

A Sermon Preached by
 Mr. Aran Walter for the Seventh Sunday of Easter, Year C
 May 16th, 2010 at St. Thomas, Menasha
[Acts 16:16-34](#) | [Psalm 97](#) | [Revelation 22:12-14, 16-17, 20-21](#) | [John 17:20-26](#)

So, there's lots of ways to look at things . . .

Who sees the old woman?

Who sees the young woman?

Who sees both?

(show using laser)

There's lots of ways to look at things . . .

Lots of ways of looking at churches and ecclesiology, which is a fancy word meaning how to people "do church" . . . structure, belief systems, etc.

How do we "do church"? What IS this Episcopal/Anglican thing we do here on Sundays anyway?

Most people within the Episcopal/Anglican expression of Christian faith either grew up or have spent significant time in other streams of Christianity.

So what does it mean to be an Anglican in the United States, also known as Episcopalian?

(this will lead us to today's Gospel reading, I assure you)

To be Anglican (and when I say Anglican I'm also meaning Episcopal) . . .

To be Anglican is to be connected to and in relationship with the Archbishop of Canterbury.

Anglicanism, at it's deepest core and heart, is relational.

This is also called being "in communion" together.

The way this is played out is each bishop of each diocese, all over the world, is in communion, in relationship, with the Archbishop of Canterbury. And they gather every 10 ish years to reaffirm that relationship.

Anglicanism and therefore Episcopalianism, is a relationship structure. It's not a hierarchical structure with a pecking order . . . it's not a doctrinal structure with a particular statement of faith or set of beliefs that everyone signs up for . . .

Those things are a part of who we are, but what makes us distinct is that we are relational at our very heart.

Today's Gospel reading is John's telling of Jesus' prayer for all of us . . . the church . . . those who believe in God and in God's sending of Jesus to the world . . . and it's a prayer in which Jesus is PLEADING to God that all followers will be "one" . . .

Perhaps we could say that Jesus is praying that we would all be in communion, in relationship, with everyone else.

So, how do churches, communities of faith, tend to see themselves when it comes to different relationships with things like God, other Christians, doctrine?

I wanna suggest that most churches would probably graph themselves along three axis in terms of these relationships . . .

On the Y axis, let's look at the Christian's relationship to God . . .

On one end we have the Transcendent relationship with God and on the other end we can show an Immanent relationship with God.

Transcendent means that God is WHOLLY OTHER than we are. God is SO different, so distinct, so HOLY . . . think behind the curtain in the temple . . . Moses couldn't be face to face with this God . . . this relationship with God is Transcendent . . . HOLY OTHER!

At the other end we have the Immanent relationship with God. This is the God that is very NEAR and CLOSE . . . this is the God that comes into a tent with King David . . . this God becomes flesh and dwells among people . . . thing God moving from fire on the mountain, to fire in the tent, to fire in our hearts on Pentecost.

Transcendent and Immanent

Some churches and faith communities really set up shop and plant their flag at different places on this axis.

Example . . . an expression of Christianity that has a Transcendent relationship with God would be the Eastern Orthodox church. Anyone ever been a part of this?

Worship with this relationship to God means when you step into worship, you are outside of time. No clocks in these places. No priest saying, "we gotta move, kickoff is in 45 minutes"

You might not even worship in your own language because this God is so different from you. Everything in the worship leads you to an understanding that God is WHOLLY OTHER and Transcendent.

On the other end? An expression of Christianity with an Immanent relationship to God? The Pentecostal tradition. Anyone have experience with this relationship with God?

This understanding of God is of a God that is so close that God is going to heal you when I touch you . . . God is going to speak and use someone's mouth in this room to do it . . . I hear the voice of this God in my mind, heart, etc.

So relationship to God . . . Transcendent and Immanent

Next axis (X axis) deals with the Christians relationship to Others.

On one end we have a communal understanding of relationship with others in the Christian faith . . . and at the other and individual understanding of the Christian faith.

Communal . . . this kind of expression is so closely tied to a Christian's relationship with the community of worshippers, so connected to a people, that if you left that expression of faith it might be very difficult for you to even identify as a Christian anymore. The people with whom you follow Jesus with are central to the way you follow Jesus.

Think Roman Catholic Church . . . their expression of following Jesus is so deeply connected to being Catholic that you'll hear people say in response to what religion are you, "I'm Catholic." For many to be outside that communal expression of faith is to not even be within Christian practice.

On the other end is the Individual expression of faith . . . this is the understanding of faith when it come to relationship to others is that it's primarily all about your individual, your personal relationship with Jesus.

It's you, your Bible, and Jesus.

It's about your personal choice to be a part of this Jesus movement.

An expression of Christianity that plants it's flag on this end would be the Evangelical tradition. Evangelicals will say things like, "Have you made a personal commitment to Jesus Christ?" Many people of this expression of Christianity might even know the date, year, and time when they made that personal decision.

So much so that some expressions might even be skeptical of you that if you CAN'T say when you began your personal relationship to Jesus you might not be "in" yet.

So we have Transcendent and Immanent as the ends of the Relationship to God axis . . .

We have Communal and Individual as the ends of the Relationship to Others axis . . .

Final axis? (Z axis . . . coming out towards you and moving away from you)

The Christian's relationship to doctrine.

On one end we have a Firm relationship to doctrine.

This is the relationship to doctrine that creates expressions of Christianity that would say that the doctrine of Christianity is set in stone, immovable, unquestionable, no conversation.

And perhaps if you find radical expressions of this relationship to doctrine . . . if you even suggest that something that is set in doctrine might need to be talked about or revisited or discussed YOU'RE OUT!

An Open relationship to doctrine . . . you can believe . . . whatever you want.

Or maybe not anything you want but at the very least everything is debatable, discussable, and on the table . . . perhaps even all the time. Nothing is so set in stone that we can't conversation about it.

Or perhaps there ARE things that are more set but there are other things that we can talk about. Depending on what a community decided was "talk-about-able" would determine where they are on this axis.

An expression of Christianity that holds to a more Open relationship to doctrine might be The Disciples of Christ. "No creed but Christ." Just want to be about Jesus but don't start reciting any creeds 'cuz that's too firm for them.

On the Firm end, we see the Reformed expression of Christianity.

This is exactly what this verse of the Bible means.

We are 100% sure of what happens in the Eucharist.

The world is going to end this way.

All the answers are in here and are already determined. We just need to share them with everyone.

There's no room for mystery. It's done. To question these things might mean we have to split from one another.

Firm . . . everything is known. Open . . . there are some things we don't know.

So, with these axis and this graph in place . . .

Where Is Anglicanism? Anyone wanna take a shot?

Anglicanism (which is defined by being in relationship/communion with the Archbishop of Canterbury and therefore all other Anglicans world-wide)

Anglicanism . . . at it's best . . . is not at the center of all these axis nor does it seek to plant a flag near certain ends or each axis . . .

Rather, Anglicanism is like a heart . . . holding all the axis in tension together.

Anglicanism embraces the Transcendent AND Immanent relationship to God and holds them in tension

"Your ways are not my ways nor your thoughts my thoughts"

"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. And the Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us"

I fall on my face before you God

God weeps for the poor and I'm on the hook for how I treat the least of these

God created the heavens and the earth

God is doing a re-creation in Jesus Christ here and now

Anglicanism embraces the Communal and Individual expressions of faith and hold them in tension

It's not acceptable for you to be just out on your own and make faith just about you and God . . . you need to be a part of a people who are working together and practicing faith with one another for the benefit of others.

We cannot be obedient to the command to love our neighbors by holding to an Individual only version of faith.

But at the same time . . . you have to make personal decision to be a part of this. Because God honors and respects your humanity and gives us a choice to partner with God in the building of God's Kingdom.

It's not enough just to say, "I'm Episcopal, or Lutheran or Catholic, or whatever" and have that be enough. There's an invitation to personally join the Jesus movement.

Anglicanism embraces both the Firm and Open relationship to doctrine and holds them in tension

There are things within Anglicanism that we're pretty serious about . . . things that we think we can know and understand . . .

In Jesus, God is rescuing the world . . . I'd be willing to take a firm stand on that.

How we treat our bodies matters to God.

God cares for the disadvantaged . . . that's a firm thing.

But what exactly happens in the Eucharist? When I take the bread and the cup what precisely is going on? How firm are you in your understanding of how that wafer and that sip of wine embodies the very presence of Jesus Christ?

There's mystery there. There's space for mystery and openness within Anglicanism. We can have conversation.

As Anglicans, our history says that who we are, at heart, are the kind of people that can come together, despite our differences, at the table, and be in relationship with each other.

Historically, St. Thomas has been ALL OVER the axis . . . the gathering of people who participate really determines what kind of community we are.

We have people who raise their hands in worship and others who genuflect before the altar . . . and some people do BOTH those things!!!!

So what in the world does all this have to do with today's Gospel reading?

Jesus prays for all his followers throughout time . . . you and I got prayed for . . . and Jesus uses the following words THREE TIMES in this prayer . . .

"THAT THEY MAY BE ONE"

If Jesus prays something THREE TIMES do you think we should pay attention?

But the real stuff is right here . . . WHY!?!?

Why does Jesus pray that we all might be one?

“SO THAT THE WORLD MIGHT KNOW THAT YOU HAVE SENT ME”

(and this was so important that he says it TWICE)

We all are to be one, as Father and Son are one, so that everyone else might know that God sent Jesus to the world.

What happens if we aren't one? Will people know?

What happens if we can't handle it if some Christians, some churches, have a different understanding in their relationship to God? Are we one?

What if some people insisted that an Individual expression of Christianity was so essential that they felt that people in a Communal expression of faith didn't even really know Jesus? Are “they” one with “them”?

What if one issue became so divisive amongst Jesus followers that it kept people from even sitting down and breaking bread together? One?

Wouldn't it be GOOD NEWS for people who held different opinions about things could sit together in conversation and honor one another's humanity . . . even if we find a little bit of “rightness” in their “wrongness” and we find a little bit of “wrongness” in our “rightness”?

Wouldn't it be dangerous for groups of Jesus followers to think that the way talk radio works or how MSNBC and FOX NEWS speak to one another is the way that we're supposed to talk about the things of God with one another?

Wouldn't it be sad if people at St. Thomas felt they couldn't express what they think and feel about God because they were too afraid of being marginalized by others who didn't think that way? Or if they just left . . . and we didn't see them for a few months . . . or 6 years . . . or ever?

Unless we maintain relationship with one another, holding things in tension and striving to be “one” . . . the world will look at us and say, “no thanks”

And if they say that, they will not know.