

Third Sunday of Easter, April 15, 2018, Year B

St. Andrew's Anglican Church – Douglas, GA

The Rt. Rev. Neil G. Lebhar - Bishop

Transcribed from The Bishop's message

“Witness”

Well, it is a special privilege to be here with you on this day. John+ showed me pictures a few weeks ago of the space and I just wanted to see it for myself. You have done a remarkable job, bringing it to life; and I want to thank you for all your work, for all your generosity, for all your prayers, it really is an amazing transformation.

Now you have just been through the process of remodeling, and some of you may have been through that process in your own homes. Once upon a time we went through the remodeling of our kitchen and looking back I think it would have been easier for us to move out of the house than to try and live in it while the kitchen was being remodeled. You have had a similar experience – you had to move out in order for this place to be re-done. But it was worth it – it was worth the remodeling. It makes it much more your home, much more a place that you like to bring others. As I said to some of you before hand this is in a sense a small thing, but now there are no distractions here. You don't look around thinking 'what about this floor?' Or 'what about this space?' Or 'how to I kneel for Communion at the rail?' All of those distractions are gone – now the concentration can be on being a worshipping family together. It is no small thing to be in a space that not only brings glory to God, lovely, but it is also no longer distracting. So, congratulations and Glory to God for all that you have done!

Now I need to tell you that in addition to remodeling the space, on the larger picture – God is remodeling His church – particularly in America. Like any remodeling, it is not going to be easy; it is going to be a confusing time, it can be a distracting time, I don't want to get the analogy pushed too far, but I will say this – it will have moments of being very uncomfortable. Why would we have to remodel the way we do church in America? I am not just speaking about Anglican churches – I am speaking about all churches, because the country itself has changed.

We now have a high percentage of what some have called 'post Christians.' I won't go into a full definition of what a 'post Christian' is, but someone who is more aligned with some of the secular values in our culture than with Christian values; not that there aren't still Christian values in our culture – but things have shifted fairly dramatically. I was looking at statistics for Coffee County in 2004, which is a long time ago now. The percentage of people in church on Sunday morning was 22 percent. Now I don't have a more recent statistic, but I can promise you that it has not gotten better. More than 50 percent of our culture is unchurched at this point.

There are two categories of the unchurched: either post-Christians or they are simply not Christians at all – not dedicating their lives on a regular basis to the Lord Jesus. And then, there is another group that are Christians, but for some reason or another – perhaps they were burned in a church conflict or perhaps they just never found a church that works for them, or perhaps there is something about their life or family that they feel ashamed of – or they feel they can't be in church – but when you add the 'post Christian' group and the 'unchurched'

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group together – more than 50 percent of the U.S. is unchurched – meaning that they do not have a church that they are regularly involved with – at all!

Now it is a good thing that this space has been remodeled – because now if you were to bring someone to it – they would not be distracted. They would be focused on worship. They would be focused on hearing God’s Word, being at God’s table and among God’s people. That is a very good thing. But, the remodeling I am talking about for the American church is not a remodeled building. Actually, it is a good thing to have remodeled buildings, but remodeled disciples. We need to be changed - if we are going to reach out to the roughly 75 per cent that are not in church in this area – at a particular time.

How will God remodel us? That is what I want to look at this morning. The answer is that He has to change us into witnesses who understand that we are sent out into the culture. Now, why is that hard? First of all – we are nervous about it – well aware of our failings, fallibilities as believers in Jesus. But secondly, we never had to do that much before, there has always been a desire to share the Gospel with others, but by and large the American culture was formed by people from other countries, coming here with their own church backgrounds. You have Presbyterians from Scotland, and Lutherans originally from Germany and Scandinavia, and Anglicans obviously from England, Catholics from many Catholic countries around the world. And so, when they got to the United States, they simply created their own congregations – and attended. They had the pattern of attending church where they came from and that pattern got passed down from generation to generation – but that pattern is now breaking. That is why so few people are in churches. It used to be that if you had a nice building and a good worship service, and a good preacher – that then people would find you. You might invite someone to church – but they were looking for churches. Most of the people in America are waking up with no expectation on a Sunday morning that they should be in church. They are not even thinking about it. How can we be called into a remodeled lifestyle as believers? That is what we are going to look at briefly this morning.

Look at your Gospel reading – Luke 24: and I encourage you to turn to page 1645 in your Pew Bibles – beginning at verse 36. We are going to go a little bit further. We will start with verse 46. This is the Risen Jesus talking to His disciples, He told them this is what was written “) He told them, *"This is what is written: The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem."* (Luke 24:46-47) That is the core of the Gospel. The death and Resurrection of Jesus; our need to turn around – to repent, and the fact that forgiveness of sins would be offered because He died for us. That Word needs to get out – that has never changed! He goes on to say, *"You are witnesses of these things."* (Luke 24:48) *"I am going to send you what my Father has promised; but stay in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high."* (Luke 24:49) So if we are going to be witnesses, we are going to be sent ones in this culture – first of all we need to be convinced of the Gospel ourselves. (We will say more about that.) And then we need to know that we have got to rely on the Holy Spirit to help us.

Now, see that “sent-ness” in the Acts reading. *“Now a man crippled from birth was being carried to the temple gate called Beautiful, where he was put every day to beg from those going into the temple courts. When he saw Peter and John about to enter, he asked them for money.”* (Acts 3:2-3) Now just think of the dynamics of that for a moment: a man lame from birth. I want you to imagine that you have just given birth to a baby that is never going to walk. Imagine raising that child; imagine all the disappointed hopes; imagine your fears for that child’s future. Crippled as a child; crippled as a young adult; now as an adult who is reduced to begging. Obviously, he has friends – somebody is getting him to the place to beg. But what a life that would be. Think of all the heartbreak there. Peter and John go by – they know they are sent ones and so when they encounter him Peter says, *“I have no silver or gold – but what I do have I give to you. In the Name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth – rise up and walk.”* (Acts 3:6) And then, *“taking him by the right hand, he helped him up, and instantly the man's feet and ankles became strong.”* (Acts 3:7) That healing of a man that people saw every single day, any time they were heading up to the Temple area – creates a dramatic opportunity for Peter to share the Good News. That is what we hear in the passage today. People are wondering what happened. Peter says, *“It is by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified but whom God raised from the dead, that this man stands before you healed.”* (Acts 4:10) *“Jesus is the stone you builders rejected which has become the capstone.”* (Acts 4:11) And then Peter concludes in saying *“Salvation is found in no one else for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved.”* (Acts 4:12)

Now, the first thing I want to do is ask you this question: I want you to search your heart and mind, for the answer. Do you agree with Peter’s statement? *“Salvation is found in no one else for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved.”* (Acts 4:12) Do you really believe that? A pastor in New York named James Keller, who has written a number of books and is well known, says that he questions people, adults who are about to be baptized or who about to become members of his church, he says “what do you think about Jesus?” Generally, they say something like ‘He is my Lord and Savior.’ And then Keller asks the follow up question: “do you think He is the Lord and Savior for everyone?” He says he often gets this response: “well, I know He is my Savior – but maybe God can save people in other ways.” Keller’s response – said gently, ‘you do not know enough to be baptized or to become a member of this church – keep learning!’ Are you convinced that what Peter said is true – *“Salvation is found in no one else for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved.”* (Acts 4:12) If you are not convinced about that – you are not going to tell anyone about Jesus; you are going to let them go on their own paths, you are going to trust that somehow or another God will get ‘em. The Gospel is ALWAYS focused on the reality that Jesus is the only Lord and the only Savior. If you are not there yet – start learning. I might recommend “The Reasons for God” by Tim Keller which may answer a lot of the questions that are preventing you from believing in Him.

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The second thing I want us to note is that this preaching the Gospel starts with a healing. There is about to be a big conference in Jerusalem and we are sending delegates from this diocese and all our dioceses there to join Anglicans from around the world. Our youth delegate is a young lady from a Chinese background named Sarah Mah. Sara arrived at FSU as a non-Christian. Her father is a Muslim and her mother is a Buddhist. She has had virtually no regular contact with the Gospel into her life at all. But when she got to her dorm, freshman year, someone in her dorm invited her to a Bible study. She didn't really know what that would be, but she went along out of curiosity because of the friendliness of the people who invited her. I don't think she understood everything that was happening in the Bible study, but at the end of the study people asked her if there was anything we can be praying for – for you? Sarah who had been quite ill said 'you could pray for me – I am not well.' I don't remember exactly what she was struggling with, but it was serious. And so, the kids gathered around her and prayed that God would heal her and He instantly healed her! Needless to say, the Lord had her attention. Within a few weeks, after studying Jesus, after digging into the Scriptures, after hearing the testimonies of other Christina students, Sarah came to faith and then immediately began to tell her friends, many of whom of Asian background, about the Gospel, and she brought many into the Lord. She is going to be our youth delegate to Jerusalem. Her sharing the Gospel began with her own healing. Do we believe that God can still do that?

I want to close with a challenge, wrapped around a particular idea. We could talk about the needs for physical healing and there are lots in this culture who need physical healing, and I encourage you to be brave and pray for them. He may heal them, or He may not, but it is the right thing to do to pray for them, as scared as you will feel, and see what the Lord does. But, there is a kind of lameness or paralysis that is in our culture or all over the place that we as Christians need to address, and that is where I want to close today. It is called loneliness. The former surgeon General wrote about what he called the loneliness epidemic in America. He said we live in the most technologically connected age in the history of civilization, yet rates of loneliness have doubled since the 1980's. Now think of Jesus addressing loneliness, reaching out to corrupt tax collectors, or women with immoral lifestyles that were isolated, or lepers, or the paralyzed, or widows. There are lots of forms of isolation today. Mother Theresa once said that "the greatest disease in the west today is not TB or leprosy, but in being unwanted, unloved, and uncared for. We can cure physical diseases with medicine, but the only cure for loneliness, despair, and hopelessness is love." She concluded by saying "there is a hunger for love as there is a hunger for God."

So, what would happen for St. Andrew's if you began to pray and think about a primary mission of getting to be with those who are lonely, including the lonely among yourselves. Over 50% of American adults are single. To give you a sense of contrast – in the year I was born, 1950, the number was 22%. We are in a radically lonely and isolated culture. As an experience of loneliness, last summer on sabbatical I went to Texas to be a part of a Christian ministry there. The staff each had their own houses, and they gave me a little house. It was essentially a retreat so they were respecting my desire to be alone, but in general, honestly, throughout my

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life, be it family or work, I am rarely alone. So, I had my own little house, I might go to a meeting with some of the people there – but then I would go back home and turn the key and then spent the rest of the night alone; the rest of the day alone. The first few days I felt “spiritual.” “I am on a retreat – I am alone with God,” But after several days I felt lonelier and lonelier, and thought of people everywhere who were turning keys and locks everyday – with nobody there. One of the wonderful things that happened while I was there was that most every day someone would invite me to a meal in their home, and I discovered the power of coming into somebody’s home and feeling welcome and getting to know them.

One of the things that I have encouraged the diocese to do is reading a book “Surprise the World,” and John is going to be sharing it with leaders here. The subtitle is ‘Five habits of highly missional people.’ One of the key habits – easy to remember – is “EAT.” But eat with someone else – invite them into your home or meet them somewhere. There is something powerful about being at meals together, particularly if you are lonely. We have a Savior who understands loneliness. He was surrounded by people who didn’t understand Him or His mission, and at the end of His life as He was hanging on the cross, not only was He experiencing the loneliness of being away from others and the pain of the cross itself, but for a moment at least He was separated from His Father, at levels we can’t possibly understand. We would have seen a naked man hanging on the cross, but the reality of it from God’s perspective, He was covered or clothed in our sin, and therefore in a broken relationship with the Father, or we could put it this way – we were watching God’s heart breaking on the cross – and hence He cried out “My God, my God – why have You forsaken me?” Jesus went through the ultimate isolation so that we can be in the ultimate relationship with God. Our sin having been covered and forgiven.

So, I want to invite you into a ministry of “witness.” Being WITH others as witnesses of Christ. To love someone is fundamentally to be with them. There is a song – years ago – kind of a weird song called “Love the One You’re With.” Now I don’t recommend exactly the thought of that song - but Stephen Stills was on to something. He knew that you can’t love the people you aren’t with very effectively. You have got to spend time with them – one way or another.

So, I am going to close with this story, and I want it to get into your hearts. It is the story of a student named Robert in a special Ed class with a teacher I know. In the midst of her class she did a little exercise, just for fun – a true false quiz. She said to the class “a banana is yellow.” And they said “True!” She then said, “a dog says ‘meow.’” And the class said “False!” Then she said, “a man can eat breakfast alone.” While I suspect the rest of the class probably said “true” Robert said “false.” So, she tried it again and said, “Robert, a man can eat breakfast alone.” He said “false.” She said – track with me Robert, just for a moment. “A man wakes up in the morning, maybe ahead of his family. Goes downstairs, gets milk out of the refrigerator, gets a box of cereal, pours cereal into the bowl, puts milk on the cereal, sits down at the table and begins to eat. A man can eat breakfast alone.” Robert again said “false.” She said “Robert, why

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do you say that? Robert responded, “No one should ever eat alone!” Robert was on to something. We were made not only for a relationship with God, but with each other.

So, my challenge to you today as a congregation: are you ready to be remodeled? Are you ready to be witnesses sent out into a world that really doesn't know the Lord? Will you ask the Lord Jesus, to teach you new ways to be the church? Will you allow John and others to teach you new ways to be more like Jesus? Will you reach out to the “post Christians” and the unchurched around you? Will you not only invite them into this wonderfully remodeled home, but into your own homes? Ask the Lord, what will it mean for you to be a witness who is practicing “withness?” Take that question home with you – “Am I willing to be a witness who will practice “withness?” At whatever cost it is, and if you are not – work that through with the Lord. Find out where the blocks are to that in your own life and heart in your experience. Are you willing to be a witness practicing “withness?”

So, I want to close with a prayer that is a part of our “Morning Prayer.” Will you bow your heads for prayer? “Lord Jesus Christ, You stretched out your arms on the hard wood of the cross, that everyone might come within the reach of your saving embrace. So, clothes us in your Spirit, that we, reaching forth our hands in love, may bring those who do not know you – to the knowledge and love of you. For the honor of your Name. Amen”