

“I am the vine, you are the branches; abide in me and you will bear much fruit.” John 15:5

Vine & Branches

from St. Elizabeth's Episcopal Church, 720 N. King Street, Honolulu, HI 96817 • Phone (808) 845-2112

Weekly Edition
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20 Years Later

Yesterday marked 20 years since the horrific attack on 9/11. Since that time, our nation has engaged in two wars, in Afghanistan and Iraq, spent trillions of dollars and lost thousands of military lives and hundreds of thousands of innocent civilian lives.

These wars began with a “born again” Christian as our President and have ended with a devout Roman Catholic President.

And both the Evangelical and the Roman Catholic vowed to never forget, never forgive and to retaliate without mercy against any and all acts of aggression.

All of which makes our gospel today so crucial. Because today's gospel asks the central question of our faith: who do we say Jesus is? Is he a radical revolutionary supporting guerrilla war against Roman occupation?

Is he a “head in the clouds” spiritual leader teaching us to muddle through in this world until we die and can get into heaven? Or is he the fullness of God in our midst?

Coaxing and cajoling and challenging us to rethink what this life, and how we live it, is all about?

Jesus is about to tell us, in his explosive confrontation with Peter, what the difference is between human religion and God's dream for humanity.

It's the difference between our best thinking — and God's best thinking. It's perhaps the most crucial conversation in the entire Gospel.

Not just then, but today too. Because we live in a world drowning in human religion. Whether it's civil religion that worships the economy or significant swaths of what passes for Christianity — human religion is perhaps the most dangerous invention ever created. Worse than nerve gas. Worse than the bomb.

Human religion is about human control pretending to have God's blessing. Which is a most dangerous combination. ISIS and Fascism and Nationalism are all human religions. Dedicated to pitting one group against another.

Christianity becomes a human religion when we say that Jesus died not only for us, but instead of us.

Rather than coming to see that Jesus indeed died for us, but precisely so that we too may learn how to die. To ourselves. To our best thinking.

To our love affair with controlling people, places and things. And it's human religion that Peter has in mind when he confesses Jesus as the Messiah. Peter knows the word “Messiah.”

But he completely misses the meaning! He's thinking power and prestige and glory. And Jesus confronts this thinking with an anger and a rejection seen nowhere else in all of the gospels.

“Jesus utterly rejects the thinking that says religion is something we do — rather than something we are. Religion as ‘something we do’ creates people who prefer the security of ritual and magic and the clubroom, to the insecurity” of mercy and kindness and grace. Jennings, *The Insurrection of the Crucified*, 127, modified.



“Get behind me Satan!” Because this kind of thinking is indeed Satanic. It seeks to replace mercy and forgiveness and grace that can only be born out of suffering and surrender, with the privilege and power and prestige that come from looking out for number one.

Peter, like me, wants to lead Jesus, rather than follow him. I try to lead Jesus whenever I secretly whisper to myself that it’s naive to love our enemies.

To forgive wrongs. To refuse to kill. To welcome the stranger. I try to lead Jesus when I use every trick in the book to tame the unpredictably wild message of the gospel.

When I spend my time feathering my own comfortable nest. When the bum at the corner is dismissed by me as that bum at the corner, rather than acknowledged as a beloved child of God. And Jesus is having none of it!

Instead, he tells us loud and clear, “get behind me! Follow me to a place that you cannot imagine.”

A place where you “jump first, for only then will the net appear.” Jesus doesn’t make these demands only on his inner circle, folks like the clergy or monks or nuns!

Because while he chews out Peter in private, when it’s time to help us see what God’s true dream is for all of us, he brings in the crowd, gathering us all in tight, as he explains. It’s about the cross.

Another badly misunderstood word that we have used and abused over the centuries.

Taking up our cross isn’t about Lenten sacrifices of chocolate or red wine.

Nor inventing ways to suffer. And it certainly doesn’t mean that if you’re in an abusive relationship, you stay. If you’re in an abusive relationship, leave!

Taking up the cross means to take the side of the poor and the marginalized.

To surrender our obsessions with controlling people, places and things, on a daily and sometimes hourly basis,. It means embracing the power of non-violence.

And the frightening challenge that non-violence creates. To place my body over yours as the club swings down.

It means rejecting the jingoistic hyperbole that is even now closing our borders and denying basic human dignity to our sisters and brothers, solely to protect the privileges and wealth we have come to enjoy.

Privileges and wealth exploited from the very people and cultures we now so fervently bar from our shores.

This is the difference between human religion and God’s dream for humanity.

We create religions that categorize and criminalize. But Jesus insists that God’s dream for humanity is that we rediscover that we are each and every one of us sisters and brothers of one God.

Who is the source of every slice of bread. Of every cup of cold water. Because, nothing in this world his MINE. It’s all God’s.

So that everything belongs to everyone. A truth many of our island people know, to the great chagrin of most westerners.

But isn’t that precisely what Jesus is saying today? “If any want to be my disciples, let them deny themselves, and take up their cross and follow me.”

The price of following Jesus is the price of giving away our life. “But here’s the thing. We tend to think that life is something you go out and get. Or earn. Or buy. Or win. But it turns out that life, is like love!

It can’t be won or earned or bought. It can only be given away. And the more you give away, the more you have.” David Lose, modified.

It’s a truth discovered by every person who has ever traveled to some distant land with the intention of “helping the less fortunate.”

Every one of them returns with the joy of discovering that in seeking to give, one receives immeasurably in return.

It’s a life of subtraction. Subtracting my need to be the most important person in the room.

Subtracting my need to be in charge. Subtracting my compulsion to achieve security and safety.

And as we subtract these things — something begins to happen. The contentment that eludes us as we chase after security is graciously given — once we surrender the chase.

The peace we so desperately try to obtain through controlling others blossoms — the moment I let go of control.

Yesterday marked 20 years after the horrific attack on September 11.

And I have asked before and will ask again: What might have been if our born again Christian President had done what only a few were willing to do?

That instead of seeking revenge, had stood on that rubble pile and said to the attackers: “We forgive you. We will suffer this injury. This loss. This death.

As a nation, in this moment in history, we will embrace the foolishness of God, and refuse retaliation.”

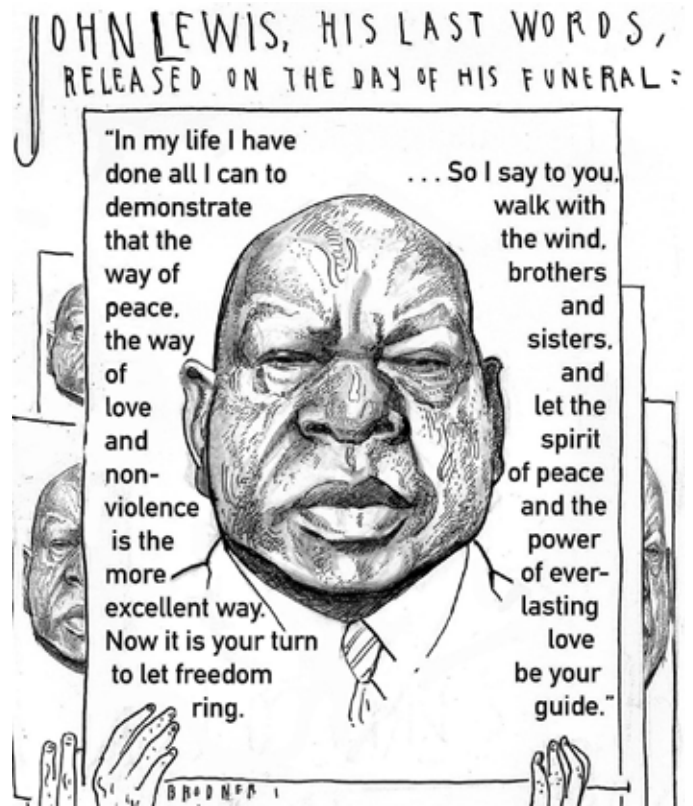
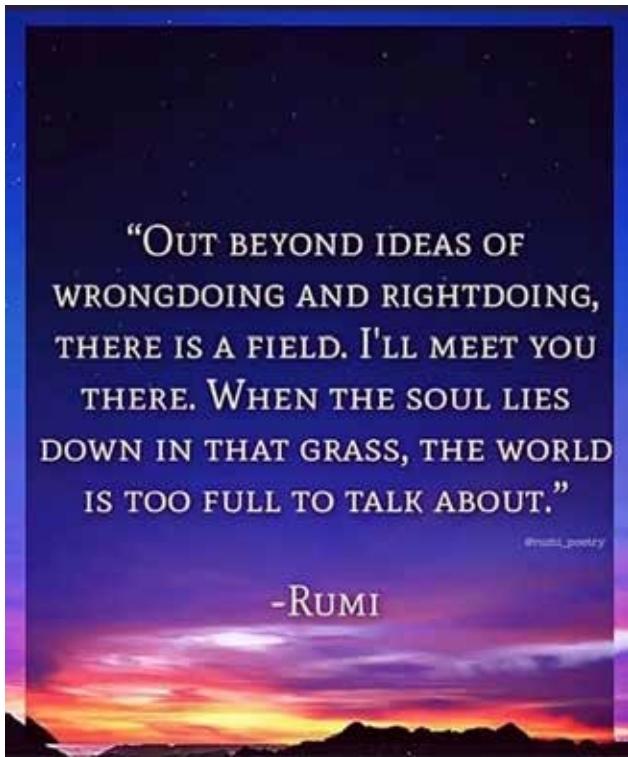
Most will say: “That’s completely naïve!” “Foolish, wishful thinking, and probably suicidal too!”

All true. It is as naïve and foolish and suicidal as the God who delivers us by dying at our hands.

And yet I wonder, if we had reacted as Christians, where we might be today? As a nation? As a world?

+amen

Quoteable Quotes from Notable Folks



Be the person who breaks the cycle. If you were judged, choose understanding. If you were rejected, choose acceptance. If you were shamed, choose compassion. Be the person you needed when you were hurting, not the person who hurt you. Vow to be better than what broke you—to heal instead of becoming bitter so you can act from your heart, not your pain.

- Lori Deschene



Remembering Jerry Gifford by Alison Dingley

Reading of the small memorial service the good folks at St. Elizabeth's had for The Rev. Dr. Gerald (Jerry) Gifford in the midst of COVID made me sad. There is much I would have liked to have said to him and about him.

I believe I first met Jerry in 1984 in the Hawaii Episcopa Clergy Association (HECA) while I was on Kauai. I moved to Honolulu in late 1985 to serve as the Immigrant Services Director at the Kalihi Palama Immigrant Services Center (KPIISC). It was a joint project of St. Elizabeth's, Kaumakapili Church and Aldersgate United Methodist Church, and was a subsidiary corporation of the Diocese and located at St. Elizabeth's.

I had been living and serving on Kauai since 1983 having been ordained in the Diocese of Minnesota in 1978. I was still canonically resident there, but as I was clearly making my home in Hawaii, the bishop of Minnesota decided to transfer me here. Bishop Browning had just been elected Presiding Bishop and was in transition. He had assured me that he would accept my Letters Dimissory (the transfer paperwork), but he had not by the time he left the diocese. So, I was a priest without a country - or at least without a diocese.

Jerry offered to help. The Church Canons stipulate that a priest needs to have a "call" in order to be accepted into a new diocese, so Jerry hired me very part time as an assistant at St. Elizabeth's. Because there was no bishop in the diocese, the Standing Committee was the Ecclesiastical Authority. Jerry went to work petitioning them to accept my Letters Dimissory. Tom Van Culin was President of the Standing Committee and led the SC to agree. He and I continued to be friends for the rest of his life.

I continued to work with Jerry until I was called to serve as Vicar at St. Matthew's in 1987. I did not appreciate his wisdom until years later. I learned a lot from him about the history of the diocese, particularly during the Kennedy and Hanchett years. I also learned about the varieties of ethnicities that made up the larger St. Elizabeth's community. He modeled how to work with all of the varieties of people in that community with a grace, skill, and cultural competence I did not appreciate until years later.

I spent time working with and learning from The Rev. Eric Law toward the end of my active ministry and in my early retirement. He is the best teacher of cultural competence I know. He shared with me one day that he had done an internship with Jerry Gifford at St. Elizabeth's during seminary, and said that he inspired him to get into the work of diversity training and gave him his fundamental understanding of how to navigate the complexities of multicultural ministry.

I was amazed and humbled that this man, Dr. Gifford as he chose to be called, had been a mentor to one of my mentors in ways that I had not appreciated until it was too late to share that with Jerry. So, I am sharing it now and celebrating his new life in the vast and infinitely diverse Communion of Saints.

