

# You are Here: A Spiritual Map

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Sixth Sunday in Easter; Year B, St. David's Annual Meeting

John 15:9-17

This morning marks St. David's Annual Meeting – the time we gather to take a look at where we've been, and then turn together to the future. Instead of delivering an uninspiring Rector's Report about programs and numbers, this morning I propose a "State of the Church" sermon that takes a look at where we are in terms of relationships and community, where we are spiritually. Think of it like one of those shopping mall maps with a "You are Here" marker. I offer you both what I see and what I hope for – as an outsider who has only walked with you for four months, and as an insider who has spent that time closely alongside your leadership and staff and in treasured pastoral relationship with so many of you.

If you hear nothing else this morning, please hear this: you are easy to love. As I have said before you have been well loved and because of that, you know how to love. You are a faith community that loves to worship. I have never, ever experienced a church so thoroughly engaged, so enlivened by coming together to sing and pray. Your sanctuaries are arresting – one offering the rootedness of a long history – a physical embodiment of the communion of saints – and the other offering the plain majesty of open, crisp space that declutters the soul helping to focus us on the cross, on the Word, on the power and grace of Christian community. Your list of outreach ministries is longer than my arm, and you take so seriously service to the community and beyond. You care for each other, you love to eat and celebrate together, you pray for 80 people by name at four services every Sunday, you pray for me every Sunday. You keep

bees, tend the marshes and waterways on church land, wash gravestones, and spread early mulch on the garden. You voraciously study the Bible, practice Centering Prayer, polish the silver that adorns the altar. St. David's is an inspired, Spirit-filled, Jesus-centered community. You are one-of-a-kind and believe me when I say: the sky is the limit for your future.

You are special, and at the same time, you are ordinary, prone to the same seasons, pushes, and pulls as any other church. You are in transition. We've been talking a lot about liminal space these past months – that time between the "now" and the "not yet." That suspended space after we've left behind the world as we knew it but have not yet arrived to the next reality. Most people experience liminal space as chaotic, disorienting, and anxiety-producing. No one EVER asks to be cast out into liminal space. If you'll excuse the use of an inelegant word, liminal space can *suck*. At St. David's you entered liminal space the minute Frank Allen announced his intention to retire as your rector. And liminal space will continue, I am sorry to say, even a year or more into your new rector's tenure. We cannot prevent liminal space from happening. It happens throughout our lives in ways big and small. It happens at church, in our professional lives, among our family and friends. We enter liminal space whenever we suffer change or loss – the loss of a dream or an imagined future, perhaps, or the death of a loved one or the end of a hope or a relationship.

If Jesus' own experience reflected in the Gospels tells us anything, we know that liminal space, while heart wrenching, is, at the same time, where transformation happens. Awhile back I penned a clergy letter about transformation in liminal space and a parishioner sent back an e-mail that said, "Why do we need to be transformed? Aren't we good enough the way we are?" It is an excellent question – and I've been chewing on it ever since. My response is – yes to both/and. St. David's is good the way it is as each of us are good too, made in God's image, always worthy, always loved. *And*, as we see throughout the Gospels, Jesus is big on people evolving - to become most fully who God calls us to be over time, bit by bit. That

doesn't mean we're not good or worthy enough the way we are. What it means is that Jesus calls us into deeper and deeper awareness of the Divine in our midst. When everything has been thrown up in the air, when we cannot recognize our surroundings for all of the change, it's in those moments that we have the best chance to learn, to evolve, to grow, to deepen. It's in liminal space where our listening is most acute, our reflections most matter, our prayers are most alive, where we can be most open to allowing God to set our hearts on fire.

What I am asking of you is not to miss the *opportunities* of liminal space. If we avoid, deny, ignore, rage, run away from, or rush through this potent spiritual moment, we together miss out on a lot of God's grace. We miss out on a chance to evolve, to go deeper in our spiritual lives, to strengthen our relationship with the Risen Christ. So for those of you interested in dipping a toe or two into these spiritual waters, here are some suggestions:

First, stay put. It is a natural response, when we see things happening in our church with which we don't agree, to take our proverbial marbles and go home. Given the chaotic nature of liminal space, when everything feels like it's coming apart, some of us just aren't up for it. But we are asked, even in this morning's Gospel, not to take off, but to abide. For the past few Sundays we've been reading from the Gospel of John and you may have noticed that "abide" is a very big word for John, especially in the farewell discourses as he prepares his friends for the liminal space that awaits them after he's gone. Last Sunday was "abide" this and "abide" that. This week we get "If you keep my commandments, you will *abide* in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and *abide* in his love." *Abide* in me, as I *abide* in you.

Now, what is this *abide*? Quick research reveals it as the Koine Greek word *menó*, meaning, to remain, to wait, to endure, to dwell. How do we hear this commandment differently using its meaning? *Remain* in me as I *remain* in you. *Endure* in me as I *endure* in you. *Dwell* in me as I *dwell* in you. I resonate most with "dwell" because it

evokes images of home, of a strong foundation, of putting down roots and staying, living our lives where we hang our hat. The Jesus of John's Gospels might be speaking to our liminal moment here and now. No one ever said living and ministering within Christian community would be easy. In fact, most of the Book of Acts and Paul's epistles are about navigating the heartache and conflict of community. And through it all the message is stalwart – keep on keeping on. Don't disappear. Abide. Stay put. Listen and love. Dwell here, in this place, with these people, at this time.

Second, do the grief work. I spend a lot of my work week meeting with parishioners – in my office, in the hospital, in your homes, or walking the church grounds. What I hear is still a lot of grief in the parish about Frank's retirement, about the loss of Frank's presence in your lives and at St. David's, about missing the way things used to be. I use the word "still" not as a judgement, but as an encouragement. Working through grief and loss takes time. It's okay. It's normal. Give grief its due. It's not something we need hide from each other. It is part of the bones, part of the DNA of St. David's in this liminal moment. There is no way through it, but through it.

In her masterpiece "Late Migrations: A Natural History of Love and Loss," essayist Margaret Renkl understands working through grief in this way: *Here is what no one told me about grief: you inhabit it like a skin. Everywhere you go, you wear grief under your clothes...[and]...it will change in time. It will change so slowly you won't even see it happening. Time claims you:...your hair grays, the skin on the top of your hand goes loose...and the skin of your grief, too, will loosen, soften, forgive your sharp edges...You are waking into a new shape. You are waking into an old self. What I mean is, time offers your old self a new shape. What I mean is, you are the old, ungrieving you, and you are also the new, ruined you. You are both, and you will always be both...There is nothing at all to fear. Walk out into the springtime, and look: the birds welcome you with a chorus. The flowers turn their faces to your face. The last of last year's leaves, still damp in the shadows, smell ripe and faintly of fall.*

Working through grief takes time. It also takes community. Grief sociologist David Kessler tells us that “each person’s grief is as unique as their fingerprint. But what everyone has in common is that no matter how they grieve, they share a need for their grief to be witnessed. That doesn’t mean needing someone to try to lessen it or reframe it for them. The need is for someone to be fully present to the magnitude of loss without trying to point out the silver lining.” So take this liminal time to talk about grief, to study it, learn from it, tell each other about it. This community is strong enough to witness each other’s grief, to hear its story without trying to fix it.

Finally, one last suggestion for spiritual work: liminal space is the time to learn how, and then practice, letting go. I left this suggestion for last because this kind of work is the hardest. Personally, I struggle mightily - and daily - with this kind of spiritual discipline. In the words of David Foster Wallace, “everything I’ve ever let go of has claw marks on it.” It’s so hard to do. But as long as we think we’ve got to fix everything, control everything, explain everything, and know everything, we will never be a peaceful people. Theologian Parker Palmer calls this ‘functional atheism,’ as in: “nothing good can happen without me doing it, or controlling it, or fixing it.” Because really isn’t it about God and God’s grace? Isn’t it about our faith in a God that heals all things, renews all things, redeems all things? What would it look like if we trusted God’s goodness enough to let go of old hurts and resentments? What would it look like if, when participating in making an important decision, we said our peace from a place of prayer and discernment, and then let go of the outcome? What would it look like if we let go of our illusion of self-sufficiency and self-determination and handed ourselves over to the knowledge that we owe our very lives to the mercy of God?

In the end, everything boils down to gratitude and trust for our loving, present, compassionate God. As we find ourselves, for a time, doing our best to stand together in the shifting sands of liminal space, we are grateful for who we are in this place, at this time, and grateful for the opportunities God gives us to deepen relationship and connection with him and each other. My deepest hope for you

is that when you do arrive safely on the other side on this roiling sea, you do so strengthened, renewed, and grounded. And to God you'll be able to confidently declare: "For all that has been, thank you. For all that is to come, Yes!" *Amen*.

**Sources:**

"Dusk, Night, Dawn: On Revival and Courage," by Anne Lamott, p. 91.

"Late Migrations: A Natural History of Love and Loss," by Margaret Renkl, pp. 218-219.

"Atlas of the Heart: Mapping Meaningful Connection and the Language of Human Experience,"  
by Brené Brown, p. 111.

"Dancing Standing Still: Healing the World from a Place of Prayer,"  
by Richard Rohr, pp. 75.

Final quote from "Markings," by Dag Hammarskjöld. (In 1961, Swedish diplomat and second Secretary General of the United Nations, Dag Hammarskjöld died at the age of 56 in an airplane crash as he travelled to a warring region of Africa. After his death, Hammarskjöld's daily journal was published under the English title *Markings*.)

"Kindness: A Treasury of Buddhist Wisdom for Children and Parents,"  
adapted by Sarah Conover, pp. 17-20.

Why would we ever want to let go? Because it frees us. When we let go we no longer have to carry the world on our shoulders. "...for my yoke is easy, and my burden is light," says the Lord. It's like the story of the two monks traveling to a village far from their monastery. On their journey they came to a fast moving stream where a small, young woman stood on the bank, afraid to cross. The one monk reminded himself that when he took his vows he promised never to touch someone of the opposite sex. He nodded at the woman and passed her by. The second monk sped right past the first monk as he carried the woman in his arms across the stream. Setting her down on the opposite shore, the second monk gave the woman a smile and

went on his way with a quick step. With each passing mile the first monk grew angrier and angrier, until, hours later, he flushed with rage, shouting at the second monk, "You broke your sacred vows! How can you forgive yourself! You shouldn't be allowed back to our monastery!" The second monk faced him and said, "I dropped that woman hours ago. Have you been carrying her all this time?"