

**“TELLING THE STORY”**  
**Acts 17:22-31; John 14:51-21**  
**The Rev Elizabeth Oettinger**  
**April 27, 2008**

I would like to start this morning with three short vignettes. The first comes from this morning's scripture from the book of Acts: Paul, standing on the philosopher's perch at the aeropagus, a center of law and teaching, a traditional venue for philosophers and poets which was to be heard by the discerning of Athens. Paul was brought to this place, we are told, by a group of Stoic and Epicurean philosophers who probably sought to expose him as a country bumpkin from the hinterlands.

But that didn't happen. Paul rose to the challenge and there preached probably his most famous sermon to the Unknown God. Those whose ancient language skills are better than mine would tell you that this sermon/oration is notable for its language: it's not written in the colloquial Greek Luke the gospel writer uses for conversation among the disciples, phrased to resemble Aramaic, or even the standard koine Greek which is the language of the New Testament. In this one instance, Luke has Paul speaking in purest, most elegant classical Greek, the common language of philosophy for centuries. In images they could understand, in language that made him their peer, Paul preached the gospel of Jesus Christ to the Athens' intelligentsia, and some were indeed converted to Christianity, including a senator, Dionysius, who later became bishop of Athens.

Fast Forward many centuries: it is 9:00 p.m. on a Sunday evening. The great church is lit by 178 candles and pew-end torches. Plainsong chant sung by the choir rises gloriously to fill every corner of the vast stone and wooden building. And between the chants are spoken the simple psalms and prayers of the evening office, the service of compline, a liturgy focused on thanksgiving for the end of this day, and protection and rest through the night to come. The site of this worship? If you guessed a medieval convent or monastery, you're wrong. It's present day St. Mark's Cathedral on Capitol Hill in Seattle. The gathered congregation includes all ages and races, but most notably over half the worshippers on any given Sunday night are young men and women in their 20s and 30s, gay and straight, single and partnered. They fill the cathedral for this old quiet service of nighttime blessing. Its haunting melodies and lovely liturgy provide for them a counterpoint to their hectic lives. They come for the stillness, for the grace of blessing, for the smell of old wood and beeswax that connect them to something far beyond themselves in time and space.

Shift again. Same time frame, but now the setting is Trinity United Church of Christ on the south side of Chicago. Trinity and its pastor Jeremiah Wright have been much in the news lately. How many of you saw the Bill Moyers interview last night. Trinity's motto is that it is a church unashamedly black and unapologetically Christian, a church completely focused around the spiritual, social, and economic welfare of the African-American community. It's worth a trip to their website to see the number and variety of their programs, all of them tailored to reach, to empower, to celebrate black history, black spirituality, black culture while addressing the particular social and economic needs of that population. Trinity is not a church for everyone; though all are welcome, they are welcome as partners in this church's singular mission, and that

singularity of purpose and outlook are both the source of Trinity's strength and its controversy.

So... Paul at the Aeropagus, compline service at St. Mark's, and the ministries of Trinity UCC: how are these three connected? I found myself this week thinking about the church and how it intersects with the world. Paul's speech at the aeropagus begs the question of just how much culture defines or refines our telling of the gospel story? Trinity UCC in Chicago is the best, most compelling example I can think of of the church deliberately pitching its voice and worship to a very specific audience and culture, and creating a powerful witness out of that cultural particularity. Compline at St. Mark's represents the opposite end of the worship spectrum: for those who come to this service, worship draws its power from complete dis-engagement from any contemporary culture: old rhythms, archaic liturgy, an hour separated from the world for healing and restoration.

It's not my intention this morning to argue that one or the other of these worship traditions is better or worse than the other, more authentic or less authentic, so if you're expecting judgment here, you're going to be disappointed. I chose these two very different approaches to worship, to being church today because both have integrity; both draw well from what we would call traditional church constituencies; and interestingly, both are also well populated, in fact are over-populated statistically speaking with younger adults: 20-somethings to young 30s. Standing these two, so-different worship traditions side by side offers an opportunity for me to ask you some basic questions about the church and worship, about where the church is going in the future and why. The reason for these questions is partly because it's good for you to think consciously about what function worship plays in your life. But I think all of us are also aware that the liberal church denominations, our United Church of Christ along with others, are in what sometimes looks to be a life or death struggle to engage new generations. Our young adults, those raised in our churches, like many raised in this church, like my own daughters, young adults who had a good experience of church when they were growing up, they aren't coming back to the church, not even when they settle down, begin to raise families. So I have three questions for you to ponder about the church and its worship life.

First question: to what extent does or should the church "go courting" new members? Where is the line between telling the gospel story in language that is accessible and engaging and turning the church of Jesus Christ into just one more focus-group driven, overly-packaged and marketed commodity? For example, the Disney corporation has a management school, and they run church management seminars, claiming that churches are most basically just a different type of entertainment venue. Is entertainment our business? These mega-churches springing up across the landscape, they're not shy about formatting the gospel in a package of deliberately-paced multi-media entertainment. Are we being overly fastidious to refuse to look in that direction? Or are we protecting something real?

Which ties into the second question: do we want the church to look like the world around it, or do we want it to be deliberately different. New churches are not being built with stained glass windows and pews for the most part: auditorium seating and chancels that look and work like empty stages that can be set, configured and decorated in endless ways are the norm. We're told the people are more comfortable coming into a familiar setting, that the church's churchy look is off-putting. Now, In my life, I've seen wonderful worship done in all kinds of spaces, but what

does the church give up when we move away from physical spaces that say, this is a different place from anywhere else? Will that transition reinvigorate the church's worship life or make church just one more place like any other?

Finally, several years ago, I was at an Episcopal church on a Wednesday morning. I happened to look into the chapel, and there was the priest performing the 10:00 a.m. eucharist. But he was alone in the church; there were no other worshippers. I have held that image to me for years, because it can be read two different ways. It can be the image of a dying institution, too proud to change, unable to preach the gospel of new life in Christ in a way that touches real people. On the other hand, the same image can be read as one of fidelity: that the church of Jesus Christ is what it is, and people can come or not, our brand of faith can be fashionable or not, and still the church will remain itself, unwilling to pander just to fill the pews.

Now I know that's a sort of grim image with which to leave you. I don't think we're there yet, and the vitality of worship in places as diverse as Trinity and St. Marks tells me that the church is capable of finding significant ways to continue to create a bridge between everyday life and the things of God. But I think it's important for us as individuals, for us as churches, to think through the options available to us, to pick and choose carefully, to know what we want our worship to be and really work at how we get there, and God willing we will continue to be one of those places where the gospel story is told, faithful and fresh for a new generation. Thanks be to God. Amen.

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