

The Episcopal Church of the Good Shepherd

The Rev. Morgan S. Allen

June 25, 2017

III Pentecost, Matthew 10:24-39

Come Holy Spirit, and enkindle in the hearts of your faithful, the fire of your Love. Amen.

Good morning!

As you may know, this Thursday members of our parish and our Good Shepherd choir will begin their travel to the Czech Republic and to Germany, where they will commemorate the five-hundredth anniversary of Martin Luther tacking his 95 Theses to the Wittenberg church. At the 6:00p service two weeks ago, we commissioned and asked for God's blessings upon their safe and fruitful travel, and, by way of encouraging the same, I invite *your* applause in support of their exciting trip.

Also, this coming Friday Good Shepherd begins a two-month partnership with Saint Paul's Within The Walls of Rome, Italy, about which I will share in greater detail. The oldest non-Catholic congregation in The Eternal City, Saint Paul's began in the 1860s as the itinerant "Grace Chapel," worshipping in various parishioner homes before settling into an abandoned granary outside the city proper. Acknowledged as part of The Protestant Episcopal Church of the United States and led in worship by an Episcopal priest during the succeeding decade, in 1870, when the Vatican ceased governance of Rome, and the new Italian constitution allowed freedom of worship "within the walls," the Vestry of Grace Chapel promptly resolved to petition Stateside friends and institutions for the funding necessary to build a church *inside* the city. Formally chartered by a New York board whose successors continue to provision its ministry, the former Grace Chapel fulfilled their endeavor with the laying of a cornerstone on the feast of Saint Paul: January 25, 1873.

In the years that followed, the parish served a core of Roman residents, while welcoming to worship the travelers and guests only passing through the Italian capital. Following World War I, the rector and congregation "had responsibilities for disbursements to [the many] refugees and orphans"ⁱ left destitute by that war's ravages, and its English-speaking leadership served as a spiritual resource to the American and Allied servicemen still stationed in the city. Late in World War II, Saint Paul's opened as a chaplaincy for American troops, and, in 1944, the quartermaster corps stationed there built from stores of pine boards the pews still in its nave today (a pew project finished in better time than our own here at Good Shepherd, I suspect!).

So, God willing and in two-week segments beginning this July 2, our priests will take turns preaching and presiding on Sunday mornings in Saint Paul's historic setting; supporting their staff and congregation during the weeks between; and resourcing its Joel Nafuma Refugee Center, which, in the spirit of its World War I outreach ministry, now serves refugees displaced from around the Mediterranean's southern rim. While in Rome, we will stay in the rectory apartment of their Rector, the Rev. Austin Rios, a close friend and colleague of mine who will spend his summer on Sabbatical here in the States.

On behalf of all your clergy, please allow me to thank you for this opportunity to participate in the life of our broader Church – a global institution! – and to share the goodwill of Good Shepherd to the brothers and sisters of a far-away altar; thank you for this opportunity to learn and explore the ancient city so central to the story of Jesus and the Christian experience, and, then, to bring back our discoveries to share with you. Indeed, our parishwide theme this fall will be “All Roads Lead To Rome,” and we will explore in depth Paul's letter to the Roman church, as well as that city's historical role in the inheritances of our faith...

...in the meantime, I need to let you know that, of our number, we Allens are – unquestionably – the most country-come-to-town of our internationally-travelling priests. My children flew on a real-live airplane for the first time just a few weeks ago, and none of us had passports [passports?!] until that same trip. Moreover, I (along with B.A. Baracusⁱⁱ) am among the world's worst flyers, and, yet, now we're zooming to Europe, just like some jet-setting, city-slicking fancy people I wouldn't recognize at my own supper table.

Thereby, preparing for an adventure not of the Griswoldian driving tradition, this trip has introduced me to a host of industries I did not know existed, from the gajillion guides and services seeking to “enrich” our time in Rome, to the infinite gadgets available to today's traveler. Of this latter group, I have been especially struck by the number and variety of neck pillows...*neck pillows*...on today's market.

[Now, this is the beginning of a wide turn into that difficult Gospel lesson, so keep tracking with me...]

Even if you're a more veteran air traveler than I (and you almost certainly are), maybe you think of the neck pillow the way I do: a cushioned donut with an open end that one wears around their neck...you know, ergo its name. Well, friends, that traditional form has now been updated with advances in the technology of ergonomics, perhaps most modestly by “The Anaconda” an instrument whose ends overlap under one's chin, providing additional support to the jaw and limiting unsightly snoring and drooling by keeping its user's mouth closed. A little further from the norm, there is the “travel wedge,” a device that looks like the cheese-head hat one would wear to a Green Bay Packers game, but allows one to lean comfortably upon one's own squishy shoulder. Oh, and there are more: there is “The J;” the “Turtle;” and the memory-foam, “Double-Camelback,” to name but a few...but I invite you to linger with me on “The Ostrich” – *The Original Ostrich Pillow* – a device which invites reflection on our civilization's current condition.

At this time, I invite anyone with a smart phone to take out their device – no, really, it’s okay, I’m going to do it, too – and, now, let’s open our internet browser and type into our preferred search engine, “The Original”...[I am a slow phone-typist, so take your time]... “*Ostrich* [o-s-t-r-i-c-h]...Pillow.”ⁱⁱⁱ

My goodness.

Now if you have a phone, have successfully deployed it in this way, and notice that your neighbor is without, I invite you to share an image of what I believe you will have discovered on your little screen, what its manufacturer describes as, “An immersive environment for your [sleep]: anywhere, anytime.” Admittedly, “immersive” is not the first word that comes to my mind when seeking description of this thing.

Now, I don’t mean to offend anyone here who may have paid \$129.95 for an Ostrich, but in the words of Bernie Mac, “C’mon, America!”^{iv} What is wrong with us, that 13 million children in our country live in food-insecure homes, and, yet, this Admiral-Ackbar-looking^v, bulbous ridiculousness can find capital investment and consumer support?! Seriously, now: I believe any honest assessment of our contemporary culture must reconcile existence of The Ostrich in a claim to our “progress.”

[Now, look up because we’ve now finished that wide turn into the church parking lot, and this is our point of entry into this morning’s Gospel text.]

This lesson is among my least favorite in the lectionary cycle. As parcel to what scholars name “The Missionary Discourse,” in this selection from Matthew, Jesus challenges his disciples to recognize their mis-ordered personal priorities and the upside-down-ness of their world’s governing aspirations, and he offers encouragement as his followers prepare for resistance to the Good-News message they will share: “Have no fear [of the discouragers!]...What I say to you in the dark, tell in the light; and what you hear whispered, proclaim from the housetops. Do not fear those who kill [only] the body...Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father...even the hairs of your head are all counted. So do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows.”^{vi}

While this speech has an edge – even the threat of “him who can destroy both soul and body in hell”^{vii} – Jesus seeks to inspire and reassure, and *not* to frighten, and here we note The Original Ostrich Pillow reference #1, recognizing that silliness as a symbol of our culture’s commitment to its own comfort: so fully do we seek our own ease as a primary vocation, that we fail to recognize how absurd our self-centeredness appears to those who propose a different way, specifically, those who propose the way of the Cross.

That intent is an important frame for the warning that follows, as Jesus moves from a generic setting, to a very personal one: “Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; and one’s foes will be members of one’s own household.”^{viii}

See, having sought to inspire his disciples in the face of resistance from strangers, now Jesus steels their hearts for resistance from their intimates, the people they know best and love most, leading us neatly to The Original Ostrich Pillow reference #2: for to choose the way of the Cross as the way of life can set one apart from one's most intimate relationships. I don't know about your family, but if I were to break out and wear one of those flesh-toned lightbulbs on *my* head in the midst of a crowded airplane, my wife and children would deny ever having known me, and measuring the value of a life by the quality of one's service to others, rather than by the comforts we afford for ourselves, is a far more dangerous and divisive commitment than any silly pillow.

In his call to transformation – and be clear: not a call to conflict, but his call to transformation – Jesus speaks a balance of inspiration and warning, of severity and hyperbole, urging us to be strong enough to separate ourselves from civilization's competing momentums, whether in the streets of ancient Rome...the reforming churches of Western Europe...or this familiar aisle of Good Shepherd...choosing the way of the Cross as the way of our life.

In the name of the Crucified King,
Amen.

ⁱ <http://www.stpaulsrome.it/visit-us/history/>. I gleaned this history of Saint Paul's from their website, and from my conversations with their current Rector.

ⁱⁱ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/B._A._Baracus. For more on Mr. Baracus, including his well-known fear of flying.

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://ostrichpillow.com/products/ostrichpillow-original>. My goodness, indeed.

^{iv} Bernie Mac: [gone too soon](#).

^v “[Looking like Admiral Ackbar has never been this comfortable.](#)”

^{vi} Matthew 10:26-31.

^{vii} Mathew 10:28.

^{viii} Matthew 10:34-36.