

**ANNUAL ADDRESS TO THE PARISH
JUNE 7, 2015**

An unusual sign was posted inside a church office. It was one of those humorous full-page slogans that people in different offices send to each other. Most of us have seen this particular message, but posted in a church office – the words take on a new meaning. There it was, taped to the cinder blocks behind the parish administrator’s desk = “You don’t have to be crazy to work here, but it helps.”

At one level why not put a sign like that in a church? Many churches are busy, hectic, confusing places. There are worship services to plan, educational programs to run, choir rehearsals, fellowship dinners to organize, outreach efforts to facilitate, fairs to run, pastoral counseling to be held, weddings and funerals to plan and to walk families through, bills to be paid, checks drawn up, people to sign them, and then archival records to be recorded and stored safely. There is a lot going on, and things can get frantic. The running joke in one church I use to work in had the staff saying, “Next week it’s going to get quiet,” but the quiet week never comes. The work load can become a little bit crazy.

On a deeper level, there is a great deal of truth to that sign. There is something strange about the church. We are not just another civic club or organization. The church’s view of reality is increasingly out of phase from a lot of prevailing views. In the church, we do and say things that do not always make sense to people outside of this house. Here we are, gathered on the weekend, sitting on pews that are not very comfortable, rather than on lawn chairs with our feet in the sand. People we know are outside, working on their tans, washing their cars, hoping to get that hole in one, while we gather here, inside, to lift our voices in prayer and song. As a lot of other people are planning a barbecue, sipping a Bloody Mary or Mimosa, we come together on a morning like this to break the bread of life and drink the cup of salvation. To some outsiders, it must look a little bit crazy.

According to the scripture text we heard a few minutes ago, this perception may reveal something of what it means to be the church. Mark tells us about the day when the immediate family of Jesus came to take him away to the funny farm. The word on the street was that Jesus was “out of his mind.” Taken quite literally, people thought he stood “beside himself.” They claimed Jesus was possessed. And so, his family came to where he was staying to take Jesus away, because the popular opinion was that he was insane.

That might sound like an odd assessment of his ministry, but it is central to how the gospel of Mark portrays the work of Jesus. From the beginning Jesus acted...well, he acted as if he was *differant*. Jesus announced that God’s reign had come near. He acted as if his view of the world was different from the world we take for granted.

Recall some of the stories Mark tells: Jesus met the town lunatic in Capernaum; he set the man free from forces “beyond his control.” Jesus met a woman bedridden with a fever, the neighbors said, “I’m sorry, there’s nothing we can do.” But Jesus set the woman free from her sickness. He set her free for service. Then Jesus met someone with a skin disease so ugly that all its victims were quarantined from the

temple. Jesus healed that person's disease, and set that person free from segregation. Here in this place of St. Luke's we seek to heal people of isolation, of segregation, of illness. And sometimes our neighbors in other faith traditions think we Episcopalians are out of our minds.

According to Mark, Jesus did not accept the world as a place of sickness, sin, and evil. He acted as if God had begun doing something new. Unlike the peasants and beggars of his time, "his eyes lacked the proper cringe, his voice the proper whine, his walk the proper shuffle." Jesus not only announced the nearness of God's kingdom, he acted as if God's reign had actually come. That's why some people said, "He has gone out of his mind." Here in this place of St. Luke's we seek not to be like the other parishes, we seek a world where redemption, forgiveness and reconciliation are not only possible, but a reality.

The evidence still reinforces that appraisal. For every disturbed person whom Jesus healed, there are 20 people possessed by forces beyond their control. For every headache Jesus ever relieved, there are 50 more bottles of aspirin sold every minute. For every ugly, isolating disease Jesus ever healed; 100 more patients are admitted to the hospital. Listen! There are forces still at work that hurt, cripple, and destroy life, the soul and the psyche of our brothers and sisters. Here, in this place of St. Luke's we offer a place where the Lord can work his wondrous deeds.

There are so many tragedies that happen because of our human weakness. Jesus came preaching, "The Kingdom of God is at hand!" But the evidence reveals God's kingdom could be a disputed sovereignty.

Has the world changed? That's the issue in the story we heard from Mark this morning. Back in the time of Jesus, some of the best minds summed up the evidence. They said, "It seems Jesus has great strength and ability. Yet the world hasn't changed. It appears like Jesus has power over the house of evil, but the house of evil has stone walls and an iron-clad gate. Those around him accused "Jesus may be doing some good things, but what if Jesus is a trickster? Perhaps the evil powers have sent him to deceive us. What if Jesus is actually evil in disguise? What if he's been sent to get our hopes up before dashing them once again?" That is, what if this is the same gruesome, dark, demonic world that we have always known?

This is a curious line of thinking for our scriptures. Look at the evidence. If the powers of destruction and death still rule over the world, what conclusion could make more sense? The question remains – Has the world changed? Is there anything qualitatively different with the coming of Jesus? We have to decide for ourselves – that's how Jesus confronted the issue. In other words, "decide what you want about my ministry; decide whether or not you think I am out of my mind. But either way, know this: the end of evil is in sight. The house of evil has been plundered."

Is this true? That's the question. Has the world changed with the first coming of Jesus? If nothing has changed then the future is an endless string of oppression, misery, and defeat. But if, as we believe, the reign of God has intruded upon the status quo, then we can act like Jesus.

We can do the will of God. We can confront the powers of hell as if God rules over heaven and earth. We can act in the face of death as if death has already been defeated. We can gather in a place like this, singing praises to a Savior who has already assured us of the world's redemption. We can stand around the baptismal font to claim God's promises for our children. We can trust in the final triumph of God, we can act redemptively even when the world calls us crazy. Maybe that's what we are: crazy cousins of good old odd Jesus. When we live as if God's reign has already come, we find ourselves in a strange new family called "church."

In a number of his speeches Martin Luther King, Jr., talked about a key to the Gospel – he remained faithful to the vision of the Gospel because of a certain *maladjustment*. ***“There are certain things within our social order to which I am proud to be maladjusted and to which I call upon all people of good will to be maladjusted. If you will allow the preacher in me to come out now, let me say to you that I never did intend to adjust to the evils of segregation and discrimination. I never did intend to adjust myself to religious bigotry. I never did intend to adjust myself to economic conditions that will take necessities from the many to give luxuries to the few. I never did intend to adjust myself to the madness of militarism and the self-defeating effects of physical violence. And I call upon all people of good will to be maladjusted because it may well be that the salvation of the world lies in the hands of the maladjusted. So Let us be as maladjusted as Jesus of Nazareth, who could look into the eyes of the man and women of his generation and cry out, ‘Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, pray for them that spitefully use you.’”***

Every one of us must decide and make our own decision. We live our lives by the assumptions we make. If we assume Jesus Christ has broken into the violence-prone, death-dealing house of evil, then we must act accordingly.

We, in this place of St. Luke's, have much to be thankful for, we have a great congregation that seeks to be open, warm and hospitable to all who enter this house of God. We, in this place have been good stewards of what the Lord has given us through your generosity, with more and more people in the parish pledging, you help us to live out the craziness of God's ministry here. Over the past six years we have had a heavy burden to bear financially. We have a beautiful hall and we had an interest bearing loan, obtained to help us finish the building. I am happy to tell you that with the increased work of Brian Niggles and Carolyn Snyder by securing new pledges and asking people to increase what they had pledged, I can joyfully report that as of May 31 we paid off that loan in full. Congratulations and our deepest gratitude to Brian Niggles and Caroline Snyder for their hard work over the years in helping us reach this milestone. With that loan laid to rest we are cognizant that we need to replenish our "endowment fund" for the funds we also used to cover construction.

We, in this place of St. Luke's, have a dedicated group of people who lead us – the Vestry. Our two wardens are wise people who help to guide me, encourage me, reign me in when needed, and without whom it would be difficult to carry out the ministry you've called me to do. Thank you, Martha and Lys. I also want to thank both Merle Aaron-McDonald and Brian Niggles who have given of themselves, their wisdom, their spirituality, their counsel over the past 5 – 6 years. I am especially thankful to them as they finish their terms on Vestry and in your name present them with these gifts.

We, in this place of St. Luke's, have a dedicated group of people who volunteer to do so many things. I am truly grateful to all of you for how you help us grow. I do want in your name to celebrate three people. The Bishop grants the Parochial Medal of Parish Ministry to three members this year. They are wonderful examples of lay ministers in our midst over the years. Would Barbara Johnson, Holly Whitmore and Jane Wood please come forward? The three of you are examples of the craziness of Jesus in leading us to tear down walls and build bridges to all in our community. Congratulations.

We, in this place of St. Luke's, have a staff that works hard to serve us – Tara Brinka, Colleen Stonemetz, Oscar Giles and Bobby Peterson. Thank you all for your hard work and your conscientiousness in fulfilling your work here. I also wish to thank Denise Galloway for her presence amongst us. Denise, as you continue your journey to being a deacon in our church, we thank the Lord for your gifts, your insights and your care. Our prayers are with you until that day when the Bishop of Long Island lays hands upon your head making you and ordaining you to this wondrous ministry of deacon.

For over 100 years we have had a special relationship with a small chapel on Old Stone Highway. The Rev. Oscar Treder, the first rector of this congregation, agreed to buy the "East End Chapel," so we own St. Peter's Chapel. His words to the members of the Chapel were that they do their best to "carry their own weight" in expenses and income. That has not always been possible. Over the years, a once very active chapel, decreased in size and possibilities. Clergy have come and gone and some wanted to see the Chapel go the path of St. Matthew's and All Saints' – that is not the position of this Rector. So I thank people like Dianne Benson and Lysbeth Marigold who recently raised needed funds to help the Chapel pay for a much needed upgrade to the landscaping around the Chapel. To that end and to help the Chapel become more self-sustaining, the Vestry has approved the signing of a lease with AT&T that will bring \$36,000 a year to the Chapel in income. This income will, over time, make needed repairs to the building, clear the lot next door to the Chapel to have some "off-highway" parking and help to pay some of the bills we now cover for the Chapel. AT&T will go through the process of seeking permissions and permits from the Town to construct a new "steeple" to hide the cell tower, thereby providing much needed cell-phone coverage in the Springs area. AT&T sought us out and after all sorts of legal stuff with AT&T, the diocese, and our own lawyer, we can move forward, lease has been signed and the Bishop and Standing committee of the Diocese will approve it on June 16th. Now that's crazy!

Let me finish this address with this story: An old colleague, named Bill, is a priest. He also has been accused of being a little bit nuts. Bill did workshops for churches on clowning. He recalls that one time in a distant city, packing up after a workshop, the phone rang and nobody was around so he answered. "Are you a priest?" "Yes, actually I am" he responded. "Come quickly" said the voice, "our child is dying of leukemia."

Bill dropped everything, ran out to his rental car and drove to the hospital. He parked the car, ran up the steps, through the doors and down the hall. Suddenly it hit him; he was still dressed as a clown, with a white face, red nose, orange hair, and green suspenders. He didn't have time to change, it was an emergency. He kept going, found the room, knocked on the door, and entered the room where a young girl in a hospital bed lay surrounded by her family.

“We called for a priest, not a clown,” said the father. The child replied, “He’s better than a priest. Can he stay, please?” No one dared deny her request. Bill sat on the edge of the hospital bed, sang songs, told Bible stories, he cradled the little girl in his arms until the end. When the last moment came, she made a final request. “Would you come to my funeral?”

Three days later, crazy Bill stood with white face, red nose, orange hair, and green suspenders. He never spoke a word, yet he led the people as they laughed, and cried, and remembered the little girl’s life. A few people present thought it was wrong to have a clown at a funeral, much less lead the service. They murmured afterwards, “That priest is out of his mind! He’s crazy! Who does he think he is coming to this solemn occasion dressed like that?!” And you know, by all the proper canons of pastoral protocol, they were probably correct.

But there he stood, acting as if God’s joyful power has already defeated death. Was he crazy? Who can say? All I know is that Bill heard Jesus say, “I am the resurrection and the life” and he acted accordingly.

“You don’t have to be crazy to work, around here, but it helps!” Likewise, you don’t have to be out of your mind to do the work of Jesus Christ, even though a faithful life can provoke the world to think of you that way. St. Paul tells us to be “fools for Christ’s sake.” Listen closely, when the world conspires against you and calls you crazy – listen to what Jesus says, “You are my brother, my sister, my mother, - YOU ARE MY FAMILY.”

There is so is so much we can be thankful for. There is so much I am thankful for in this place and at this time of my life. God has shown forth the divine craziness of abundant blessings to us and we need to be mindful of those blessings and express our thanks.