

## **Homily – The Trends of 2016**

**Rob Keim**

**January 31, 2016 – St. Barnabas Episcopal Church**

The second Episcopal joke that I learned was a lightbulb joke.

How many Episcopalians does it take to change a light bulb?

Change, we can't have change. Aunt Edna gave us that light bulb

Episcopalians have a reputation of being averse to change. This is somewhat understandable since when things are changing all around us in the world, we usually want a place that has less change – a place of stability. We often say that God is unchanging, and we want that changelessness to extend to our churches as well.

But change is as true in our churches as it is the culture around us.

There is a lot of data out there about churches that can cause us to fret. Surveys and research show that fewer people are going to church, especially young people. We are not the church of the 1950s, and for some there is a longing to be back there.

Change can be even harder for us when we don't know where it is going to end up. It leaves us with open ended questions, and a sense that things are not under our control. If we are controlling the change that is one thing, but change that is out of our control just causes us to fret.

As I said a moment again, we like to say that God is unchanging, and we also like to say that God is control. In the very long run things will turn out the way that God intends. God can see the big picture and is omniscient. God knows what is happening.

Today in our Old Testament reading from the prophet, Jerimiah, we heard, *"The word of the Lord came to me saying, "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you;"*

And again in our Psalm today we read about the omniscience of God. *"I have been sustained by you ever since I was born; from my mother's womb you have been my strength; my praise shall be always of you."*

And, in our prayer of the week that I shared earlier, we were reminded that God is in control. *"Almighty and everlasting God, you govern all things both in heaven and on*

*earth: Mercifully hear the supplications of your people, and in our time grant us your peace;"*

Notice that the prayer says, "*grant us your peace*", and NOT grant us control. "*Grant us your peace.*"

When things are changing, and when we are not in control of the change, many of us wish that God would tell us what is going on. If we knew what was going to happen then it would feel like we were in control.

And, I think that this is a valid prayer to God. "God tell us what is going on. God, help us understand. God, help us discern."

Frequently, I say prayers of discernment. "God, help me understand. God, help me know what to do."

Sometimes my prayers of discernment have led to wonderful insights – sometimes even out of the box thinking that has led to magnificent things.

Sometimes my prayers of discernment have led to false answers. You have probably experienced this as well. Sometimes my answers to prayers were utterly wrong. It can be hard to discern what answers are from God and what answers come from my own desires.

When I was in business school, we called all of this discernment stuff "trend watching". I had two trend watching classes in business school. The first class was statistical analysis in which we had data to help us discern trends. The research reports that we see in the news that say fewer young people are going to church, these are statistical analyses with correlations, and regression analysis.

The second class I had was trend watching based on what we observed in the media or from other first hand resources. This type of trend watching is more subjective or intuitive. This second type of trend watching can also be misleading because sometimes our media sources become skewed, and we are not seeing the bigger picture. I think we are all well aware that news networks can distort our perspective one direction or another.

So trend watching can be fun, but sometimes our conclusions can be wrong. I would like to believe that prayer can help improve the accuracy of trend watching.

Now since the annual meeting of our parish is today, I wanted to share a few trends that I see for our Church. These are ten trends for the universal Church and not just for us here at St. Barnabas.

And, before I share my ten current trends for the universal church, let me provide two caveats.

First, God is in charge of the Church, and I have a hard time believing that God is done with our churches. So, our churches may change in some dramatic ways, but I am convicted that God is in the change.

Second, my ten trends are subject to error and change. Take them as one man's perspective and feel free to poke at them. See here they are...

First, the language we use about God must be updated. The traditional concepts are still good, but the words have been co-opted. This can be very hard for us in a liturgical church for the traditional language that we use in our ritualistic liturgy is very dear to us. As one person said to me recently, the language we use in our liturgy is concrete. The words get to truths that are unchanging. However, some large churches are using the traditional language in ways that is not consistent with our liturgy. Words like sin, forgiveness, religions, sacrifice, redemption, law, truth, believer and even faith can be a drag since the words have been co-opted. The concepts are still correct, but you may have noticed that I tend to use words like, spiritual path, community of God, wisdom, misstep, healing, and trust. So, the first trend I see is a need for updated language about concepts that still remain valid.

Second, we must focus on both the interior life and the exterior life. As a church we must allow people to go deeper spiritually, and we must provide opportunities for people to serve.

Third, money must be separated from power in our churches. We all know that money and church go together since we need money to operate. We also know that money and spirituality go together, because money can get in the way of spirituality. The things that need to be separated in a church are money and power. Here in the South County we are not immune to the spiritual inhibitor that comes from money, power and control. We must guard against this trap.

Fourth, music must be inspiring and well done. One does not always need to have music in worship, but when done well it can be a valid spiritual experience of the beauty of God.

Fifth, we must understand when to include technology and when to exclude it. Technology can be a wonderful enabler of our church, and it can sometimes get in the way of spirituality. The tough thing is that we are made up of people who have differing needs or tolerances or even aversions to technology. It can be hard to find the right balance but we must recognize that technology is becoming a bigger part of our church life.

Sixth, we must recognize that there are many good paths and not just our own. There is not just one good style of worship. There is not just one correct way to use and understand the Bible. There is not just one proper way to govern a church. It can be hard to be the “big tent” that embraces people in various places of a spiritual journey, but that is what we are called to do. This means we are called to find the things that we have in common. Things that join us together. We are also called to embrace our differences and know that they are good.

Seventh, power is shifting in American society. We can see this in the shifting demographics that we have here in California and in the changes in the roles of women in American society. We must embrace the change by encouraging those who have traditionally had less power, and by helping to ease the transition pain of those who have traditionally had more power. Specifically, we are called to help straight, white, men learn to share with others who are also the beloved of God.

Eighth, the image of the church has been tarnished by abuse, violence, and a culture of church bigotry. This has been more of an issue for our Roman Catholic brothers and sisters, but it is also somewhat related to the prior trend in the shifting of power and demographics. Today, we still hear strident voices from many churches – voices that are against certain types of people. We have been tainted by those voices and must share our own voice. We must ensure and demonstrate that our churches are healthy communities of love.

And that gets us to the last two trends for our universal Church.

These days, fear is permeating our culture and we must help people find peace. Fear is being used by terrorists, and it is being used by politicians. And, the problem is that fear is one of the most potent inhibitors of spirituality. Whether you think political change is needed or not, fear and the resulting dampening of spirituality do not need to be part of our culture. As churches we are called to be a place of refuge from the fears. We called to be a place were the peace of God can be embraced. We are not called to be the ostrich with our head in the sand. We are not called to ignore things. However, we are called to sift through the hyping up of fear that is being used by terrorists and politicians for there own purposes. We are called to help people let go of fears.

And finally, the last and most important trend is about loving relationships. You have heard me say that I think spirituality is about responding to the love of God that is most clearly evidenced by the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. We are called to respond by practicing healthy relationship with God, with others, with ourselves, and with the rest of non-human creation. You would think that are churches were getting this last trend right, but we don't. We let other things get in the way of healthy loving relationships. Part of the constraint is baggage we have from others and from our history. We must still overcome both.

I don't know if you see God at work in these ten trends. It is not about one man's vision of where the Church is going. We get to work this out in community together. Pray to God for discernment about the trends of our universal Church.

*"Almighty and everlasting God, you govern all things both in heaven and on earth: Mercifully hear the supplications of your people, and in our time grant us your peace; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen."*