

**Easter 6A - St. David's
April 27, 2008**

Last Saturday, 18 members of the St. David's community gathered in St. Mark's Cathedral in Salt Lake City, along with hundreds of other Episcopalians and Salt Lake dignitaries, to take part in the Eucharist in which our Presiding Bishop, Katharine Jefferts Schori presided. That Eucharist was followed by the Bishop's speech about the place of religion in public life. So in the span of two hours, we had the great opportunity to hear the Bishop preach and teach.

Though the sermon Bishop Katharine gave that morning was very different than the speech that followed the service, there was at least one common theme between them. Saturday was the feast day of Alphege, the 11th century Archbishop of Canterbury, who after being captured by the Danes, refused to allow a ransom to be collected from his already overburdened people for his release. That decision cost him his life. Using the example of Alphege, Bishop Katharine urged us during her sermon to move beyond our fears so that we too can stand up against injustice that surrounds us in this world. She encouraged us to follow the example of not just Alphege, but Oscar Romero,

Ghandi, Martin Luther King, Jr. and our own previous Bishop Paul Jones. All of these world changers were told by their contemporaries that they were overstepping their boundaries, that they were called to be church leaders, not secular ones. Against the opposition of their own religious traditions, they each became the change they wanted to bring about in the world.

Then in her speech later in the day, Bishop Katharine suggested that if we are to live into our religious tradition, we have no choice but to be politically engaged. In both cases, Bishop Katharine made it clear that it is her firm belief that as Christians, we are called to be in the world and not isolated from it.

Our Presiding Bishop's understanding of the relationship between religious folk and secular society echoes Paul's actions in today's first reading from Acts. Paul was a Pharasaic Jew and as such, he was taught that secular culture would pollute his soul. He was taught that even though they had to live IN the society that surrounded them, they were not to be OF it. But somewhere along the way, Paul changed his mind. Instead of living a cloistered religious life, Paul starts traveling all over hill and dale, immersing himself in the activities of every

Gentile culture he can find. His actions in today's reading represent the epitome of his new theological understanding. Paul travels to the Areopagus, the very centerpiece of Greek philosophy, culture and worldview. Speaking in this mecca of philosophical and political thought in the first century sounds much like a Presiding Bishop in the 21st century giving a speech in the center of the kingdom of Deseret.

What changed Paul's mind? What moved him to jump into the middle of the symbolic center of a culture he previously thought was radically dangerous and would pollute him? In a similar way, why is it that our Presiding Bishop urges us to be OF the world in which we live, while other contemporary religious leaders tell us to segregate ourselves from the dangers of society, lest we become just as secular?

Whether it is Paul or us, I would argue that what separates us so completely from one another on this issue is the starting point of our theology. For some, faith *begins* in the knowledge that God is a transcendent being, separate from the world. In modern times, this has been articulated most completely by Karl Barth, the famous German theologian who died in 1968. In his classic work, *Church Dogmatics*, Barth says, "God is a separate, distinct being, autonomous

from humanity. He is the One who stands above us...above the human spirit..He is in no way established IN us, in no way corresponds to a human disposition and possibility, but who is in every sense established in Himself...He who from on high has condescended to us...”

Donald Bloesch, a contemporary evangelical theologian states the position again for a new generation. “I contend,” he says, “that the true God is essentially independent of the world...God needs man only in relation to the realization of his plan for the world. An authentically evangelical theology,” he states, “...will side with the transcendent God of the prophets over the immanent God of the mystics.”

This model of the relationship between the world and God is very much the traditional view expressed in classic western religious thought. If we were to image it, it would look something like this.

(Draw) There is God, up there somewhere, and there is us, down here.

The only way we get to God is to die and go to that other plane of existence, that which we have called heaven. There is a radical discontinuity between us and God. Karl Barth tells us that this is the way it all operates, now and forever, with one exception. That

exception occurred 2000 years ago when Jesus broke through the natural separation of God and humans to link us together, one time.

When the relationship between God and earth is understood in this fashion, we can readily see why many churches teach that we must separate ourselves from the non-Christian or non religious world. Because God is not in the world, the world is a nasty and dangerous place. Therefore, the job of a church becomes to segregate us from the danger and become a beacon of hope in a fallen and broken world. As images of God, we too must separate ourselves from the secular parts of humanity.

This also helps us understand why Presiding Bishop Katharine's urging for us to be caretakers of the earth is such a difficult sell in some circles. Because God is separate from the earth as the Holy other, the earth has nothing to do with God, so being concerned about it is a waste of time and energy. Instead, for classic western religious thinkers, we should spend our time not worrying about the Earth, but rather getting to God.

All that sounds logical enough, and there are plenty of scriptural references in the Hebrew Bible to support this viewpoint. Apparently

early in Paul's life, he too understood God as a separate force in the cosmos. But then, we get to today. Just moments ago, you heard Connie read to us the words of Paul, words that originally came from the Greek poet Epimenides.

“From one ancestor God made all nations to inhabit the whole earth, and God allotted the times of their existence and the boundaries of the places where they would live, so that they would search for God and perhaps grope for God and find God--though indeed God is *not far* from each one of us. For it is 'In God that we live and move and have our being'.”

No longer does Paul buy into the transcendent image of God he grew up understanding. What changed his mind? His conversion on the road to Damascus. Paul never knew the man Jesus, but he discovered first hand the risen Christ. He felt Christ's presence with him so intensely that it changed his entire understanding of the relationship between God and us. He came to a sudden revelation that God is not just far away from us, but is the one within whom we live and move and have our being.

Paul says that we are not just close to God, but that we actually live *within* God. Some have suggested that Paul was being loose with

his theology so that he could link Greek thought with his own. But he says the same thing in a slightly different way to a very different audience in Colossae. “Christ himself is before all things, and in Christ all things hold together. There is only one Christ: he is everything and *he is in everything.*”

If Christ is in everything, and if God is the one in whom we live, then that means, that God is not far away, but right here with us. In fact, it means that we and all of the cosmos, including the earth, has to be part of God. If we were to image Paul’s new understanding of the relationship between the world and God, it would look like this. (Draw)

Does the fact that Paul comes to this new understanding of God make it true? Of course not. Most of us can find plenty to disagree with in Pauline theology. But then we turn to today’s Gospel. Jesus knows he is about to physically depart the earth. And what does he tell the disciples? “I will ask the Father, and he will give you another *Advocate, to be with you forever.* This is the Spirit of truth...You know him, because *he abides with you and he will be IN you.*” There it is again. Apparently, at least from the viewpoint of the author of the Gospel of John, Jesus too believes that God is present with us in this

world.

For those who understand our relationship with God in *this* fashion, engagement with the world is not only something we *can* do, but what we must do. If God is present with the world, why would we not participate in this world on every level? And if God is present everywhere, we can do nothing less than care for every aspect of this world, whether that be humanity or the rest of creation. As images of a God who is present in all the universe, we too must be present in all the universe. And hence Paul's call to us today and the Presiding Bishop's call to us last week, to engage the world everywhere.

The truth however, is that despite Paul and Jesus's understanding, most religious folk in the world today continue to view God and humanity through the lens of classic Western theology. I realized that again last weekend right after hearing Bishop Katharine's call to us to engage society.

Your intrepid St. David's group decided to do just that. So we jettisoned our little bag lunches and headed off into the culture surrounding us. In this case we chose to eat at Squatters, a local eatery and brew pub, noted for their social activism and conscience,

as well as their ability to offer their employees full benefits and a living wage. But no sooner had I walked in the door in my clericals that I realized I was not in Kansas anymore. Some uneasy shifting of people in their seats and the deathly stares I received reminded me that many still believe that a minister's place is in a church, separate and distinct from the rest of secular society, especially the part of society gathering in a bar.

The predominance of transcendent God theology in our world today is seen across the religious spectrum. Perhaps it is most visible in the huge home school movement in this country, much of which has occurred because parents have chosen to keep their children isolated from the ills and bad teachings of the secular world. We also saw it highlighted for us here in Page a few years ago when the movie *The Passion of the Christ* was released. I'll never forget Pastor Marty Micale down the street noting in his column in the Chronicle that he was going to see this movie and it would be the first time he had ventured into a movie theater in 20 years.

If we believe like Jesus, like Paul, like our Presiding Bishop, that we are called to engage with the world, and we want to convince

anyone else that they should do the same, we must start here. Like Paul, each of us need to have a conversion experience. We need to move from an understanding of God as the Holy Other to the knowledge that God is the one within whom we live and move and have our being.

The same holds true if we are ever going to have any success conversing with someone who wants to know why it is always Earth Day at St. David's. No one is ever going to put their heart and soul into caring for the earth if they believe that God is totally distinct and separate from it and that our goal is to leave this world and be with God somewhere else. But if Paul and Jesus were right about the world being contained within God, how can we choose any path other than protecting it?

Once we do venture out into the real world, lurking about in bars and theaters, we learn something else. When we meet people where they are, when we listen to their experiences of God, what most often happens is that our OWN understanding of God develops and grows. In fact, that is exactly how Christian dogma developed. It is this wonderful combination of Hebrew thought, Greek and Hellenistic

philosophy, oriental teachings, Roman ideas, and North African thinking, among others. Christian thought developed and matured over many centuries. There is no such thing as “pure Christianity,” it continues to evolve today. It is when we stop searching, when we try to put Christianity in a box separate from the world, that it stops functioning for us as a pathway to God, and stops speaking to us in today’s world . Churches do not grow in vacuums, they die in them.

Paul learned from the great philosophers of Greece at the Areopagus. But what Paul gave them would eventually change the way the world understood God, influencing the greatest philosophers of the day. Instead of 25,000 gods to cover all the possibilities, they heard about a single Godhead who was in all things as the Stoics said, and was also distinct from the universe as the Epicureans said. Suddenly, this understanding of a monotheistic God had the power to combine the world’s two greatest philosophies into one, and go way beyond either.

Not many people that day caught on to what Paul had accomplished among the great thinkers of the day. Indeed, not many realize it today. But some did. Those who were open enough to

consider that there is always more to learn were changed forever. May all of us remember that this is what Evangelism is all about. Our job is to invite others to discover God's reality for themselves. May all of us continue to grow in the love and knowledge of that God, a God in whom we live and move and have our being. Amen.