. Or to seek justice for those people who understand justice in the same way that I do.

But the really hard element of the baptismal promises, the thing which makes taking them seriously very close to an heroic undertaking, is that they are not premised on reciprocity. God calls us to this life, God blesses and equips us for it, God sends us out to do it, not to build up the numbers of any religion, denomination, or congregation, but because without God's people actively pursuing God's mission and vision in the world, the world is debased, life is coarsened, and kids die. Perhaps the greatest irony is that we are surprised by the result of a series of steps and choices we make as a culture which, in retrospect, have an inevitability which might genuinely qualify as tragic in the strict and literary understanding of that term.

Help and hope We are neither without help or hope in confronting this culture of death, but as with any daunting undertaking of life or death, we are more likely to prevail if we have allies, have a strategy, and acquire the skills we need to succeed. More than ever, we need now to become a community of children, teens, adults, and seniors who each in our own way, in our own setting, in our own words, proclaim the Good News of Christ—that is, a way of life defined by generous hearts, strong spirits, clear minds, and unswerving dedication to the faithful, and effective presentation of God's Kingdom in our time and place. I think we need to come to worship believing that, at some point, and maybe some point sooner than we might ever expect, our lives and the lives of members of our community may depend on whether we have been faithful in seeking to be shaped by not only regular, but frequent, encounters with the holiness of God.

Near the very beginning of the night service of Compline we say, "Our help is in the Name of the Lord." (BCP p. 127) To the modern rationalist, that brief piece of liturgy might sound like a quaint vestige of the Middle Ages. But I invite you to look at that phrase more seriously and to ask what has promised to help us but has failed. And then ask where true help might be found, and what we might do to make that help our own.

This November article is usually about stewardship, giving back to God a portion of what God has given us, and our financial support of St. Elizabeth's through our financial pledges. If you have hung in with me this far, you will be able to connect the dots to link what I have written with what I am supposed to have addressed. Without a strong local church, the campaign for dignity, justice, peace for all people loses one of its clearest and most powerful voices. I hope you will be an active partner, in every way, in that mission for the year to come.

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