

February 12, 2012
Epiphany VI, Year B
2 Kings 5:1-14
1 Corinthians, 9:24-27
Mark, 1:40-45

✠ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Getting attention for birthdays and anniversaries makes me feel awkward and uncomfortable, but I'm trying to get over myself. When Susan – our Senior Warden – called me and said, possibly with some trepidation, that we needed to recognize my 15th anniversary as rector, I didn't protest... much. I know that I need to give and receive. I know that it's important to mark milestones, which are a moment to look backward and forward.

Last week I discovered a You Tube video with about 19 million views, a viral sensation. It shows 22 year old Christian and rapper Jefferson Bethke reciting his four minute poem "Why I Hate Religion, But Love Jesus." It's first line: "What if I told you Jesus came to abolish religion?"

Bethke points out that the most opposition to Jesus came from religious people. Sounding as harsh and angry as Jesus when he's attacking scribes and Pharisees, Bethke rips religion:

If Jesus came to your church would they actually let him in...
Jesus and religion are on opposite spectrum
See one's the work of God, but one's a man made invention
See one is the cure, but the other's the infection
See because religion says do, Jesus says done
Religion says slave, Jesus says son
Religion puts you in bondage, while Jesus sets you free
Religion makes you blind, but Jesus makes you see

It reminds me of an epiphany I had, a moment when Jesus helped me see. I was almost Bethke's age, sitting in a comparative religion class. The teacher was talking about a 19th century, German church historian, Adolf von Harnack, who had argued that the church had not distorted the gospel, but had totally perverted it. I liked that a lot. It excited me, and it helped me to take Jesus more seriously. A couple years later, I was baptized.

Although I'm now a company man – the suit is black flannel instead of gray, I still have some rage against the church, that we get hung up about the wrong things and do things to separate ourselves and other people from God, that we use Jesus to justify meanness and injustice and separation.

In the verses immediately before today's gospel, Jesus healed a person on the Sabbath, and in today's gospel he touched a leper, an ostracized man, someone religion directed to avoid, to reject. It's religion used to be mean to someone. I like that Jesus

broke religious rules to heal and to be close to someone. God cares for people more than he cares for rules. Jesus sees the big picture and transcends our rules and customs.

I've learned how hard it is to keep the main thing the main thing. I was baptized in 1988, went off to seminary in '90, and became the assistant here in '93, and in some ways I am sure that I had greater clarity about Jesus and what's important when I was baptized than when I was ordained. After a while, a lot of secondary and tertiary things seem more important than they really are. It's easy for me, and for most people, to be distracted from what's most important: our relationship with God. Most of us take on a lot of unnecessary baggage in being a disciple of Jesus. Religion puts you in bondage, while Jesus sets you free.

I have found renewal in repeatedly coming back to why I became a Christian: Jesus is where I found meaning in life and sanity in an unhinged world and strength to live more fully.

In my years here, I've learned again and again that life is all about relationships. I suppose that I first learned it in seminary when I studied Trinitarian theology, which helped me understand that God is love and so God in himself is relationship. We are made in God's image, and we emerge and grow and become whole from our relationships. In seminary, I got it intellectually, but here – in this parish – it's moving from my head to my heart.

In the gospels, illness is being less than whole, and Jesus' healing is about making us whole. Just before today's gospel, Jesus healed Peter's mother-in-law by taking her hand and lifting her up. Mark described Jesus lifting her up with the same verb he used to describe the resurrection, Jesus being lifted up. For Mark, healing and resurrection are the same thing. Healing and resurrection are life.

In today's gospel, Jesus healed the leper. Lepers lived apart from every else. They were excluded, rejected, alone. Jesus restored him to the community, not only benefitting the leper and making him whole, but also making the community whole. It's the model of Christian community, reaching out to the lost or seeking and welcoming and accepting, and both the community and the leper healing.

Jesus strengthened relationships, facilitated intimacy, connected people – the things that give life. Jesus said, "I came so that you may have life and have it abundantly." (John 10:10) That's what Jesus is all about. That's the purpose of the church. That's the purpose of following Jesus.

I've experienced much life here over the years, and if we've got life in us, we're growing – not staying static, but developing. I've learned, gained new capacities, re-evaluated things, let go of some things and taken on new ones. I've new roles. I came as a priest, but I am not also a husband and father. In many ways I'm now a much a different person than when I arrived. I understand it as transformation in Christ. For me, it's healing, becoming more whole.

The healing of the leper happened just after Peter had interrupted Jesus praying. A crowd had been looking for Jesus, and Peter was unable to keep still in the crowd's anxiety and agitation. Peter went and disturbed Jesus. Peter wanted Jesus to please the crowd. That's the way people become important – pleasing the crowd. But Jesus said, "No, let's go on to the next town to preach." Jesus annoyed his disciples and disappointed the crowd, and instead of increasing his popularity, Jesus healed a forgotten, excluded leper. Jesus followed his own sense of God's call to him.

I get Peter. I started ministry thinking that my role, like Peter, was to satisfy people. It's ministry as customer service. That's where I started. But Jesus shows us repeatedly in his ministry that leadership often involves disappointing people and following one's own sense of God's call. If each of us is going to be true to our own sense of God's call, what God wants from us, then we're going to have differences, but we can hold together. We can accept differences, even irreconcilable differences, and stay together.

When I came here, I assumed that conflict was a problem, something to be avoided. I've learned that conflict and differences exist wherever two or more are gathered together, and if we have the courage to look inside ourselves, we'll see that we've even got conflicts within ourselves. Instead of avoiding these, we need to acknowledge and accept conflicts and differences and recognize that's what makes us creative. It means learning to live with uncertainty and confusion, to refrain from making everything black and white, to be more accepting and less judging.

I've seen here that when we are open about our differences and discuss them openly and directly, we become more resilient and solid, less fearful and anxious. Through periods of conflict and change, our parish family has become stronger and more gospel-focused. The most upset person in the room has less control over the community; there's less reactivity, less worrying about greasing the squeaky wheel. Our responsibility is to offer care to one another and to work with one another; it is not to agree with one another.

I came here with a fairly rigid idea of priesthood, assuming that Father knows best, that my role required providing lots of order and stability and direction, and I've learned that often I need to get out of the way, that responsibility for ministry needs to be widely shared, that there's tons of wisdom and ability here. More and more I see the Holy Spirit most able to work when I don't cling tightly. I recognize more the spiritual value of being able to chillax – that's chill and relax. I've found that a useful word to say to myself – "chillax."

More than ever I appreciate that my primary focus is spiritual growth, or becoming closer to Jesus, or being open to the Spirit, or however you want to describe it. Gandhi said, "You must be the change you want to see in the world." Criticizing and worrying about what's wrong with the world or the church is usually a distraction to avoid our main issue. The main issue: stay focused on Jesus and life in him.

As I look to my next fifteen years, I expect both personally and corporately to develop at evangelizing, at connecting and building community, at impacting people

beyond our doors. Evangelizing, building community, serving people who aren't here -- I don't know how all of that's going to happen or how it'll change me or how it'll change us. But it will, and it'll be difficult. It will take time, and we'll goof up sometimes. I want to be able to tolerate the tension of not knowing and trust the creative process, trust the work of the Holy Spirit.

Although I have these hopes for the future, what's more important is now, trying to be more present, attentive to this moment, to being here and now with you. That's the path to more abundant life. That's the path to enjoyment and appreciation of all the ways God has blessed us. That's the path to a grateful and joyful heart.

I know that Bethke is correct -- the church sometimes gives us religion that is hypocritical, corrupt, petty, annoying, self-righteous, and I hate it, but we need the church, we need the church because we need one another to know Jesus, because we need one another to grow and learn, because we need one another to have life. For being part of this parish family, I thank God, and I thank you.