

Epiphany 6, Year C

- If you came to adult forum you heard the broadest imaginable overview of Church Architecture, including use of art and Scripture in sacred spaces as a way of telling the story of our faith by way of our surroundings
- One of the things I perhaps should have mentioned as part of that forum, though, is the need to be very careful about the way we do that – to consider things from all angles
- I'm thinking here of a Roman Catholic Church I have heard of that decided to print a verse from the First Epistle to the Corinthians that we just heard around the apse of their building, right behind the altar – and they chose a wonderful verse, a verse I think that we should pay quite a bit of attention to, 1 Cor 15:14 – “if Christ has not been raised, then our proclamation has been in vain and your faith has been in vain.”
- But evidently the church is wide enough that if you sit in the wrong place, you can't see the whole of the apse, meaning if you sit on the wrong side, you can only see the latter part of the verse: “your faith has been in vain.”
- Not exactly what you want staring you in the face when you're sitting in worship, I don't think
- But I do love that verse – it's one of those that sticks with you, one of those that's been coming up again and again in my head all week in preparing for this sermon – “if Christ has not been raised, then our proclamation has been in vain and your faith has been in vain.”
- Paul tells the church at Corinth that the Resurrection is the cornerstone of the faith – he's heard that some of them are doubting it, some of them are saying it doesn't make sense, it's not really that believable
- And Paul says, without that, the whole thing falls apart – without that, what on earth would we even be doing here, gathering on Sunday mornings?
- He says it's the *sine qua non*, the one thing that is absolutely necessary for our faith to be anything more than nonsense, than vanity
- It reminds me of something that Stanley Hauerwas, the Christian ethicist and Duke University professor, once said about the Christian life – he said that we who follow Christ should live our lives in such a way that they are utterly incomprehensible if God is not real, if the Resurrection isn't true.
- In other words, our lives should be so radically oriented toward the Gospel, so

revolutionary in their commitment to God's mercy and love and justice, so dedicated to bringing about the Kingdom of God on this earth, that neutral observers would think we're crazy if Christ had not conquered death and brought new life to the world

- What does that even mean, though?
- What kind of life should we be living for that to be the case? Do we even know how to do that, given that we were raised with intense pressures to fit in, not to rock the boat?
- Thankfully, we don't have to answer that question on our own, without any help
- We've been given hints, really quite a few of them
- There are hints like our Gospel passage today:
 - "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.
 - "Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled.
 - "Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh.
 - "Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man. Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, for surely your reward is great in heaven; for that is what their ancestors did to the prophets."
 - "But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation.
 - "Woe to you who are full now, for you will be hungry.
 - "Woe to you who are laughing now, for you will mourn and weep.
 - "Woe to you when all speak well of you, for that is what their ancestors did to the false prophets."
- Can you imagine what the world would be like if we actually lived as though those statements, that list that Jesus gives of God's priorities, were also our priorities?
- Can you imagine how crazy people would think we were if we actually acted as though God was present with – truly, deeply concerned with – all of God's children who were in need, who were suffering, who were marginalized? If we acted as though the kingdom of God truly belonged to the poor, like Jesus said? If we didn't aspire to be rich like it seems everyone in the world does, because that might mean that we'd received our consolation? Can you imagine?
- Or, to use another example, another hint we've been given: can you imagine being a woman born into slavery, where the man likely to be your father was allowed by society to own you, and your mother? Can you imagine being emancipated at age 5, then being able to go to school only to find out that though the world said you were free, you still were only free to take those subjects that were appropriate for women?

- Can you imagine working hard to get an education anyway, solely because you knew how important it was that you continue in your calling as an educator and advocate, so that others wouldn't have to fight quite so hard the next time around, that the deck wouldn't be quite so stacked against them?
- That's what Anna Julia Cooper did, one of the saints of the Church we are commemorating today at Grace, where she once attended as a parishioner while she served on the faculty at Lincoln University
- Or, take another example: can you imagine having to work to purchase freedom for your wife and children while not being free yourself?
- Can you imagine becoming part of a church, finding a place to use your obvious gifts as a preacher, only to be told that you couldn't sit in the main part of the church, that you had to be kept separate because of your skin color – that you had to sit at the back, no wait, better yet, in the balcony, so that your skin didn't offend the sensibilities of the whites in the congregation?
- But even so, can you imagine being so committed to Christ, so convinced of the importance of the Good News, that rather than let this sour you on the church, you decided what you had to do was start one of your own? To fight against whoever stood in your way and become ordained so that no one had to go through what you went through, so that everyone was welcome at God's table?
- Can you imagine fighting that hard to stay in a church that didn't seem to want you? Creating a congregation for people that the world and even your denomination didn't seem to care much about, just to make sure that the Good News still reached everyone?
- That's what Absalom Jones did, whose feast we celebrate each year on February 13, the anniversary of his death, and who we also commemorate today here at Grace.
- That's what it means, I think, to live our lives like Hauerwas imagines, like I think Paul is advocating to the Corinthians – living our lives in light of the Resurrection – in such a way that they don't even make sense to the outside world unless the Resurrection is true, unless God is real and our Redeemer lives
- Have we allowed Christ to change our lives that completely? Are we that devoted to the Gospel?
- And if not, with the help of a great cloud of witnesses like Anna Julia and Absalom showing us the way, are we willing to be?