



St. Andrew's By-the-Sea
The Episcopal Church
in Destin, Florida

“What is a Christian?”
5th Sunday of Easter
May 7, 2023
John 14:1-14

A Homily by the Rev'd Jo P. Popham

Jim and I were in the waiting room of our ophthalmologist's office this last week. My eyes had been dilated, and I could not read, so we were talking. What do two priests who are married to each other talk about? What else is there to talk about besides the church? We talk about the readings for the next Sunday, about you all and how supportive you are of us and our ministry, about how we might be more supportive of you and the Blue Door and the Bike Shop, about our hopes and dreams for our parish family. We overheard a discussion from the other side of the room. Four men who were strangers were discussing their lives, how long they had been married, where they live, where they have lived and how those places had formed who they are – my words not theirs. One man who has been married for 57 years but had known his wife for three years before when they were in school in Philadelphia, was very outspoken about how frightened his wife and her friends were just walking to class at their college in Philadelphia. He represented that Philadelphia was a very dangerous place to be in the early 1960's – that indeed they had to have an armed guard walk them to class. And he went on and on about the many minorities who were the cause of the unrest. That the cause of racial conflict was because there were too many of “them” in Philadelphia and that it had to be so much worse now. He led the conversation and continued to blame an entire race for the ills of the world. He spoke loudly about other places they had lived. He really liked Wisconsin because they were such good Christian people like himself. I wanted to get up and sit closer to that new group of like-minded men. Jim discouraged me from making a scene. We did have our collars on, but we would surely not be gathered into the conversation of these self-proclaimed good Christians.¹

So, this week I explored what it is that makes a Christian. In a beautiful God-wink or God-incident, Fred Buechner addressed the same idea in the daily news feed with some of his most wonderful quotations. The following excerpt was originally published in

Wishful Thinking then later in *Listening to Your Life* and also in *Beyond Words*:

“Some think of a Christian as one who necessarily *believes* certain things. That Jesus was the son of God, say. Or that Mary was a virgin. Or that the Pope is infallible. Or that all other religions are all wrong.

Some think of a Christian as one who necessarily *does* certain things. Such as going to church. Getting baptized. Giving up liquor and tobacco. Reading the Bible. Doing a good deed a day.

Some think of a Christian as just a Nice [Person].

Jesus said "I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father, but by me" (John 14:6). He didn't say that any particular ethic, doctrine, or religion was the way, the truth, and the life. He said that he was. He didn't say that it was by believing or doing anything in particular that you could "come to the Father." He said that it was only by him—by living, participating in, being caught up by the way of life that he embodied, that was his way.

A Christian is one who is on the way, though not necessarily very far along it, and who has at least some dim and half-baked idea of whom to thank.”

My two favorite prayers are: Thank you, Lord! & Help me, Lord! I use them all the time. I teach small children to use these prayers so that they can be and stay in a good relationship with Jesus. Our Bishop, Russell Kendrick has two things that he knows in his heart of hearts: He loves Jesus and He is proud to be an Episcopalian. Our Presiding Bishop Michael Curry says often: “If it's not about love, it's not about God.” Those are the plumb lines by which we should all measure ourselves – our beliefs, our words, and our deeds. The Presiding Bishop calls the Episcopal church a branch of the Jesus Movement. We fully accept that there are many on the road, many with other viewpoints, of different denominations, of different races and creeds, but we are all on the same road together. My friends, we are all human, and we make mistakes. We take the wrong road from time to time, maybe often. And the church as an institution, as a body of people, makes mistakes too.

Thirty years ago, I suffered a break from the Episcopal Church. I went to services faithfully, Sundays at our home church and at the Noon weekday Eucharists across the street from our offices in DC at “The Presidents’ Church, a block from the White House. The weekend service pained my heart for nearly six months. My priest had lied to me. He knew he lied, and he knew that I knew he had lied. I could not take communion from his hands; I just sat in the pew and cried. Now, I know, I know that the Great Thanksgiving prayers are made for and by the people. And the prayers work even if the priest is distracted or sick because that liturgy is a work of the people. But I still could not take communion from him. I prayed, I spoke with my spiritual director many times. But it was Jim’s spiritual director who freed me from the bondage of my own making. He said calmly: “Jo, you know the Doctrine of Indefectability? And I said “The WHAT?” He pointed me to the doctrine that “The Church will never perish. The Church will never fail in her mission. The Church will not undergo any substantial change in her constitution, doctrine, or worship.” More simply put, this ancient doctrine acknowledges that the Church (and most especially the people who make up the church) make mistakes. And when they do, the Holy Spirit has the power to right the wrongs we do in the name of God and Jesus. Well, that was liberating. But I wanted it to happen right then, and that is not how it works. But I came to accept that in God’s time, the Holy Spirit can and will correct all of our mistakes often made in the Lord’s name.

John’s Gospel message today is full of hope but also full of our responsibility to bear witness to the relationship of Jesus and God the Father and the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is the perfect image of God’s love and she will bear witness to the unity of love between the Father and Jesus.² And the Holy Spirit points to Jesus Christ as the living word and helps us know and live into the real truth of God. There is a religious upheaval happening right now, as it has happened many times in history all the way back to the disciples and the first Church. But remember that the one constant is Jesus as the truth and the way. In the Collect for the commemoration of the 17th century priest and theologian Richard Hooker we pray in hope: “help us seek unity not for the sake of compromise but for the sake of comprehension”,³ and from our prayer book, the Prayer

for the Church on page 816 of the BCP reads: “where [the Church] is corrupt, purify it; where it is in error, direct it; where in anything it is amiss, reform it. Where it is right, strengthen it.”

In the midst of trying to define a Christian, I heard the lament of my dear sweet husband, commenting on someone who is doing good works that Christians are called to do – someone who is definitely on the road, looking for the way, but has taken the wrong turn. The person Jim encountered was embracing and sharing not just misinformation but disinformation. Clearly this person had drunk the Koolaid and had not only swallowed raging rumors about those who do not believe as he does, conspiracy theories so outrageous as to be totally unbelievable, but is still gulping them down, and thirsting for more. Can I love this lost soul on the way? Yes, but it is really hard.

So let me end by saying what Fred Buechner said about Christians: “A Christian isn’t necessarily any nicer than anybody else. Just better informed.”

It is my prayer that, with the help of the Holy Spirit, we more fully live in the hope and love of our God that we know through Jesus, and that we love all those we meet on the way, on the road with fellow followers who are seeking the truth. And may we open our hearts to love all God’s people and share with them the truth of God’s love. Because our love for all becomes real only when we speak it; love exists first before we speak it, but it is only by speaking it does it become a reality.⁴

Risen Lord, may it be so. Amen.

¹ My impression of Philadelphia is quite different than the men at Dr. Henkel's office. I know Philadelphia through the eyes of my colleagues at KYW, the preeminent broadcasters in the area, known for their honest, verifiable, and well-respected news gathering. I know Philadelphia for its Museum of Art, City Hall, the Sheraton Hotel, the Benjamin Franklin Bridge, Independence Hall, the Betsy Ross House, the Liberty Bell, and, of course, the best Philly Cheese Steak sandwiches ever. I am familiar with President Kennedy's speech in Philadelphia on October 30, 1963 about the kind of America that he wanted for his family and all Americans. He was there just a few weeks before his assassination November 22, 1963. The 1964 Philadelphia race riot in late August that took place in the predominantly black neighborhoods of North Philadelphia began with the police – black and white officers – dragged a black woman out of her car at an intersection and arrested her. Surely there were more reasons that sparked the violent reaction of the black community, but that is how it began. But civil unrest was rampant in large cities all over our country in the 60's, but we were insulated from it in NE Louisiana. So I cannot claim to understand racial tension in the 60's. In the fall of 1963, I had just met Jim Popham in Algebra class at Neville High School in a sleepy southern town of 80,000 people in Northeast Louisiana. We would go on to become best friends sitting next to each other on the front row at our graduation. Our class of 264 was the last all white class. So, of course, we didn't know much about racial unrest.

² C. Andrew Doyle, Bishop of Texas writes a blog on the readings for each Sunday: See <http://hitchhikingthebible.blogspot.com/2014/05/easter-5a-may-18-2014.html>.

³ From Lesser Feasts and Fasts, and <http://lectionarypage.net/LesserFF/Nov/Hooker.html>

⁴ Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking, a seeker's ABC*.