

THE EPISCOPAL CHURCH IN MAINE  
198<sup>th</sup> Annual Convention 28 October 2017 Bangor, Maine  
Sermon by the Rt. Rev. Stephen T. Lane, Ninth Bishop of Maine

John 15:17-27

Today we celebrate the Feast of St Simon and St Jude: Simon the Zealot, either a member of one of the factions of Zealots before his conversion, or a man zealous for the Gospel. And Jude, also known as Thaddeus, who has long been regarded as the patron of lost or desperate causes, although why that is so is unclear. The tradition holds that both Simon and Jude were apostles to Persia and were martyred, hence the color red, while an early church document records that both died peacefully in Greece. Go figure...

I was ordained to the transitional diaconate 39 years ago today on this feast, the patron of lost causes being noted by my bishop as he ordained me. I was also ordained at the height of Christendom in The Episcopal Church. 1978 was the high water mark in terms of attendance in The Episcopal Church, and I have never participated in the life of this church when it was not marked, in some ways, by decline.

What's important about Simon and Jude is the fact that, one way or another, they were outsiders. Their devotion to Christ marked them as "aliens in a strange land," as persons whose Christian identity did not fit comfortably with the surrounding culture. They did not belong to the world. They belonged to Christ, and the world hated them for that. Christ came to transform the world, to overcome the world, and the world has hated Christ's call to another way.

That's where, I think, we find ourselves as the church today. Like the first days of the church, we exist on the margins of society. Although nearly half of Americans claim to be Christian, only about 10% of Americans are in church on any given Sunday and only about 30% have any current religious affiliation. 25% of Americans say they have no religious belief or affiliation, and 8% of formerly practicing Christians say they are "done" with religion.

More importantly, much of what passes for Christianity today seems to have little relationship to the love of God as revealed in Jesus Christ. The airwaves are full of harsh and condemnatory words from Christians about neighbors and strangers - words that Jesus would certainly rebuke. As our Presiding Bishop said at the recent meeting of The

Executive Council, "If it's not about the love of God, it's not Christianity. If doesn't look like Jesus, it's not Christianity."

He also said, "While it may be tempting to despair and search for ways to return to a church that Episcopalians believe existed in the past," if the church concentrates on making and forming disciples who truly live the way of Jesus, "we won't have time to worry about average Sunday attendance; that will take care of itself."

"If we continue to navel gaze, then we won't survive, and probably shouldn't," he said. "If our concern is being the church of the 1950s, maintaining an institutional reality for the sake of the institution, maybe we don't need to continue."

But, if Episcopalians are concerned about keeping Jesus at the center of their lives, then "that's a church that has a reason to exist and will have a future."

The Way of Jesus has never been a supporter of current culture or government. The Way of Jesus has never been captured by the Republican Party or the Democratic Party or any political group, old or new. The Way of Jesus is not aligned with the NRA or the ACLU or, even, with the holy, catholic Church. The Way of Jesus has always been moving toward the creation of a new heaven and a new earth. As the Psalmist put it, God's rule "has no frontier." All of us are invited to follow the One whose very being is an offense to the way things are.

We are invited now to stand out from the culture, to stand for the Way things are supposed to be, rather than the way they are. We are invited to trust in the presence and the leading of the Advocate, the Spirit of God who is here, right here, right now, and to testify to the Good News of God in Christ.

Testifying requires us to be out there, to be among our neighbors, to actually know our neighbors, to be seen and heard as voices for the love of God, as followers of Jesus. That's the work the lies before us.

It may seem like a lost cause, but the love of God is never exhausted. It is here, right here, right now. May we claim the high calling that is ours in Jesus, and may we raise our voices, wherever we are, in proclaiming the love of God.

*Amen.*