

St. Paul's, Concord
Invitation Sunday, September 8 & 9, 2018
James 2:1-10, 14-17; Mark 7:24-37
Rev. Kate Atkinson

50 years ago, although fewer than 2% of Americans were Episcopalians, 14% of members of Congress were Episcopalians. A 1976 Fortune Magazine study reported that one in five of the country's largest businesses had an Episcopalian in charge – and one in three of the largest banks was run by an Episcopalian. Two thirds of the signers of the Declaration of Independence were Episcopalians and, by the mid-70s, there had been 10 Episcopalian U.S. Presidents (an 11th, George H. W. Bush, was inaugurated in 1989).

50 years ago, the congregations of most Episcopal churches were richer and better-educated than average, and had a greater than average representation of professional, political, and business leaders. As a denomination, we were viewed as aristocratic and elitist – and were often referred to as “the frozen chosen.”

The writer Cleveland Amory famously said, “This much I know: God is an Episcopalian. From Boston.”

This was the Episcopal church I attended as a child in Connecticut. And maybe it's the church you remember too. It was a place where people went to be seen, where you dressed up in your best clothes, where Sunday School teachers were strict, where members came week after week, put their offering in the plate, stayed after the service for a cup of coffee and a cookie, and went away again until the next Sunday.

But then things began to change – and the changes came from the pews. People like my parents realized that there was so much more to being God's church in the world than singing hymns and wearing their Sunday best. In the late 70s several Connecticut towns welcomed Boat People escaping from Viet Nam. The Episcopal Church played a huge role in finding homes for these families, tutoring in English, helping with drivers' licenses, job applications, college loans, taxes – and most of all, offering friendship and support – in much the same way that St. Paul's New American Partnership ministry is doing here today.

At the same time that those refugee families were finding their feet, in some of the struggling neighborhoods around New Haven and Hamden, Connecticut, children and youth were losing their way as gang activity and drugs and social unrest took hold. The Episcopal church played a huge role in establishing ministries and enrichment programs for families in desperate need – much like St. Paul's is doing here today with our youth mentoring partnership and our involvement in the Family Promise program for homeless families.

And, as the years went on, Connecticut parishes established feeding and clothing ministries – again much like the food pantry and clothing bank St. Paul's administers today in our Outreach Center downstairs.

Little by little, my “Frozen Chosen” childhood church let go of its elitist identity and began to use its resources to make a real difference. And throughout the United States a similar transformation was taking place in other Episcopal parishes. We still represented less than 2% of the U.S. population but we were having a positive and significant effect in responding to the needs of the world.

As well as its commitment to hands-on ministry, The Episcopal Church became increasingly involved in social justice. Although rarely at the forefront of change, we responded thoughtfully and effectively to issues of economic imbalance, gender inequality, racial discrimination, environmental degradation, unjust war, and violence and human oppression of all kinds.

St. Paul’s celebrated its bicentennial last year, and it’s very likely that our founders would have been counted among the Frozen Chosen, the Episcopal elite of the 19th century. But, like our sister parishes throughout The Episcopal Church, we’ve undergone a radical transformation – especially over the past 50 years. And, like our sister congregations, those changes have come from the pews: from the hearts, minds, and imaginations of faithful people who long to see God at work in the world and who are committed to doing their part in making that work succeed.

And a major aspect of St. Paul’s transformation has been the shedding of *our* elitist identity as we embraced our mission of being “A place to belong, whoever you are, just as you are.”

There’s no doubt that The Episcopal Church has discovered renewed purpose and expression over the decades, and that we’ve become more a more diverse church, more representative of the communities we serve. As people of faith, we’ve taken to heart St. James’ instructions to the early church – welcoming the poor person in dirty clothes as genuinely as we welcome the person with gold rings and fine clothes. And although we pray faithfully and fervently for people in need, it doesn’t end with prayer. As James wrote, “faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.”
(James 2:17)

Our Presiding Bishop, Michael Curry (who preached so eloquently at the Royal Wedding in May) describes the Episcopal Church as “an ongoing community of people who center their lives on Jesus ... following him into loving, liberating and life-giving relationship with God, each other, and creation.” He recognizes a yearning that is clear to so many of us as we make our way through the challenges of this life. Humanity is *longing* for a different way.

Active ministry in the world is an important and fulfilling way to live out our faith and bring meaning and purpose to our lives – and the lives of others. But there’s still more to being a spiritual person. Nearly every week a newcomer tells me that they have a sense of something missing in their life, something they believe they’ll discover as a member of our parish family. And it’s true, they will. That’s why we have Invitation Sunday, to offer our guests the opportunity to have a taste of the loving, liberating and life-giving relationship God promises us all.

You may have never set foot in a church building in your life, or you may have experienced the frozen chosen church I described and decided never to return – until something, or *someone* brought you here today. I guarantee that you will not be disappointed. And what about those who are *not* here for the first time? Perhaps you’ve been attending church services all your life but are still feeling as though there is something more to a life of faith.

Well that's because there always *is* something more. That's why we so often refer to faith as a journey; we're always moving – sometimes backward but, especially when we support one another, mostly forward. It's a process of understanding more and more about God through Jesus, and discovering God's spiritual gifts in ourselves and one another.

Forward Movement, an agency of the Episcopal Church has developed a tool that will help us all to focus on our spiritual vitality – and to come up with new ways of growing spiritually, as individuals and as the Body of Christ in this place. It's called RenewalWorks, and St. Paul's is one of five parishes in New Hampshire that's taking part in a pilot group this fall.

What better day than Invitation Sunday to launch this program and invite you all to take the survey that starts us off? I encourage you to take it online, if at all possible ([click here for the link](#)) and we have paper copies in the parish office if you prefer to do it that way.

When all the results are in, our parish RenewalWorks team will take part in a series of workshops and devise an implementation plan which addresses the unique spiritual needs of our parish. It's a very exciting time for us!

Our church has come so far, and every day more and more people are discovering what is missing in their life and finding it here. I invite you to keep coming, to keep growing, to take the time to explore where you are on your spiritual journey, and to take part in our survey and share in the benefit of the results.

This could be the day that Jesus says to *you*, “*Ephphatha* ... be opened.” (Mark 7:34)