

**The Fifth Sunday in Lent
Holy Comforter Church
The Rev. John E. Shields
March 21, 2010**

On Thursday, week before last, I attended a workshop for interim clergy offered by the Center of Congregational Health, a division of the School of Pastoral Care, Wake Forest University, Baptist Medical Center. I was the only Episcopalian – there were two United Church of Christ, one Lutheran, and a lot of Baptists. That is just a fact – it is not important.

The title of the workshop was “Keeping Everyone Happy at the Same Time!” -- “Managing Polarities”. Of course, everyone happy at the same time was a bit tongue in cheek.

This work acknowledges that conflict is inevitable in all alive and vital institutions – and that sometimes polarities exist. Polarities are different from conflicts and problems. Unlike problems which can be solved and conflicts which can be resolved, polarities present a different challenge – but they can be managed. What is a polarity: Traditional or Contemporary music; Rite I vs. Rite II.

One interesting quote from that conference: “The presence or absence of conflict is the single biggest predictor of church growth or decline.”

What does that mean? If there is no conflict, nothing is happening. If nothing is happening, decline will set in.

This past Thursday, I was in Burlington meeting with interim clergy from the diocese of North Carolina.

These were only Episcopal clergy meeting with the Canon to the Ordinary, Michael Hunn. Canon Hunn is responsible for clergy deployment and congregational health in our diocese. At this bi-monthly meeting, we all check in and tell about our situation, how our parish is doing, how we are doing, and what is happening in our lives. I always tell them how great you are and what a fine church this is.

Canon Hunn played a short video for us. It was produced by the national church. The essence of the video was how Social Networking is impacting the lives of people.

How people get information today and how they interact with one another is changing at a very rapid pace. While some of us are just now getting the hang of using email – that has become passé for most young people as texting and social networking have evolved and are still evolving.

I know that you are thinking it, so let's go ahead and say it: So what?

These are things that will have vast implications for the church and how we go about our business of being present for Christ in the world. Tools such as Facebook are being discovered as valuable resources for invitation and inclusion.

In our first lesson this morning, the writer of Isaiah says: “Do not consider the former things, or consider the things of old. I am about to do a new thing.”

Have you noticed that sometimes the lessons seem to hit at just the right time? “Do not consider the former things, or consider the things of old. I am about to do a new thing.”

Dr. Fred Horton says that these words from Isaiah are “...the author speaking for God, imagining that the Jews in captivity in Babylon will undergo a new exodus like the exodus from Egypt.”

The writer uses powerful and picturesque language in imagining a new future – “I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert.”

What a great lesson for a church in transition. What a powerful statement of hope and affirmation that God does not abandon his people, but always has a new thing – a thing giving life and joy and vitality,

This text was proclaimed to a people still suffering as exiles in bondage in a foreign land. There was little hope for them in their present situation, yet the prophet proclaims that a drastically changed future awaits them. Not only will they go through the desert to their promised land, but they will make straight in the desert a highway for their God.

Of course there is not an apt comparison between the plight of those held in exile in ancient Babylon and the modern day Christian parish in Charlotte, N.C., known as the Church of the Holy Comforter. Those folk in Babylon were in pretty tough and dire circumstances. Their future did not look bright.

These folk – at Holy Comforter - are standing on the brink of a brand new and bright future. So the present state here is not a desperate one but rather one already alive and energized with promise and activity.

But the one thing that both those ancient Jews and the modern Christians at Holy Comforter have in common is this: God is

about to do a new thing. We don't know exactly what it will be -- but it will be a new thing.

Another thing that we have in common with those folk is this. When the time comes, we'd better be ready for a new thing.

I want to propose to you that one attribute is needed above all others in order to fully benefit from the "new thing" that God is about to do for this parish. That thing is "openness."

You see, as much as we like to imagine and design our future – we can be assured that it will be different than we imagined or planned. I have a little magnet that says, "We plan, God laughs." And how true that is in my life, and I expect that it is true in yours as well.

We need to be open to the possibility that God may have a different plan than the one we have envisioned.

We think that we would like for things to stay the same. In fact we often go to great lengths to preserve the status quo. That is why we often get so upset when change occurs – it upsets our comfort zone – it shakes the status quo.

It is why the Episcopal church has had to struggle over the last several years with changes in the role of women in the church, the move to more modern language in the liturgy, and the church's attempt to minister with justice and compassion in the arenas of racism and human sexuality.

When the church has declared by action and not just words that there are no second-class citizens in the body of Christ – that which we acknowledge in our baptismal theology, that has indeed caused consternation in the body of Christ as we have

wrestled with what does this all mean – how does this new reality become a part of our life and tradition?

We need to be open to the possibility of conflict and polarity and be open to resolution when possible and management when resolution is not a possibility. We must remember that we are saved NOT by what we believe about issues – we are saved by grace. There is a place at God’s table for all.

In this morning’s gospel, Mary anoints the feet of Jesus with a costly perfume, much to the consternation of Judas and probably others as well. This passage – which has parallels in all the gospels – is a foreshadowing of Christ’s death and burial, occurring just before the final journey into Jerusalem.

This is an act so intimate and humble but also extravagant – it angered Judas, who felt the money could be better spent on outreach (though the text says, he was a thief.) It really doesn’t matter – he could have been perfectly serious and said, “This is a waste; the money should be spent helping others.”

Jesus manages the polarity between Judas and Mary by saying “... leave her alone, let her do what she feels needs doing – you will have ample opportunity to help the poor after I am no longer with you.”

Jesus is fully aware that God is about to do a new thing – a thing so incredible that it would change the entire world – a thing so magnificent that millions of people over the centuries have been offered hope, help and healing in his name.

God has indeed done and is doing a new thing. Be open, get ready.