#Forma17

Good Morning Class! Today’s lesson is about the foundation of the Episcopal Church. The Sunday School Superintendent explained it to the Confirmation Class like this. The Episcopal Church is a three-legged stool. Each of the legs represents one of our greatest values. The first is scripture, the second is reason, and the third is tradition.

Of course we all know that maintaining tradition is the strongest and most important leg of the stool, right?

Randall: Excuse me!

Church Lady: Oh, pardon me. Did someone speak?

Randall: Yes. Excuse me! This is not Sunday School. This is worship and the stool has no relevance to the Bible readings this morning.

Church Lady: Young man, is your name Simon Birch? I’ve heard about you – challenging modern conventions and spreading new fangled ideas. Where are your parents anyway?

Randall: Really lady – we are waiting for the sermon.

Oh! Wait. This is worship? Not Sunday School? But I thought Sunday School and Christian Education were the most important things we do at church. Educating the next generation of Episcopalians is our responsibility according to the Baptismal Covenant, isn’t it?

So what is the most important? Let’s unpack this a little bit. How many of you remember dressing or seeing women dressed like this for church? Although I am poking fun at a time that most of our current and aging membership still remembers, we have grown so much and our cultural context has changed so drastically and rapidly that we really do need to re-evaluate and determine our higher purpose and our strategy for achieving it.

It was just five years ago that one of our wisdom bearers and Biblical scholars, the intrepid and always entertaining Vickey Garvey addressed us in New Orleans to describe this organization’s name change from National Association of Episcopal Christian Education Directors (NAECED) to Forma. Part of the change was to honor the Charter for Lifelong Formation and to make the tent bigger and expand our membership to include those whose mission and ministry could not be described as Sunday School Teacher, Confirmation Class Mentor, Christian Education Leader, or Director of Religious Education. Out membership needed to include and affirm all those practicing a variety of methods of Christian Formation. We had been playing with the term Formation rather than education. My colleague Shannon Kelly and I have been doing some leadership development and discernment work with the past couple of Young Adult Service Corps cohorts. We’ve been using this working definition of Christian Formation and hope that it will be helpful for you, too.

When intentional education and information sharing is specifically combined with community worship and personal practice, typically one reaches an Epiphany, or a new understanding or perspective, that causes us to behave differently because we have been transformed. Formation is the combination of teaching and practice with the Holy Spirit working to help with transformation in light of and Epiphany. (Pun intended.)

And yesterday we were blessed to hear four amazing stories in which formation happened and transformation took place. My thanks to Eric Law, Andrea Rosenberg McKellar, Nancy Fausto, and Nadia Bolz-Weber for challenging us to see through new eyes so that we might learn to behave more boldly in love and grace blessed with your wisdom.

I am not convinced that our traditional method of Sunday School, originally begun in the absence of public schools as a solution to illiteracy, is the best possible way to make disciples. I find that most people are transformed when they are called out of their comfort zone to do something bold. But paving the way to those moments through enlightenment, information gathering, community practice, and spiritual disciplines are definitely advantages. I am a lifelong learner – which is a polite way to confess that I am a slow learner. I was transformed recently. And I can tell you that it wasn’t all that intentional on my part, but a result of my familiarity with our prayers, our Creeds, and our beliefs.

Twenty years ago my mother married a man who I did not like or trust at all. I have experienced him as a selfish and arrogant human who drew my mother away from our family. I believe him to be afflicted with Narcissistic Personality Disorder and acute paranoia complicated by degenerative dementia and alcoholism – none of which was diagnosed until recently. But I am getting ahead of myself.

My mother, a lifelong smoker and drinker, already suffering from liver disease and peripheral neuropathy, was diagnosed with terminal esophageal cancer last September. I relocated to a trailer park in Scottsdale in late October to help manage her in home hospice care and to take care of her deteriorating husband with heart disease in need of a Pacemaker replacement. Who knew the hell that we three would travel through together over the next two months.

But years ago and friend and mentor taught me something about youth ministry that I took to heart as a good rule of life. Thank you Lisa Kimball, for teaching me to Show Up, Listen, and Tell the Truth. And so I did. Because I have been formed to do this. I didn’t willingly subject myself to the hard work of caring for two drunk and dying co-dependents because there was no one else to do it. I did it because that is who I have become. It is who I am. I show up. I do my best to listen, and I tell the truth.

When my mother was in her final days having been relocated to a hospice facility, she descended into horrible withdrawal from nicotine and alcohol that was so severe drugs couldn’t compensate. She was miserable and conflict arose between her and everyone, including her beloved and befuddled husband. She cursed at us, banished him from the facility, threw a phone at me, and tried to strangle one of her nurses with her stethoscope.

I was mortified. And as I was apologizing to a couple nurses and a doctor, having rudely corrected them when they referred to my mother’s eccentric husband as my father.

“He’s NOT my father,” I had barked. “He’s married to my mother. My father is alive and well in Illinois.”

One of the staff members said to me, “Are you an Episcopalian?”

“What? How could you possibly know that?”

The doctor said, “I heard you telling one of the nurses that you didn’t really like him but that you respected the dignity of every human being, even that one.” As he pointed in the general direction of where my step-father had been standing

I was stunned. I admitted to my religious affiliation with a nod and the doctor explained further.

“I am Episcopalian, too, and I would say you are working the Baptismal Covenant pretty hard.”

He was right. I had been working hard. Every day I prayed the The Lord’s Prayer, The Nicene Creed, and the words tattooed on my feet.

Act Justly. Love Mercy. Walk Humbly. Love God. Love Neighbors. Love Self.

We pray ourselves into being. If we practice enough what we have learned we will be transformed. And if we dare to truly show up, listen, and tell the truth, especially the Gospel truth – others will listen and learn.

Two hours before my mother passed she had finally calmed down. She was in leopard print pajamas and wrapped in a fuzzy pink blanket. She hates pink. And she doesn’t believe in God. So there I was, with a nurse who knew I was a person of faith, waiting for my faithless mother to die. The nurse was worried about me, that I may have hurt feelings from my mother’s bad behavior. I responded to her concern by saying, “There is nothing my mother can do to convince me that she doesn’t love me, because I know she does love me. And there is nothing I can do to convince her that I don’t love her, because I do love her. Love is really the only thing we have.” (Sound familiar? I adapted that one from church!)

My mother nodded. That was our final conversation.

It’s been a month and I am still receiving personal notes from Hospice of the Valley Staff members thanking me for being a light in their midst, an example to them, even an evangelist to some who already do the work of angels.

The most powerful tool each and every one of us has for being faithful teachers and followers of the Gospel of Jesus is our own heart, our own behavior, and how we choose to be in relationship with other human beings. How we model that love in Sunday School, during worship, at coffee hour, in our homes, with our friends, in public, with fellow Christians, and most importantly with those who make us uncomfortable – the sick, the needy, the powerful, the corrupt – determines how we are perceived and received in the world.

Did you hear all the ways in which we might be blessed that Matthew shared from Jesus’ teaching?

Did you hear Micah telling us what God requires of us? In times like these when our society is in deep conflict and people are frightened and angry and frustrated, we need to hold our righteous indignation close as we prayerfully discern how to act justly, love mercy, and walk humbly.

I look to Marian Wright Edelman, founder of the Children’s Defense Fund when I need this kind of prayer, and I invite you to be yourself and find the teaching method that suits you best in your context. But for now, let us pray:

God Help us to be honest so our children will learn honesty.

God help us to be kind so our children will learn kindness.

God help us to be faithful so our children will learn faith.

God help us to love so our children will be loving.

In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.