

## *Greetings from Maryville: Moving to a New Community and Preaching*

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Advent One of last year, I moved from a congregation with 3,000 members in midtown Atlanta to a parish of 400 in a small town in East Tennessee. I had never even heard of the place until a few months earlier. The nominating committee conjured up names out of a computer, mine being one of them. We then chatted on the phone, a baffling conversation because I assumed Maryville was way over near Nashville; the woman from Maryville, on the other hand, felt pretty strongly that her home was really twenty miles from Knoxville. Once we got *that* straight, we sent each other paper. We visited back and forth. They called me. I said yes.

Which is how I found myself, on my fiftieth birthday, sitting on the back pew of a strange church, watching an unfamiliar bishop baptize and confirm people whom I did not know from Adam's housecats and then being introduced as their new preacher. I have been trying to figure out what in Jesus' name I am supposed to be about here ever since.

I believe I was "sent" to this place. I said my prayers. The church said theirs. Through the grace of God, I have come to delightful new life in a new faith community, and they have a new pastor. Now what?

For instance, what about preaching? A lot of you all get "sent" one way or the other and thus move all the time. You probably resettle gracefully and swing immediately into effective preaching with sensitivity and gusto. But here are some issues that have come up in my first year in Maryville which may ring a bell for a couple of you.

*1. What do you do when you are sent to be the preaching voice of a community you barely know? Are you the "guest" preacher for a good while? Realistically, I think so. As I mentioned, the day I arrived the bishop was baptizing and confirming, as clergy have been doing in this parish for seventy-five years. The gospel did not come up in the U-Haul with me from Atlanta. Paul had already planted and Apollos had watered and several other preachers had weeded and fertilized. Not only that, the community garden seems to be quite capable of spreading the good news around itself.*

I believe my job is to somehow graft my gifts to the Good News that is already living and healing and confronting here. And the gospel here— thanks to the endless possibilities of the incarnated Word — is different from the gospel back in Atlanta. I am discovering — rather than just mouthing — the gospel truth that I should have grasped in seminary if not in third grade Sunday School when we learned about "MatthewMarkLukeandJohn." We really do need different gospels to enliven different communities.

Reading through Acts and the letters to the churches is useful. The sophisticated Athenians and the beguiled Galatians and the sleepyheads in Thessalonica and those crazy guys in Corinth were co-creators with Paul of new expressions of good news. Through the grace of God, that always will happen in Christian community, even here with these people and me. So I am looking for ways to celebrate differences and not

defend against them.

Conversations with people about the dynamics of preaching in the life of the congregation have been useful. In the Episcopal crowd, we tend to pay inordinate attention to the ramifications of liturgical changes, and we do not think much at all about the changes in preaching. My predecessor (who is a good guy, thanks be to God, since he still lives in town) was at St. Andrew's for twenty-two years, preaching week in and week out. We talked recently about how the gospel came alive for him in the act of preaching and, from his point of view, for the congregation. That conversation has helped me imagine the inner life of this parish — past and present — much more vividly.

2. *How do you get the new priest, or more accurately the long-awaited completion of the calling process, out of the center of the picture?* The congregation and I both sometimes seem to assume that my call was the important one, and whew, thank heavens that call business is over. As a friend in another congregation wrote to me, "Will we ever move beyond yearning for somebody to show up and tell us what to do? Even the illusion is such a vast relief."

Of course, we all know how long *that* illusion will last. And the larger truth is that my call to St. Andrew's is only one of 400 calls that are in process right now in our congregation. Surely Jesus constantly is calling everybody's name — to sustain us in our present life and ministry or to lure us into some new adventure.

I knew that on lots of levels at my old parish. As a preacher, I counted heavily on the reality of Jesus' continually calling all of us, just as he first called Peter and James and John and Mary Magdalene and then kept up running conversations with all of them. Since I knew people's names, too, and was privy to some of their soul conversations, it was natural for me to preach out of the richness of all the connections and struggles for connections among that crowd and Jesus.

There is such profound and blessed *immediacy* available in preaching with a known community. Their stories and the stories of biblical figures and the stories of the saints down through the ages all swished around in my soul and colored each other and came alive through each other. The lections read like parish stories to me and *vice versa*. I have baptized Sarah and Abraham's longed for son. I have listened to Nicodemus struggle with what on earth this whole thing is about. I watched in awe of Matthew's vocational courage. I knew Martha and Mary and Lazarus on a first name basis. I was really annoyed by Jeremiah. All in all, most liveliness in my preaching derives from making the connections — at least in my preparation, though usually not blatantly in the sermon — between the text and persons in the parish and in the community.

To recapture that immediacy with this new congregation, my temptation is to rush intimacy. *Maybe* that would be okay in some places, but not in East Tennessee. I am "stifling myself," as Archie Bunker used to say to Edith, and trying not to assume yet that I have been given the gifts of really knowing much about these people and their peculiar journeys toward God.

So. There are 400 calls going on in this parish on any given day, and my call is not the most important one. As I move slowly into this community, my wonderment in prayer and preaching, to God and to my fellow sojourners, is, Who is being sent Where to be and do What?

3. Which brings me to the trickiest part. *How do you preach a corporate vision of the gospel when the faith and strength and prayers of the individual are valued and trusted a great deal more than any corporate reality?* A privatistic self-understanding is commonplace everywhere in our culture, and it is certainly powerful in this region of mountain people, small farmers, and high tech industry gypsies. (My long held suspicion that God has a weird sense of humor has been confirmed by my call to a community crammed full of engineers including, yes, several rocket scientists.) There seems to be a strong and helpful “I” here in most people; I don’t hear so much “we.” On a daily basis, it is hard to remember that there are not just 400 calls in our congregation. There is ultimately One Call, One Faith, One Baptism, as the baptismal liturgy in the Book of Common Prayer proclaims.

Somehow we need to start nurturing, and I need to start helping us articulate, a vision of shared mission. That would be new for this congregation, according to them. Part of why they asked me to come be with them is a strongly stated desire to claim a corporate identity and to belong to each other and to God more openly. And yet... we all resist the deeper, more complex tugs of community.

I think one reason we trust individualized faith more than the faith community is that we have confused the words “individual” and “personal.” Christian life is intensely personal; Christian life is not remotely individual. Our faith is always *caught* from each other like some life-giving virus, some “good” cold. We even catch faith from strangers across time and space.

My teacher here is Carlyle Marney and a ragtag bunch of Atlanta priests. Actually, even the way that they are teaching me — though I have never met most of them and Dr. Marney is long dead — is helping me understand the irreducibly corporate nature of our faith. Dr. Marney did a clergy conference with the Diocese of Atlanta in the seventies. Somebody happened to tape the informal conference sessions. Somebody else happened to give me a copy a decade later. Now, another decade after receiving the tapes, I am listening to and learning through casual interchanges among nameless clergy pastoring in small towns like my new home. They are my mentors.

As a start to a stronger, more trusting corporate identity I want to help other people remember and claim their own experiences of Christian formation through long ago Sunday school teachers, neighbors, friends, colleagues, books, even tapes and videos of strangers. Each of us is already surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses who have been for us the Body of Christ and who can lead us into understanding our own lives as part of that so mystical and so earthy reality.

4. While on the subject of depth community issues, *How do you preach about money?* How do you move through the privacy hedge around the intimate secrets of money and use of such? We are almost literal about the right hand not knowing what the left hand is doing or giving or needing. How anybody uses money — or land, which is the same thing here — is nobody else’s business. In addition, we think that the dynamics of county (or regional or national or international) economics is abstract and remote and has very little to do with our faith community.

Since Jesus is relentless in his interest in money and economics and talks about both in uncomfortably intimate terms, I am stuck talking a lot about money, too. The discipline of preaching with the lections is most helpful here. My hunch is that money

and trust and community are all tangled up together. I think I need to be imagining “us” and “money” and “trust” a lot. Somewhere in the gordian-knotted-up wad of those three words are our God-given, grace-filled gifts for each other and the world.

5. Speaking of economics, I find myself in a strange quandary. *How do you preach in good times?* One of the most confusing changes for me is the switch from a big city with heartbreakingly obvious poverty of body and spirit to my new home. Blount County has a long history of racial justice work through the Presbyterians and Maryville College (which was integrated long before the Civil War), the Society of Friends, and others. The county has one of the strongest economies in Tennessee with superb schools. Crime is low. Civility is high. Kindness is common in the grocery store line, one of my key barometers for quality of life. How do you celebrate goodness without becoming self-satisfied? How do you rejoice together that things are pretty good right here and right now and yet keep your eyes and hearts open to the pain of the world?

6. Which leads me to the final question for all preachers in all Christian communities: *How do you preach to send?* What kind of corporate vision of being “sent” is possible when people trust the faith of the individual, go to church primarily to sustain that individual faith, and are amused or infuriated by the skewed picture of evangelism in our culture? How do you hold up Missioning vs. Marketing?

As is common among mainline traditions, we are mildly alarmed by the notion of going out as identified Christians. I was already leery of people who use “Christian” as an adjective, e.g., Christian school, Christian therapist, Christian rock and roll band, but in East Tennessee we have taken the name of Christ to dizzying heights in pursuit of the sale. Karl Barth would have a heart attack.

In our neck of the woods, the public declaration of one’s allegiance to Jesus is understood by many — without apology, irony, or cynicism as far as I can tell — to be a source of economic blessing. God will bless you and your business if you associate your endeavors with God’s holy name. So across the street from our church in Maryville, there is a mom and pop tire store. From about the season of Epiphany through Pentecost, the big sign in front read:

Jesus is Risen!!

Spring Tire Sale!!

This fall we were queried:

Do You Know Jesus?

Back to School Brake Special!!

Down the road, so help me, another sign says:

Best Tan in Town!

New Bulbs!!

Jesus Saves!!!

My congregation thinks that is what proclaiming the Kingdom of God outside the church doors looks like. And they don’t like it.

Of course, the church herself is not immune to the idol of God as corporate booster. Last winter, a church four blocks away from us put up this sign:

1997 — A GREAT YEAR

21 NEW MEMBERS

11 SAVED  
9 BAPTIZED

Every day when I drove by, I would brood over what happened to the one hapless new member who, according to my math, was neither saved nor baptized. Then I would forget about how tacky this other church was and go back to the much more dignified question of how to get more people to join *my* church.

Frankly, in my own small way, I am quite capable of making the sale for Jesus; I tend to think in terms of some mission project that will generate community. And of course, it *is* wonderful to have a mission project; the temptation is to make the survival of the institution into the mission of the church. It is also problematic to point to the Habitat House or the clothes closet or trip to Haiti and say, “here is the church’s mission,” and then kind of check “mission” off the to-do list. It is satisfyingly efficient just to fold mission into the busy work of maintaining the institutional church. And then, too, the mission that Jesus had in mind — the proclamation of the Kingdom of God — always brings trouble, big trouble.

I go back to Dr. Marney who spoke these words twenty-five years ago:

We have used the divinity of the Lord Christ to escape his humanity. And so the regional heresy where you will live out your lives is docetic gnosticism of the worst kind. God has been used to so destroy the Incarnation that not even the Lord Jesus can get at us. Indeed, we have lost him as Jew and we have lost him as man, to keep that terrible cat off our back. Because if we let him get to us, he really does get to us. And then we will have to live in our potential, which is to say, we will have to be like him. That’s a terrible secret.

My guess is that the unhappy divisions that we are experiencing in the Church these days — I think of the chaos churned up around biblical authority and human sexuality in particular — are directly related to our squeamishness with the Incarnation. Jesus is sort of God Junior floating above the rest of us, so we argue about the Bible and leave Jesus out of it. Isn’t that odd? Jesus is lost.

Of course we know where to look for him. We can find him where he has always been found — strolling among the least and the lost, weeping with the brokenhearted, and hanging out with the despised and rejected. But in this day of Christian certitude and church triumphalism, I think we also need to look for him in the critique of the church. Jesus *got into it* with church people who take themselves, the church, and scripture too seriously and do not take Emanuel, God-in-the-Flesh nearly seriously enough.

Back to my original question: What in Jesus’ name am I doing here? Really, what in Jesus’ name are any of us doing in any Christian community? Looking for some Body we can trust, I imagine. We are looking for Jesus, who, as Dr. Marney told that weary, wary crowd of clergy gathered around him so many years ago, is our real name. That is the terrible secret we share. My real name is Jesus, Beloved Child of God, and so is yours. And darn it, *so is theirs*, whoever your “they” may be. Isn’t that an awe-full mess? We are stuck with each other.

And isn’t “Jesus” some name for all of us to live into? That might be worth sending some folks out to spread the Word.