

Friending Christ

Preached by the Rev. Thomas M. Kryder-Reid on the Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost, 15 August 2010, at Trinity Episcopal Church, Indianapolis. Scripture readings: Isaiah 5:1-7; Psalm 80:1-2, 8-18; Hebrews 11:29-12:2; Luke 12:49-56.

I was amused this past week when my techno-savvy wife passed along to me a printout of the Facebook homepage of an Episcopal church in New England.

Now let me say right away that I myself don't actually "do" Facebook (not yet, anyway). Therefore I required an extended tutorial from my teenage daughters as well as my techno-savvy wife in order to have any comprehension whatsoever of the terminology I'm now about to recite to you.

Facebook homepages, I've learned, include what's called a privacy setting notation. This enables you to make sure that any person wanting to "friend" you is somebody you actually want to "friend" you. So for example, my privacy notation might read, "Tom Kryder-Reid only shares certain information with everyone. If you know Tom, add him as a friend..." Then on one side of the page are options like "Send Tom a Message," along with another I still don't quite understand: "Poke Tom"—meaning, I gather, just shoot me a quick attention-getter, as if you're standing next to me poking my shoulder.

Anyway, back to that church I was mentioning. It's Christ Church in Exeter, New Hampshire. So yes, the Facebook homepage of Christ Church reads as follows: "Christ only shares certain information with everyone. If you know Christ, add them as a friend..." And then on one side, these options: "Send Christ a Message" and, I kid you not, "Poke Christ."

Which leads me to the gospel passage we've heard this morning: When I first read this passage, with Jesus blasting out all his dire warnings, my immediate impulse was indeed to Send Christ a Message, Poke Christ, do whatever it takes to get his attention. I want to know: How are we supposed to respond to all these dire warnings—of "fire... stress... division... households divided... father against son... mother against daughter"? Where's the *gospel* in this message? What's the *good news*, which, after all, is what the word "gospel" literally means?

I

Well, clearly Christ is trying to send us a message, though in doing so he doesn't come across as particularly "friending." But there is

good news in what he's saying, and to find it we need to start by accepting one premise right away: In some portions of the New Testament, the good news is just not obvious. It's implicit rather than explicit. Understood rather than directly stated.

So, following that lead, check out again the last line of this passage, where Jesus emphasizes the importance of knowing "how to interpret the present time." What does he mean by "the present time"? What were the circumstances of his "present time"?

What comes to light if you read back a bit in St. Luke's gospel is that Jesus is speaking out of the urgency and tension of his own *in-between time* on his way to the cross. He's "set his face to go to Jerusalem," as St. Luke notes a few chapters earlier [9:51]. He's on his way but not yet there. His mission, his message of God's kingdom at hand, is on a collision course with the vested interests and loyalties of the powers-that-be. The signs of his times are as obvious as the weather-signs of earth, sea, and sky. He knows the danger that awaits him—knows the authorities are not about to "add him as a friend."

And so the tension is high and the time is short. He's tried to get the message of his mission across to his disciples and to the crowds. But time and again, they've either misconstrued it or dismissed it or just plain missed it. So we needn't be surprised that in the urgency of his own "present time," Jesus really does intend to shock his listeners, not merely "poke" them. He says what it takes to get them to hear.

And as he does so, he also speaks to the tension of our "in-between time." Like him and the disciples and the crowds and the church ever since, we, too, live in the tension of "in-between time." It's the same tension you can hear this morning from the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews, who wrote to his readers late in the first century. Our present time as the church today is also of continuing tension between the inauguration of God's kingdom on the cross and the fulfillment of God's kingdom at the last day, God only knows when.

One image I've found helpful in grasping this perspective of "in-between time" is the analogy to D-Day and World War II. On the European front after the Normandy invasions of June 1944, the decisive victory had been won; but the war wasn't over yet. Likewise,

Jesus' death on the cross and resurrection on Easter secured the decisive victory for God's kingdom, for goodness and love to reign supreme on this earth; but the war against all the sins of self-centeredness on this earth isn't over yet. And with God's Holy Spirit guiding us, we—the church—are the forces commissioned for the fighting that follows D-Day.

All of which is why, in this morning's gospel, Jesus doesn't mince words about how costly that fighting can be. Battles still erupt out of the same sins of self-centeredness that put him on a cross in the first place. And Jesus knows that some of our worst battles erupt out of some of our most intimate circles—including the loyalties that bind us as families.

His point is that the demands of God's kingdom come first. Doing whatever we can to allow goodness and love to gain ground must come first.

Or to put the point another way, to "friend" Christ is costly. Sometimes it calls us to reassess even our dearest loyalties here and now, including the loyalties that bind us as families.

II

A tough message, to be sure... More than merely a "poke..." Yet at the heart of this message is good news. At the heart of it is God's promise that goodness and love *will* reign supreme, just as love reigned supreme from the chaos of the cross.

And even now, amid all the chaos of our "in-between time," you can look around and see glimpses of God's kingdom gaining ground.

One glimpse that stands out in my mind today is a news story the Associated Press carried some years ago. Frank and Elizabeth Morris had one child, a son, and a drunk driver killed him. You can imagine their reaction. For more than two years, they dedicated their lives to punishing the young man named Tommy who'd killed their only child. They monitored Tommy's every court appearance. They wanted him in jail and the key thrown away.

But gradually, a realization dawned on Frank and Elizabeth Morris: They were allowing the love that once had bound them with their son as a family to twist itself into a demon of vengeance that was eating them alive. Their passion for revenge was compounding not only Tommy's torment, but also theirs. So they came to a moment of decision, a turning point in their war. They changed the cause they chose to fight for—from vengeance to forgiveness. They reached out to "friend" Tommy, if you will, with all the messages of encouragement they could send him.

They started by visiting him in jail. They supported him in recovery as an alcoholic. Eventually the judge

ordered that Tommy could be released into their custody. Tommy became an active lecturer for Mothers Against Drunk Driving. He became an active member of the Morris's church. They attended together—the Morris's would drive him there. In time, they would also set a place for him at their dinner table at home.

To "friend" Christ is costly. For Frank and Elizabeth Morris, it meant honoring their son by loving his killer.

Their story resonates for me especially today in view of a news story that's dominated our local scene all this past week—about the police officer, apparently drunk on duty, who crashed his patrol car and killed one motorcyclist and injured two others. I can't help wondering, for that officer, for all in the motorcycle community and of the families who, understandably, want him in jail and the key thrown away, for all who rightly demand equal treatment of officers of the law under the law—I can't help wondering if someday, somehow, some possibility akin to what the Morris and Tommy fought for will emerge as a light of hope. Will open up as a glimpse of what can be, even out of what's been.

The good news for us in any of our struggles and uncertainties now in our present time is that by God's grace, and in and through our lives, God's kingdom can and will gain ground. The fighting will be costly. Some battles will be brutal. The victories will be life-giving.

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