

Getting Out There

Every single day, I think about getting out there. Mostly, I'm thinking about getting out there to eat a meal that somebody else cooked, or taking in an actual movie, or hanging out with actual three-dimensional people -- and, of course, worshiping with the community I love. I'll bet you have a list of things you can't wait to get out there to do.



And there's another kind of getting out there that's calling to me, too, and to many of you as well. I'm dreaming of the possibilities that come from being cast out of our old well-worn paths (let's not call them ruts...), out of our pre-COVID automatic habits, out of the tracks we had laid from house to work to church building. There's a precious chance for some reinvention, some expansion, some re-imaging of the ways we engage what's out there. On the downward slope of the greatest socio-everything disruption of our lifetime, we can make our world even more connected, more just, more peaceful, more caring, more an outpost of God's Kingdom, just because we're out of the old track and we can re-shape the new one if we want to.

In normal times (if memory serves me), we talk a lot about "thinking outside the box." We wonder if we dare to do it. We speculate about the cost, the repercussions, the potential impact. We hire consultants to expand our awareness of the box and of the world outside it. We coax and cajole the reluctant, and we cheer -- and then worry about -- those who climb a little beyond it. Nobody ever expected the box to just evaporate. And it's been mighty unsettling.

AND -- and, now the green blade riseth, even in the first half of Lent (this can happen when boxes dissolve...).

When I got involved in church leadership many years ago, I heard quite a bit from my dad, who was then the Bishop's Deputy for Congregational Development in the Diocese of West Texas. The reality of declining church membership was just starting to come into focus for the Episcopal Church, and my dad had a pretty good bead on what was needed. First, more and better prayer, study and action, to strengthen the spiritual life of the members, and then, the willingness to go outside our boxes, to where the people are, and build bridges of the kind of meaningful relationships that lead to spiritual conversations. And, he averred, maybe just some old-fashioned preaching to people, in their space, might change the equation.

"Jennifer, do you know where all the missing people are on Sunday morning? I can tell you. They are at Walmart. Just go look at how their parking lot compares to the church's. If you'd go hang out in the Walmart parking lot instead of an empty Sunday School room, you could really make an impact. **You could stand in the bed of a pickup truck and talk about the Gospel** -- your voice carries, you know. You'd reach a lot of people." He was only half joking. My dad's as traditional and as accomplished a lay liturgist as you'll find anywhere. But you know how sometimes the voice of God sounds a lot like your mom or dad, how there's a profound holy reverberation in a casual comment that rings like the cosmic gong of God's own truth? That conversation has haunted me for decades.

Last week I met with the North Fairfax Region (stay with me -- this is coming together). There were all kinds of reports, celebrations, challenges, questions. The President Pro Tem of the region asked the reps to share how things were going -- for good or ill. Of course, there's fatigue and frustration, but there's far more commitment and enthusiasm. The congregations are blessed with good internet service, which helps a lot. But two things got my attention. One is that, if you made a "word cloud" graphic of the words that came up most often, congregation after congregation, the giant word in the middle of them all would be **CREATIVITY**. Faced with limitations and fueled by the Spirit, these communities of faith have flung themselves into creativity. And why not? Might as well have some fun. So there are things I hear about all over the Diocese of Virginia -- Lent activity bags, innovative food pantry delivery schemes, greatly increased participation in book groups and Bible study and online Morning, Noonday, and Evening Prayer and Compline and outreach. North Fairfax is right in there with all of it.

But even with all the good fortune with internet connectivity and healthy congregations, it was the story of drive-in church that grabbed me. Holy Comforter Vienna, like a number of our congregations, is holding drive-up low-frequency FM worship, and the Rev. Jon Strand and the Rev. Ann Gillespie climb up in the bed of a **PICKUP TRUCK** and **preach!** Be still, my South Texas heart!!! My old conversation with my dad reverberated so loudly in my soul that I wondered if others could hear it.

And on Wednesday of last week, a Holy Comforter parishioner, whom I met in an entirely unrelated context (that's how the Holy Spirit does it), sent me the photo attached to this article. Wednesday was the feast day of John and Charles Wesley, Anglican priests of the 18th century and two of the greatest saints in the Anglican firmament. John engaged in open-air preaching and large public lectures on theology, as well as organizing and tracking a serious and demanding structure for making mature disciples of our Lord. Charles wrote over 6,000 hymns, many still in use. The Wesleys would have loved the pickup truck bed and the low-frequency FM station -- and they would have rejoiced, as do I, that the Word of the Lord managed to get out of the box and into the parking lot. If you know about the Methodist movement in America in the two centuries after the Wesleys, you know what God can do with preachers and pastors who get out of the box.

Not for one New York minute do I believe that God visited any of the calamities of the past year upon us, but I do believe that the Holy Spirit can and will take any opening to pour the Good News of God in Christ into this beautiful and broken world.

So I wonder -- and I'd love to hear from you, as would we all -- where has the box blown open for you? Where do you find yourself living a life of passion and grace even in the wake of pandemic and upheaval? Where is God calling you, and your community of faith, further out of the familiar and deeper into the world? Now that the box has been gone for a while, where are you seeing blue sky -- and the inbreaking of the Kingdom? What is your pickup truck in these new days?

Breathe deep. The Spirit stirs among us.

Blessings!

Bishop Jennifer Brooke-Davidson