

Proper 16, Year C

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[Isaiah 58:9b-14](#)[Psalm 103:1-8](#)[Hebrews 12:18-29](#)[Luke 13:10-17](#)**Looking In and Looking Out**

If you've been at St. Paul's long enough, there's a chance you remember a day when the altar was pushed up against the wall. Back then the priest would celebrate the Eucharist with his back to the people. It wasn't until the liturgical renewal of the 20th century, culminating in Vatican II in the 1960s, which had a big impact on churches of all denominations, that churches pulled their altars away from the wall and the priests got behind the altar to face the people like we do today. The reason for it seems to make sense: it's simply more inviting and inclusive of the people gathered. Many find it off-putting that the priest would celebrate with his back to the people, as if there's something secret going on that the people didn't need to see, something really only for the priest. There was a rudeness about it. "We'll just wait here, Father, while you do that special work up there. Don't mind us."

I can understand why it changed. But there was actually a pretty good rationale for facing the wall. Though it may have appeared so, it wasn't about excluding the congregation from the action—far from it. It was actually about facing east, the direction of the rising sun, from whence the Messiah might return, and facing that direction as a group. The people, then, were facing God, and the priest stood before them as focal point and representative of the whole, facing God in the same direction with them. Not a bad rationale, if you ask me.

Now, don't get too excited, ye fervent traditionalists, I'm not advocating pushing the altar back against the wall. I like the way the altar is right now just fine, but I understand the old way. I mention it only because I've read several things floating around about this recently in churchy circles. The east-facing altar is making something of a comeback in some places. It's the kind of thing church folks (clergy in particular) love to argue about. All of us have our own opinions about liturgy, be it the direction of the altar, or the style of vestments, or whether or not to use incense. Deciding what the "right" way is can be a way of metaphorically excommunicating those who do it "wrong."

Many people get understandably tired of this kind of thing in the Church. This kind of insular arguing has turned off a whole generation of church-goers. Who cares, right? Does God really care if you're facing east or west? Whether you use incense or not? Whether you use screens and a rock band, or stained glass and a choir and organ? (Don't worry, Liliia, I'm just trying to make a point. God clearly loves choir and organ more.) Truth is the church can become the place for the seemingly silliest, navel-gazing kind of conflicts. And the navel-gazing doesn't begin and end with how we worship. Vestries and church boards of all type and manner, committees and groups in churches can become hotbeds of conflict over what must seem ridiculous to the outside observer. St. Paul's, in the past, has known conflict, as many of us remember. This isn't foreign to us; we're as guilty as anyone else. And a lot of the conflict comes during times when we, or any other church, become preoccupied with internal rather than external matters.

Our readings today, particularly the reading from Isaiah, and the reading from Luke, address this issue. Both readings make a contrast between internal and external matters. Let's look at the passage from Isaiah which is from a larger discussion about

worship and fasting. The people in Isaiah's time are actually quite a religious lot. They are regularly worshipping, regularly fasting. They are good pious folks. Yet, they've still got problems, and they can't figure out why God doesn't notice their great piety. They're doing it all right! The altar's facing the right way, they've got the incense going, the organ is cranked up to 11. Yet, something's missing. Their lot in life remains the same. They don't seem to feel God's presence. What's the problem?

Notice that Isaiah writes, "If you remove the yoke from among you, the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil." While they may be pious, it sounds like there's something going on within the community that does not align itself with the way God wishes for us to live. Isaiah later goes on to talk about, "going your own ways, serving your own interests, or pursuing your own affairs." Pointing fingers. Being self-serving. Worrying too much about our own selfish desires, and not enough about others. A few verses earlier in the reading, the part we did not hear, the people ask God, "Why do we fast, but you do not see? Why humble ourselves, but you do not notice?" "Look," God answers, "you serve your own interests on your fast day, and oppress all your workers. Look, you fast only to quarrel and to fight and to strike with a wicked fist. Such fasting as you do today will not make your voice heard on high." This is about a community focused too deeply on its own individual desires, its own parochial arguments, yet it's a community that is not offering food to the hungry and satisfying the needs of the afflicted. Too much looking in without noticing the needs all around.

There's a story told by Peter Gomes about the British army officer Ernest Gordon who was a POW captured on the River Kwai in World War II. Gordon and his fellow officers in the Japanese prison camp were, explains Gomes,

initially very religious, reading their Bibles, praying, singing hymns, witnessing, and testifying to their faith. They were hoping and expecting that God would reward them and fortify them for their faith by freeing them or at least mitigating their captivity. God didn't deliver, however, and the men became both disillusioned and angry. They gave up on the outward display of their faith; but after a while, as the men began tending to the needs of their fellows—caring for them, protecting the weaker ones and in some cases dying for one another—they began to discern something of a spirit of God in their midst. They discovered that religion was not what you believed but what you did for others when it seemed that you could do nothing at all. Compassion gave them their inner strength, and their inner strength gave them compassion.¹

Whatever your circumstances in life, going to church, reading your Bible, doing all the pious things will never in themselves bring you satisfaction. The Church is not an end in itself, but a means to an end. Spiritual practice only sets up the right conditions for growth to occur. The internal matters of worship and the running of the church do matter. It's just that the practices we engage in should reflect the values we actually live out. What we do in here only matters if it reflects what we do out there. What we do out there comes to have a deeper, more transcendent meaning when empowered by what we do in here.

I'm struck by the line in Gomes' story that says, "They discovered that religion was not what you believed but what you did for others when it seemed that you could do nothing at all." Remember how St. Paul's, in fact our whole diocese, came together to serve not just ourselves after the experience of Katrina, but to serve the community around us? Remember how somehow helping others gave us the strength to meet our own challenges? People all around South Louisiana are on the road to discovering this right now, if they don't know it already, as victims of the flooding help each other rebuild. We

¹ Peter Gomes, "Animating Illustrations," *Homiletics*, accessed August 20, 2016, http://www.homileticonline.com/subscriber/illustration_search.asp?keywords=outward&imageField2.x=0&imageField2.y=0.

do well to remember it as we begin to reach out to them just as others once reached out to us. We're at our best when we're balancing the looking out and the looking in.

Isaiah bears this experience out when he tells his hearers that balancing an inward orientation towards with an outward orientation gives the worship we do in church purpose and meaning, and ultimately gives life purpose and meaning: "your light shall rise in the darkness and your gloom be like the noonday. The Lord will guide you continually, and satisfy your needs in parched places, and make your bones strong; and you shall be like a watered garden, like a spring of water, whose waters never fail. Your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt; you shall raise up the foundations of many generations; you shall be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to live in."

Sometimes we come to think that things in life have to be all or nothing. It's either got to be all this or all that. Episcopalians (because we have it all right, of course) have always been about the middle way. Even though I grew up Southern Baptist I found the Episcopal tradition attractive when I discovered it because I've always been attracted to moderate, balanced approaches. I believe that the truth isn't the property of one side or the other, but lies somewhere in the middle between the extremes. Episcopalians call this the *via media*, the "middle way," and it's deeply embedded in our heritage, and that of the wider Christian tradition, too. It's not about getting rid of the things we argue over in our more insular moments. Does it matter if the altar's against the wall or not? Does it matter if we have drums and guitars or organ and choir? Does it matter if we use wine or grape juice? It matters if what our practices mean for us come to mean something about the way we live in relationship to others.

WORKS CITED

Gomes, Peter. "Animating Illustrations." *Homiletics*. Accessed August 20, 2016. http://www.homileticsonline.com/subscriber/illustration_search.asp?keywords=outward&imageField2.x=0&imageField2.y=0.