February 1, 2015 – 4th Sunday after Epiphany – Theological Education Sunday

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*May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be always acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.*

In 1999 the General Convention of the Episcopal Church decided that the first Sunday in February each year was “Theological Education Sunday,” and Mother Jean has been kind enough to ask me to speak.

To reuse one of my favorite old jokes, “I’ve suffered for my seminary degree, now it’s your turn.”

I’m not an Episcopalian by birth, I’m an Episcopalian by choice. I’m an Episcopalian because I want to be. Now, there’s a lot I really like about our Church; I don’t think I’d be amiss by saying I love the Episcopal Church. But despite what the poets would have you think, love is NOT blind.

I must admit that one of our … well, foibles, if not failings… is our propensity for “Stained Glass language.” Why say “entryway” when you can say “narthex,” why say “introduction” when you can say “introit,” why say “incense burner” when you can say “thurible.”

And then we come to the word “disciple.” This is an important word; Jesus calls disciples to him, and he commissions them… and through them, us… to make disciples of all people. But what exactly does it mean? Not “what does it mean to be a disciple;” what does the word “disciple” actually MEAN?

Surprisingly, “disciple” does not come from the Greek. I was surprised at this; I thought all our obscure words were Greek. I thought it was a rule. Disciple, however, is a Latin word that means “student”. So I looked up “student” – it’s also a Latin word. So I said to myself, “Self,” I said, why would the Romans have two words for student?” Well, it turns out “disciple” has a more specific meaning – “a student who is expected to share and spread what they are learning.”

It shouldn’t surprise us, really, that we’re called upon to be learners; Jesus is frequently called “rabbi” or “teacher” by both his disciples and by other people. The interesting part, though, is that we are specifically called by the word “disciple” to share and spread what we learn, including that those we make disciples of should also share and spread what they learn.

SO, for a start, we can de-mystify the word “disciple”. When we hear “disciple,” we can substitute “a student who shares and spreads what they learn.” Not bad.

Now, though, we come to the whole “learning” aspect. What is it we’re expected to be students OF?

The Gospels give us plenty to study. First, we must learn about Jesus; who he was, and what he did. Between the four Gospels there’s a lot there. Secondly, we must learn FROM Jesus. He was a teacher; what did he teach? His words are lessons, and we have to study not only what he said, but what it means. And third, we study how to be more like Jesus, because we are called not only to learn, but to be different.

This is a tall order; to learn about Jesus, to learn from Jesus, and to learn to be like Jesus. If we think about it at all we should realize that this is nothing less than a lifetime work; if we study all our lives, we will never learn all there is to know about Jesus, we will never learn all there is to learn from Jesus, and we certainly will never learn to completely be like Jesus.

But that doesn’t mean we aren’t supposed to work on it. When I was in Seminary, one of the most discouraging things I read is the statistic that of people who actually go to Church, only 22% of them do any sort of prayer or study outside of Sunday morning. For most churchgoers, the only theological education they get is that 12 minutes after the Gospel. That’s it.

I have to admit this was extremely demoralizing, and my first impulse was to think “well, phooey, why bother.” Okay, I admit it, “phooey” is not the word that came to mind, but I’m in Church.

But I’ve read all four Gospels and Jesus never ever said this would be easy.

In the Episcopal Church, we say and believe that Baptism is complete and full initiation into the Body of Christ. And it is. The problem is we seem to think that initiation is the last step; in fact, it’s the FIRST. Learning the alphabet is complete and full initiation into learning to read. If a five year old can say the alphabet, we congratulate her or him, and think it’s a great thing. Thirty years later if they still haven’t gone any farther than the alphabet, that’s a problem.

Baptism makes us part of the Church, the Body of Christ in the world. But this is just the beginning, not the end. Jesus gave us the Great Commission, to “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you.”

This is not something passive; this is about getting up out of our chairs… or our pews… and doing. But people often say, “How are we supposed to do that?”

By learning. We are called to be disciples, remember? The key to this is to do exactly what I was talking about earlier; to spend our lives… our entire lives… learning about Jesus, learning from Jesus, and learning to be like Jesus.

This is something that takes genuine, diligent effort. Since joining the Episcopal Church in 1986, I have attended many adult education programs. But after a few years I became dissatisfied; I felt like I was attending first grade over and over. This is a large part of what led me to eventually attend Seminary. I would not trade that experience for anything, but even while I was attending, I kept encountering things that made me say, “Why did I have to go to Seminary to learn this? Why isn’t this being taught to every adult Episcopalian?”

And it’s not always something terribly esoteric, either. In most Episcopal churches, for instance, the altar has been moved out from the wall so the priest faces the people. Well, this isn’t because it’s rude to have your back to somebody; it’s because of a shift in our theology of Eucharist. We no longer think of Christ as “out there somewhere” and we’re all looking beyond the altar; the theology of our 1979 BCP is that Jesus Christ is PRESENT WITH US. That’s why the priest faces both the altar and us; in a perfect world, we’d all be in a circle, and the altar would be at the center of the circle, and Christ is present in the Eucharist there in the middle of us. THAT is why we moved the altar out and the priest faces the people; because Jesus is at the center of our worship. “And remember, I am with you always.”

When I was in grad school for the first time getting my MBA, one of the things they taught us was “Never point out a problem unless you have at least one viable solution.” Sadly, I have to break that teaching. You could very reasonably ask, how are we to accomplish this learning? Well, frankly, to quote Dr. Peter Venkman in “Ghostbusters”… “I have no idea.”

And this is where you… all of you… all of US…come in.

Last week in her sermon, Mother Jean talked about how we, as a congregation, need to discern how Jesus is calling us to follow him. Part of that process needs to be for us to discern how Jesus is calling us to learn.

Because as his disciples, he is commanding us to learn; to learn about him, to learn from him, and to learn to be like him. This learning…. Theological education… isn’t just for priests, or a few chosen members, or some select portion of the congregation. Theological education is an absolutely vital part of being a disciple, and it’s something we are all called upon to participate in.

But nobody can make anybody else do it. Our challenge, then, as a congregation, is to discern what our path of theological education is; how to implement a learning process that will empower each and every one of us to be disciples, and to fulfill Jesus’ command to “make disciples of all nations.” And above all, to make us into a congregation that shows that “disciple” means “a learner who shares and spreads what they learn.”

Together I’m convinced that we can indeed work towards this goal with God’s help.

Amen.