

Questions

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St. David's Episcopal Church, Wayne, PA
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“Grant us, Lord, not to be anxious about earthly things, but to love things heavenly; and even now, while we are placed among things that are passing away, to hold fast to those that shall endure.”

(Book of Common Prayer, Collect of the Day)

“Do not be anxious about earthly things.” I must say this is my favorite collect. I know that it is a strangely “churchy” thing to say, but each time it comes up in the rotation, I take my own inventory and ask myself.... Hey, did you hear that? Where’s your focus these days? How can you be a part of things that endure in an increasingly disposable and AI-generated world?

I moved from Paoli to Philly in May, and nothing teaches one more about one’s relationship to earthly things than when there is a need to pack it all up, move it to a new location, and then unpack it again. I am a fairly organized human, but I found myself asking, “Do you really need that? Is there actually going to be enough space? When WAS the last time you used it? Is this important enough to lug along one more stop on this earthy journey?”

I must have been vocalizing it, too. So much so that when I would enter Scout’s room in preparation for the move, they would stretch their arms out over whatever they were packing and say, “Yes, mama, this is all important enough to move!”

Remember the days when we could pack up all our possessions and wedge them into a car to go off to college or a first apartment? We might be more mobile than in other eras, but we definitely aren’t traveling light.

Yet our physical possessions are only part of what it means to look at earthly things. The gear is one thing, but the experience of earthliness is another.

In a podcast interview this past week, my friend John Francis O'Mara, a priest and musician, said his favorite punctuation is a question mark. The interviewer connected with the concept and suggested that in a world filled with exclamation points, the question mark stands out.

James' questions stand out this morning. He goes right for it without mincing words. James begs the questions - Who is wise among you? Where is the source of conflict? And what does God want? Those still are our questions now in every area of our lives.

There is something deeply holy (and often uncomfortable) about standing in the middle of questions without hurrying toward a conclusion. Living life in a human body in an imperfect world creates a natural tension. It's a craving, as James called it, to be ambitious in a way that is not kinship-building for the glory of God and doesn't honor the divine spark within each of us. There is a certain bravery that comes from being willing to sit in uncertainty together. To allow holy mystery and plurality of ideas. To take an honest look at ourselves.

As I prepare to say goodbye on October 6th, James' questions made me sit and meditate on our church community this week. I considered who among us I experienced as being filled with wisdom and understanding... and gave thanks for each one. There are so many of you, and I am grateful for how you have shown me the face of Christ.

I thought about the conflicts and disputes that have arisen during my three years. What was the root? Who was involved? What was the resolution? WAS there a resolution? What was my part? And I lifted it all up for the spirit to continue to blow healing and wholeness in and through us. That we might come to see a new level of belovedness in one another.

Most of all, I meditated on what God's will might be for St. David's in this season, trusting that God goes before us always. Hearing James' reminder - "Draw near to God and God will draw near to you." To us.

God's economy is so different from the world's economy. I don't say that to shame us. The under-the-breath battle for ranking that the disciples were doing along the road is a perfect example.

The Gospel reading today is fresh off the heels of the transfiguration, the moment on the mountain when Jesus before Peter, James, and John, appeared in dazzling white clothes and standing in the presence of Moses and Elijah, the very embodiment of the law and the prophets. What a sense of glory and awe. A fulfillment. So much so that Peter just wanted to stay there and set up a few tents. What could be better than this?

The holiness of Jesus was revealed, and then just a little while later, the disciples were faced with the brutal reality of Jesus foretelling his own death. Not just once. This is the second time, and it would not be the last.

It would be easy to look at the disciples like they were clueless. How could Jesus be teaching them day in and day out, and they didn't get it? But if we pull back the veil a little more, maybe they didn't WANT to get it. What if they fully absorbed the shocking reality of what Jesus was saying? This was going to end badly before there was a resurrection. Jesus was the one they had been waiting for... the Messiah... the Anointed One. But it was not shaking down the way they expected. So, what now?

Something very human.

They distracted themselves from the pain and horror by engaging in a sidebar conversation, a surprisingly premature power grab based on who they believed was the greatest. Was the gutsy or foolish within earshot of the redeemer of the world?

How does Jesus respond? He teaches. Jesus places a child in the middle of the gathering and says, "The way you welcome this child is the way you welcome me." The thing that gets lost in translation is what makes this teaching so powerful. The word "diakonos" doesn't necessarily mean a young child in terms of age. What is closer is the word "servant." In that culture, meaning someone with no power, no status, no ability to offer anything in return in terms of earthly goods or influence. Jesus goes one step further and calls himself the "servant of all." The absolute lowest position. The servant to the servants... and Jesus asked the disciples to join him there. And asks us to join him. There were no limits to what Jesus was called to do to love and care for God's people.

Today, over the course of all the services, we will place four children in the middle of our lives here as they receive the sacrament of baptism. The parents and godparents will make promises of what they will turn away from and take up in order to be a witness to the power of Christ to their children. And all of us will make a promise to be there too. Our "we will," when taken seriously, is a racial act of servanthood. Following in the footsteps of a God made human for us and with us.

In just a few minutes, we come to the altar rail as the ultimate leveling act. There is no greatest one among us when we reach our hands for the bread and wine. Our energy should be placed on the anticipation of the gift of body and blood, not our stuff and status. It is possible to put aside all the differences and be beloved children of God together.

Last Sunday, Mario (who is five) came to me after the 9:30 service. He looked distressed and wanted to tell me something before the last song was even finished. On the verge of tears, Mario said, "I missed it. I missed when I get to help make the Holy Spirit go inside everybody." I wasn't sure what he meant at first. I saw him gathered around the table with others with his outstretched hands in blessing, so I knew he didn't miss the consecration of the elements (better known as the "Holy Spirit part"). His mom mouthed silently, "He didn't get

Communion". I realized he had missed receiving Communion because he was in the restroom.

Mario knew that when he gets in the big circle in Allen Hall, he is part of something bigger than himself. Something that puts him on the same level as the grownups. Something that gets inside of everybody no matter who they are. Maybe we all come to know that, if don't already.

The truth is we have both inside us - the desire to hold onto those moments in the presence of the transfigured Christ AND the tendency to find ourselves bickering about our greatest along the road. We are both and we are loved. The invitation from Jesus is to draw near. To be servants, encouragers, and companions on the way. A far more important task than being friendly or nice. To do what the collect instructs - "to love things heavenly" and to "hold fast to the things that endure."

So, to get back to my friend John Francis. This sermon contains 19 question marks. Some are mine, and some are from scripture, but they all belong to us. This is my hope and prayer for you as depart. To remain curious and hopeful in community. To do the work contained in the collect - to not be anxious but to love and to hold fast. I love you, dear ones. Amen.

The Rev. Emily Given

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