

Bicentennial Sermon  
October 18, 2020  
Christ Church Gardiner  
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Today we have come together to honor the history of Christ Church, to celebrate who we are today, and to look to the future with hope. Two hundred years ago on this day, parishioners, clergymen from across New England, and Bishop Griswold of the Eastern Diocese gathered to consecrate the beautiful Gothic building that those of you sitting in the churchyard gaze upon this beautiful fall afternoon. In a non-COVID world, we would be sitting inside admiring the stained-glass windows, the carved altar and pulpit and choir stalls, the intricate reredos, and the high ceiling, but there's certainly nothing wrong with the view out here. The glory of fall is in full force this afternoon.

Many of you will have read the newspaper article about our Bicentennial celebration and the history of Christ Church that came out in the Kennebec Journal on Thursday. It was a lovely reminder of all that Christ Church has meant to Gardiner over the past two centuries. But it made me pause as I read this line about our church on the hill, "Most drivers probably note it...Christ Church...only in passing — after all, what's a Maine city or town without an old church or two?"

The writer isn't wrong, of course. For many, even most, of the cars that drive by, we're just another old church. A pretty building to look at, but not much happening inside that impacts the surrounding community. Or at least that's what they think.

Early into my ordination process, I had a priest ask me why I wanted to be ordained into a dying church. Look around, he said, can't you see that churches are closing all around us? I could see. I can still see that today. We are always in a cycle of life and death, but death never gets the last word. Our Christian story does not end with the crucifixion of Jesus. It ends with resurrection. Or more accurately, it begins again with resurrection. Light broke through the darkness. Love overcame hate. Life emerged again. The disciples were sent out emboldened by the promise of new life and wanting to share that good news with others.

This cycle of life and death means that the church is always changing and evolving. The congregation of Christ Church may never again quite look like it did in the past. And that's not an entirely bad thing. Some of us worshiping here today would not have been fully welcomed, as God made us to be, in the church of our past. Not too many years ago, neither Bishop Brown, nor myself, would have been allowed to serve the church as we are doing today. We cannot return to the past, and I don't believe that God would want us to. The future of the church may look different than those in the past imagined, but it's a future that we get to create together.

So what does it mean to be the Episcopal Church in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century? To be a member of this particular church that most people only admire from afar?

One sign of what the Church is called to be in this new age was apparent at our Annual Convention of the Diocese yesterday. Priests and deacons and delegates from each Episcopal Church in the Diocese of Maine gathered, on Zoom this year of course, to discuss the business of the church. And after pretty quickly dispensing of the annual business that consists of electing people to diocesan committees and voting on the budget and what churches pay in assessments to the Diocese, we moved to the heart of the Convention: the resolutions. It was this discussion that took most of the time and energy of our gathering. These resolutions addressed a covenant on anti-racism, an acknowledgement of white privilege, support for legislation that would revise the unjust Maine Indian Claims Settlement Act, advancing tribal self-determination, and the creation of a carbon offset program for the Diocese to reduce carbon emissions and our damage to God's creation.

There were two important aspects to each of these resolutions that I believe are reflected in what Christians are being called to today.

The first, is honesty about where we've been, what we've done, and who we are—even if the past and present aren't always pretty.

And the second is, intentionality about who we hope to be, what we need to change, and how we might shape the world to look more like God's vision for the world.

You might have heard me use this borrowed phrase before that the Gospels and the message of Jesus are meant to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable. At times we desperately need the comfort of Jesus, the one who heals and feeds and stretches out his hand to those in despair. But at other times, our comfort and complacency need to be challenged. The story of Jesus calls us to a constant evaluation of our lives and our interconnectedness with others. It calls us to a spirit of confession and repentance—not to focus on how wretched we are, but to point us more fully toward the person that God knows we can be.

And, beyond that, the story of Jesus calls us to action.

Action that must take place outside of the beautiful granite building that is our spiritual home. And that's the part of the story that people are missing when they drive by our stately church on the hill without realizing that our worship and study and relationships in there affect how we act out here in the world. We don't live out our Christian lives in a bubble. We come to the church—whether in the sanctuary, in this churchyard, or watching on Facebook from our living rooms, to strengthen our faith so that we might live faithfully in the world.

As our Gospel this morning showed, being a Christian has always meant learning to live in the tension of this world and God's world. Jesus' words: "Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor's and give to God the things that are God's," mean that we while we must live *with* the powers that be, we always live *for* God. We don't get to retreat into our faith or our churches.

We are the church, wherever we are. Even in the voting booths this November. Using our voice and vote allows us to be the church even there—showing that while we live *within* the government structures of our nation, we live *for* God by voting for leaders and policies that best reflect God’s agenda—an agenda of concern for the poor, the oppressed, the voiceless, and the downtrodden.

We are the church. And we are not dying. As long as we are willing to be honest about our shortcomings and our past and work for a better future. As long as we live for God—sharing the compassion and love of God wherever we go and with whomever we meet. When we do those things, the church is alive and well.

Today we celebrate Christ Church and two hundred years of faith, hope, and love. As we have prepared for this celebration, I have read the stories of many of the saints that have been part of this community over the years. And while they certainly built up this church, their discipleship didn’t stop at those big wooden doors. Their discipleship was apparent in their neighborhoods, in their work, in their communities. The fellowship of Christ Church strengthened them for ministry just down the street at the House of the Good Shepherd and as far away as Haiti. We should always be asking ourselves: how are we being strengthened *here* for ministry out *there*?

Many of the people who drive by our church may never experience the beauty of our worship, the earnestness of our prayer, or the sincerity of our welcome—but that is not a sign that we have failed in our discipleship. Our discipleship extends beyond our doors and what we do inside them should always be felt outside of them, too. Because God calls us to be known in the world, not by which church we attend, but by our faith, our hope, and most of all, by our love. May it be so. Amen.