

Crazy Christians

Introduction of the Presiding Bishop Elect

preached by the Rector at St. Paul's, Henderson, June 28, 2015

based on "We Need Some Crazy Christians," by the Rt. Rev. Michael B. Curry, at General Convention, July 1, 2012

Lord, take my eyes and see through them. Take my lips and speak through them. Take my soul and set it on fire with love for thee. Amen.

"Bishop Michael Bruce Curry of the Diocese of North Carolina," one of the official announcements read, "has been elected and confirmed as the next presiding bishop of the Episcopal Church. Curry, who will be the first African American to lead the church, was elected [by the Church's House of Bishops at General Convention in Salt Lake City] on the first ballot with 121 of 174 votes."

Some of you know, because you had asked, that Bishop Curry was my personal favorite among the nominees to lead our Church for the next nine years, and now, beginning his term in November, he will do just that. I readily admit that I don't know anything about his administrative leadership style or skills, though the fact that he has ably led the Diocese of North Carolina for the last fifteen years says something, I suppose. But I do know, because I have heard him on numerous occasions, that our new Presiding Bishop-elect has a remarkable gift to convey the story of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, to draw others into that story, and to bring them along to do the work we have been called to do in Jesus' name. In short, Bishop Curry is a preacher.

Though I have heard several of his more recent sermons online, including one from the Episcopal Youth Event that St. Paul's own delegate, shared with many of us as part of his report last summer, the last time I heard Bishop Curry speak in person was when I was visiting General Convention in Indianapolis three year ago. As it turned out, that sermon became one of the highlights of that General Convention, and a rallying cry for much of the Church since, including me. I think it says enough about his vision of the Church, and our call in the Church, that instead of offering a sermon this morning on one of my favorite Gospel passages, or teaching from Paul's letter to the Corinthians, I thought that by way of introducing our Presiding Bishop-elect to you, I'd share a portion of his sermon with you this morning. I won't do it near justice, and you can find the real thing on YouTube, but here goes.

For a text today, I offer these words from Mark 3:19-2: "Then [Jesus] went home; and the crowd came together again, so that they could not even eat. When his family heard it, they went out to restrain him, for people were saying, 'He has gone out of his mind.'"

The King James Version of the Bible translates the concern of Jesus' family for him in these words: "He is beside himself." The old J.B. Phillips New Testament translates it, "People were saying, 'He must be mad!'" But my favorite is from the 1995 Contemporary English Version which says, "When Jesus' family heard what he was doing, they thought he was crazy and went to get him under control."

So, forgive me for saying it this way, but Jesus was, and is, crazy! And those who would follow him, those who would be his disciples, those who would live as, and be the people of the Way, are called and summoned and challenged to be just as crazy as Jesus. So I want to speak on the subject, "We Need Some Crazy Christians."

I don't want to be too quick to judge Jesus' mother and the whole family. They had good reason to be concerned. ...Jesus taught in the Sermon on the Mount: "Do not repay evil for evil or abuse for abuse; but, on the contrary, repay with a blessing." That's crazy. ...Jesus says, "The greatest among you will be your servant." That's crazy.

What the world calls wretched, Jesus calls blessed. Blessed are the poor and the poor in spirit. Blessed are the merciful, the compassionate. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst that God's righteous justice might prevail. Blessed are those who work for peace. Blessed are you when you are persecuted just for trying to love and do what is good. Jesus was crazy. He said, love your enemies, bless those who curse you, pray for those who spitefully use you. He was crazy. He prayed, while folk were killing him, "Father, forgive them; they know not what they do." Now that's crazy.

We need some Christians who are as crazy as the Lord. Crazy enough to love like Jesus, [crazy enough] to give like Jesus, [crazy enough] to forgive like Jesus, [crazy enough] to do justice, [to] love mercy, [to] walk humbly with God – like Jesus. Crazy enough to dare to change the world from the nightmare it often is into something close to the dream that God dreams for it. And for those who would follow him, those who would be his disciples, those who would live as, and be the people of the Way? It might come as a shock, but they are called to craziness.

Let me suggest one example of such a call from the New Testament: Mary of Magdala, Mary Magdalene. For whatever reason, Mary often gets a bum rap. [But] think back to the crucifixion of Jesus. Crucifixion was execution by the Empire for crimes against the state. It was public torture. It was an intentionally brutal means of capital punishment, an execution designed to send a message that revolution and revolutionaries would not be tolerated. If you were a supporter or follower of the person being crucified, it was dangerous to stand too close by during the execution. The rational and sensible thing to do was to go into hiding or exile.

Having said that, let's call the roll of those Jesus called to follow him, let's take the attendance of the apostles at the crucifixion of their Lord. Simon Peter? Absent. James? Absent. Andrew? Absent. Bartholomew? Absent. Thomas? Absent. Judas? Definitely absent. Mary Magdalene? Present and accounted for! That's a disciple!

When the old slaves sang, "Were you there when they crucified my Lord?" there was a woman named Mary who could answer, "I was there!" Now that's crazy!

Now it may not be obvious at first, but we actually have a day to remember crazy Christians. I think we call it All Saints' Day. It's not called "All the Same Day," it's All Saints' Day, because, though they were fallible and mortal, and sinners like the rest of us, when push came to shove the people we honor as saints marched to the beat of a different drummer. [And] in their lifetimes, they made a difference for the Kingdom of God. As you know, we [have] a book to help us commemorate them. We are calling it Holy Women, Holy Men. But we might as well call it, "The Chronicles of Crazy Christians."

... You see, most of these holy women and holy men believed that following Jesus means changing the world from the nightmare it often is, into the dream that God intends. And sometimes that means marching to the beat of a different drummer. Sometimes that means caring, when it is tempting to care less. [Sometimes that means] standing up, when others sit down. Sometimes it means speaking up, when others shut up. Sometimes it means being different – even being crazy.

...[And] we need some crazy Christians. Sane, sanitized Christianity is killing us. That may have worked once upon a time, but it won't carry the Gospel anymore. We need some crazy Christians like Mary Magdalene..., Christians crazy enough to believe that God is real, and that Jesus lives. [Christians] crazy enough to follow the radical way of the Gospel. [Christians] crazy enough to believe that the love of God, is greater than all the powers of evil and death. [Christians] crazy enough to believe, as Dr. King often said, that though "the moral arc of the universe is long, it bends toward justice." We need some Christians crazy enough to believe that children don't have to go to bed hungry; [Christians crazy enough to believe] that the world doesn't have to be the way it often seems to be; [Christians crazy enough to believe] that there is a way to lay down our swords and shields, down by the riverside; [Christians crazy enough to believe] that as the slaves used to sing, "There's plenty good room in my Father's kingdom,"

because every human being has been created in the image of God, and we are all equally children of God, and meant to be treated as such.

Three years ago, and three weeks before Bishop Curry preached his sermon, I ended my sermon with you from the same Gospel text, with the challenge I will leave with you this morning, the challenge I hope the 27th Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church will help all of us live into in the years ahead: Let us pray that we will all let the madness of Christ take absolute control of us. Amen.