

*The Essentials*

A Sermon on Acts 19:1-7 by the Rev. Philip Major  
St. Mark's Episcopal Church, Casper, Wyoming - January 8, 2012

A few weeks ago Nancy and I went into St. Mark's own Sign of the Lion shop to do a little Christmas shopping. We found this great t-shirt. On the back it lists the top 10 reasons to be an Episcopalian, contributed by actor and comedian, Robin Williams:

10. No snake handling.
9. You can believe in dinosaurs.
8. Male and female God created them; male and female we ordain them.
7. You don't have to check your brains at the door.
6. Pew aerobics.
5. Church year is color-coded.
4. Free wine on Sunday.
3. All of the pageantry - none of the guilt.
2. You don't have to know how to swim to get baptized.
1. No matter what you believe, there's bound to be at least one other Episcopalian who agrees with you.

Even though this last statement is a bit of an exaggeration, in his own humorous way, Mr. Williams is getting at one of the central pillars of Christian faith as it is expressed in the Anglican tradition and in the Episcopal Church: our understanding of faith is not based on agreement with a specific set of beliefs. We understand faith to be based on what we do together, rather than on what we think together.

Seven or eight years ago a new family joined our church, a mother and her son. The boy sang in our children's choir. After a year or so the mother approached me and said, in confessional tones, "I'm not sure if I can really do this, really be a Christian." I asked what she was concerned about. She replied, "I've tried to read the Bible on my own at home, and it doesn't always make a lot of sense to me." She was convinced that in order to be a faithful, she needed to be able to read the Bible and make sense of it on her own. I think I succeeded in convincing her that this is not the case.

You see even though it's great to work on reading and studying the Bible on your own, we have to remember that none of the letters or books in the Bible was originally intended to be read by individuals. Each of those texts was written for a group of people, usually a group like our congregation here today, a congregation coming together to worship God. This was partly because most people could not read, partly because in those centuries before the printing press there were very few copies of the scriptures, and partly because almost all of the religious activities in ancient times were group, not individual activities. Likewise, for faithful people in our time it's important to know scripture and study scripture, but we do this together, as a church.

So if, as Robin Williams and most of the Anglican tradition is saying, it's not essential to agree to a specific set of beliefs in order to be faithful, and if, as I told this woman in our church, it's not essential to read the Bible on your own in order to be faithful, what is really essential in order to be faithful? This question is at the heart of Paul's conversation with the twelve disciples from Ephesus in chapter 19 of the Acts of the Apostles.

This part of the book of Acts tells several stories about people who are *almost* true disciples. These are stories of people who are missing an essential part of what it means to be faithful. In the previous chapter there is the story of Apollos, a very eloquent, well-educated man who is running around teaching with lots of religious fervor. Apollos' problem is he has no strong connection to either the Jewish synagogue or to one of Paul's new gatherings of Christ-following gentiles. Apollos becomes a true disciple through his involvement with the church in Ephesus. Apollos appears to have stayed with Paul's

community in Ephesus and received intensive instruction from Priscilla and Aquila, a husband and wife team who serve as the leaders of the church in Ephesus.

In chapter 19 we read the story of these twelve sort of generic disciples hanging out in the busy seaport of Ephesus. Due to their situation we know that they are not attending a synagogue. It seems pretty likely that they were disciples of John the Baptist until John was killed. Now they are looking for a new teacher.

Paul would fit that role pretty well, but Paul doesn't want these twelve wandering theologians to simply shift from being disciples of John the Baptist to being disciples of Paul. Paul sees that they are missing an essential piece of what it means to be a faithful disciple. They get so wrapped up in being a disciple of a particular teacher they've kind of forgotten the main point, being a disciple of Jesus Christ. Perhaps they like the excitement that comes with hanging around a dynamic character like John the Baptist. But Paul knows giving all of our attention to human teachers keeps us from giving our attention to God.

The essential parts of faithfulness are right here in the book of Acts. First, give your attention to God, and take care to not get too obsessed with human teachers. Second, be part of the church. The church helps us keep our attention on God. The church is the body of Christ in the world. Worship with your church. Learn scripture with your church. Pray with your church. Work with your church.

You don't have to think all of the right thoughts or be an expert on scripture to be faithful. Being faithful is about giving our attention to God in prayer together. It's about studying God's word in scripture together. It's about doing God's work in the world together. Being faithful is about what we do together as a church.

One moment from this past week at St. Mark's was a vivid illustration for me of what is most essential for Jesus' disciples. It happened on Friday. On Friday afternoon we celebrated the life of Glenn David Dale, a young man who had attended St. Mark's as a child. Glenn was killed in a collision with a large truck on the morning of January 2<sup>nd</sup>. With over 180 people in attendance the service lasted well over an hour.

After the service Glenn's family and friends entered our parish hall, recently cleaned by our sexton and beautifully decorated by members of our parish. Our meals and receptions committee welcomed old friends and and complete strangers with refreshments. As I watched friends and family members surround and care for Glenn's parents, brother and sister I was overwhelmed with the realization of what was happening during this reception. I believe that if this family received any comfort and ministry in the course of the funeral they received at least as much in the course of the reception.

People at the reception, almost all of them complete strangers to St. Mark's Church, were so comfortable they stayed for well over an hour. Our meals and receptions committee stayed right alongside them. As I walked through the parish hall one last time on my way to our 5:30 Epiphany service I noticed that at least 80 people continued their fellowship in the parish hall, supported by five of our members still working away in the kitchen. As we began our worship I realized that in our own ways, the group in the kitchen and parish hall and the group beginning evening worship were in some way doing the same thing: giving their attention to God's work, being God's people in the church.

This day I give thanks for this wonderful gathering of God's people, this community so focused on giving their attention to God, this church so willing to do God's work together. Amen.