

THE EPISCOPAL CHURCH IN MAINE
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Sermon by the Rt. Rev. Stephen T. Lane, Ninth Bishop of Maine

Ephesians 2:19-22; Matthew 28:16-20 (The Summer Day by Mary Oliver)

The greatest truth about us, as both the Letter to the Ephesians and Mary Oliver tell us, is that we are children of God, made in God's image, and called into God's mission of restoration and renewal. The world is infused with the glory and the wonder of God's presence. We churchy types sometimes call that the Incarnation, but - however we understand it - it is the deep truth of life.

In the Gospel according to Matthew, Jesus states the truth a little differently. "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me..." Well, yes... because the world is already all God's. All that is is rooted in God, and Jesus is God incarnate.

Then Jesus says, "Go... and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them..., and teaching them to obey all I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always..." Some of those disciples, as we know, went. We have a record of their journeys and their ministries. And, some doubted... and probably didn't go anywhere at all.

To be created by God is to be blessed with the freedom to express your own nature - to be fully a grasshopper - or a human being. And to be human is to be blessed with the freedom to choose: to believe or to doubt, to go or to stay. The question for all of us is "...what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?"

Those of us who've been part of The Episcopal Church for while - or who have experienced other communities of faith in the United States - probably remember a time when participation in the church wasn't all that demanding. We went to church to worship God, to be part of a community, a fellowship, to be nurtured in our spiritual lives. We contributed a little money to pay the priest, took part in some sort of mission project, and went home. The notion that we were supposed to be the ones who "go," that we were the evangelists and missionaries, was not a notion we thought much about or would have accepted.

But now - seemingly overnight - the world has changed. Now we talk about chaos theory and the butterfly effect. Now we know that the primary metaphor isn't the individual, but the community, the organic whole. Now we talk about Ubuntu - I am because we are. Identity is formed in context. Meaning is formed in relationship. We are the Body of Christ.

Now the notion of communities of faith who stand apart from the larger community is a non-sequitur. Now the mission field is not the congregation, but the neighborhood. Networks link people with a shared passion together across the globe. What you and I believe is tested daily against what others believe or don't believe. Now the world is impatient with little groups who withdraw to do their own thing without reference to the lives of people around them. Now we are the ones who are expected to go.

Except... except... at a deep level this has always been true for Christians. "But you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. You... are the dwelling place of God." Our primary identity is that of being members of God's household, created in God's image, joined to Christ in baptism and sent to serve God's world. Our call is to use our wild and precious lives for the sake of the swan and the bear and the grasshopper and the rest of God's world.

I personally find all this incredibly challenging. How on earth did I ever fall into this vocation? How will I ever find a way to offer myself in the service of the One who made the world, the One who created me, the One who lives in me?

In a sense, I guess, I don't have a choice. This is God's world, and God is on the move. The world is changing, and I can't stop it. Moreover, it seems that God is behind the change; that God is not satisfied with the world as it has been, with the structures and institutions we have created. God is, as God always is, creating a new heaven and a new earth. I can complain about it... or I can go. (Or, perhaps, I'll do some of both.)

Jesus said, "...remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age." The One who is sending us is also the One who goes with us. The One who is sending us is also the One who will meet us when we get where he is going. The One who is sending us is also the One who will never abandon us, never leave us alone - even if we die, even if he dies. The foundation upon which we are built is so firm it can never be shaken.

My dear brothers and sisters, I invite you today to go. Go on the adventure to which Christ is calling you. Bring your gifts and skills, your stories, your doubts, your fears, your wounds, your hopes and dreams, and tell the story of your life in Christ. Hear the good news and tell your own. Be healed and be a healer. Seek Christ in every face and show Christ in yours. Hear the pleas for justice and be an advocate for every human being. Worship God and be the place where God lives. Seek after God and rest in God's presence.

God has given you your one wild and precious life. With Jesus as your Companion, share it with the world. Amen.