

## **BREAD HOMILY**

Delivered By Renee Ozburn\_August 9, 2009

I had a crisis of faith that kicked into high gear last year. I had serious questions about whether I should stay in the Episcopal Church even though I wasn't considering any other houses of worship. This reevaluation of my relationship with church came at the same time that I began to question other connections in my life.

I can just about pinpoint the beginning of my crisis of faith with the church to the 9-month Exploring Your Spiritual Journey class I took through the Whitaker School of Theology in 2006 & 2007. This is a required class for anyone who thinks they may be called to ordained ministry, but it is also offered to those who want to explore whether God is calling them in any different direction from their status quo. I signed up because I was considering a rather drastic change in careers, from the law to health care. The class did help me determine that I was not being called to change professions.

While the intensive study, prayer and fellowship the class immersed us in, led many of my fellow Explorers into a deeper relationship with the church, it had almost the opposite effect on me. My reaction to learning more about the rubrics, catechism and bureaucracy of the Episcopal Church was to bristle at all of the regulations and restrictions that govern worship. I still see many of them as barriers that hamper rather than promote communion with God. And I've always been recalcitrant about the "don't cry, don't touch, don't sing or give praise too

passionately” unwritten, but clearly communicated, rules of decorum that persist in many Episcopal churches.

Although I’ve heard people proclaim they come to church for God not fellowship, I know that for many individuals their only and closest friendships have been forged through the church. But even though I am a very social person who often experiences God most easily through fellowship, only a few of my closest social intimates and none of my very small family are churchgoers.

I have been cognizant for some time that I live a very compartmentalized life. There is my church life, my work life and my social life, and throughout my adult life there has been very little crossover. My social life is further stratified into predominately black and predominately white groups of friends and relations, even though, being the entertainment maven that I am, I do my part to bring these groups together as often as I can.

My growing resistance to what I perceived as the strictures of church and my unease over what it means to live in so many separate worlds was compounded by the ugliness unleashed last year when Obama became a presidential candidate. My naïve or oblivious bubble of feeling accepted was popped when I learned how pervasive and close to home the hatred and suspicion of blacks remains. I learned this not only from the news, but from close friends who themselves were distraught about how freely and proudly some of their friends, family and coworkers were expressing their prejudices. I became

hypersensitive, frightened and a little suspicious that I have been more tolerated than welcome or accepted.

I live in a very white world. I am married to a white man. I'm pretty sure there are at most three other blacks living in my subdivision of 75 homes. In my office, out of the 30 Administrative Law Judges there are only 5 blacks and even fewer support staff of color. I am the only person of color in my long standing movie group and a few other girlfriend groups here in the community where I live. When I attended my 40<sup>th</sup> high school reunion a few weeks ago, I was 1 of only 2 blacks out of the approximately 200 who showed up. My 1969 high school graduating class of 500 had only 11 of us, so I have dealt with these demographics for a long time. And although All Saints has been my church home for almost 25 years, it has never been what I would call ethnically diverse.

All these circumstances converged last year, and for the first time in my life, I began to feel that even though I might fit in many places, I didn't truly belong. And given how much of a people person I am, it was disheartening and lonely to be reassessing my realities in this way at 56.

But here is where my faith in God and that Jesus Bread started working to turn things around. First, we invited my husband's brother, who had terminal lung cancer, to come live out the remainder of his life with us. He arrived the first of October last year and died, in our home, in early January of this year. Bill's life did not have many lasting intervals of joy, security and love. Due to his condition, I can't say he experienced much joy, but I can say we probably gave him one of

his most extended periods of unconditional love, support and peace. Taking care of Bill and supporting John was the bread God gave me when I was hungering to know my place, when I was thirsty to feel sincerely accepted. And I was satiated and fulfilled in a very profound way by this experience.

That Jesus Bread also nursed me back into a more healthy perspective of church and other connections. I *am* sincerely accepted and welcomed by scads of wonderful people at church, at work and in many of the other multi-dimensional relationships that are part of my life.

When I went away to college, I drifted away from church for the first time. In retrospect, church was more of an obligatory social practice for me as a child. Although it may have been germinating back then, I didn't recognize God as an integral part of who I am and there was no cognition of a relationship.

The difference in my drift this time, is that I have a definite visceral connection to God that did not waver as my faith in my surroundings buckled. I stayed intimately in contact with God throughout my desert experience. I instinctively knew that God was there as a steady source of nourishment whenever I requested it and more often when I didn't think to ask.

I also never abandoned church. I merely changed my habits of participation. I go to 8 o'clock. And I shared my journey with Kit, our pastor, who helped Shepard me with empathy and insight – more Jesus Bread.

Last Sunday's NYT's had an article written by a woman in a long-term marriage she thought was healthy. One day her husband suddenly announced "I

don't love you anymore". Although she felt the pangs of hurt and shock you might imagine, when she gathered her composure her surprising response was "I don't buy it." And even though there was more turmoil before resolution, she maintained her response mode, which allowed her to recognize the losses in her husband's life that likely contributed to the turn of events in their marriage, she gave him time to heal and eventually he and they did.

My crisis of faith in the church led me to consider bolting, but God said "I'm not buying it" and I'm still here.