

Proper 28, Year B  
November 17, 2024

How about those annoying people, you know, the ones who spend hours each day, checking out the latest online whatevers and sending them to all their acquaintances; the folks at concerts who spend the entire time audibly whispering helpful comments to their seat-mates; or the flirty teeny-boppers on the commuter train who “forgot” to buy their tickets before they boarded the train and say they don’t have enough to cover the extra charge as they clutch their shopping bags from the latest chic accessory store in the City - all those people who illicit an involuntary response in me of eye-rolling and “get a life.”

I was talking with a friend over zoom on Tuesday, as I do every week, and she said something that really struck me: maybe we should worry as much about our own mistreatment of those immediately around us as we do about atoning for our collective mistakes as a nation. Retribution to mistreated people, bringing home hostages, making up for the past - all these things are important and honorable and noble; but we need to remember those who are part of our everyday lives, family members, people we disagree with, yes, even those we wish would “get a life.” And in my case, by stirring up a hornet’s nest this week, I have deeply hurt some of you here today.

If things don’t go the way I want them to, rather than thinking God is not answering my prayers, how about if I ask myself, “What is God asking me to do with this? Why is God putting it in my lap?”

I believe God is calling us – you and me, here at St Thomas and Grace Episcopal Church in Brandon, Vermont – to figure this out. Sitting at dinner with my son James, daughter-in-law, five-year-old grandson and ten-month-old granddaughter confronted by bowls of homemade rotisserie chicken soup James had just whipped up, we were treated to the five-year-old’s declaration that he was not going to eat the soup because it had carrots in it: “You know I don’t like cooked carrots.” After the dust of drama had settled, I said, “Isn’t it interesting that we can all sit here together even though some of us like the soup, some of us may not like the soup so much, and some of us love the soup. We love each other, even though we don’t all love the soup.”

St Thomas and Grace is not new to weathering storms. I dare say there is not an Episcopal Church anywhere on this earth, to say nothing of worship or gathering spaces of any kind, which have not weathered storms, literal and figurative. I think of church buildings which have burned to the ground or have had their structural foundation irreparably damaged by flood waters; do we give up? do we try to start all over again? do we say farewell forever to this community? do we allow this tragedy to strip us of our friendships?

Do we give the seeds of doubt the privilege of robbing us of our love for one another?

Let us instead consider ways to provoke one another to love and good deeds, says Hebrews. Let's figure out new ways to take care of each other. I believe keeping our anger and frustrations deeply locked in our hearts and pretending that everything is okay is not the way to accomplish this. So many precious and beautiful relationships have been broken when "little things" are left to fester. May we hear, read, mark, learn and inwardly digest the words of your Holy Scripture that we may hold fast to hope: may our hearts be glad, our spirits rejoice, so that we might rest in hope, knowing that you will not abandon us, but will show us the path of life: for in your presence there is joy.

Those of us who are feeling elated over November fifth's election results are surely sensing the omnipresence of disapproval, generously doled out by those of us who are broken-hearted by the fact that "our guy" didn't win. Can we fix this? As we struggle to hold on to those we love but with whom we disagree, let us ask ourselves, "Is this really the hill I want to die on?" Has St Thomas/Grace gathered itself together in the loving community it has become to be torn apart by political unrest that has been stewing for decades? I am reminded of those hideously ironic accounts we have all heard of folks who have miraculously survived war or prison camps and returned home, only to die in completely mundane and usually avoidable accidents.

Let us please ask ourselves whose voice we are listening to: am I following the loud demands of the world, looking for safety and comfort, or am I listening to the still, small voice of Jesus Christ? "Separation of church and state," one of the tenets of this nation's founding, was not meant to leave church and Jesus and God and the Holy Spirit inside the church building, separate from the lives we live, the jobs we hold, the decisions we make, Monday through Saturday.

God should be the focus of everything we say and do and think, inside or outside our sacred worship space. Great Britain, as well as many other cultures, believed that their monarchs were ordained by God to rule; the Church of England was The Church and the Archbishop of Canterbury, the head of The Church, crowned kings and queens to demonstrate the inseparability of church and state. If you were a citizen of Great Britain, you were Anglican. Period. And if you were not, you were considered dangerous, heretical, untrustworthy, suspect, less than a citizen, certainly never qualified to serve in any governing positions. One of the freedoms we fought for in the Revolution of 1776 was the freedom to worship or not to worship as we pleased; separation of church and state does not necessarily mean leaving God out of the equation: instead it means not creating a climate where one is forced into worshipping a certain way. Send us now into the world in peace, (we say) and grant us strength and courage to love and serve you with gladness and singleness of heart. Father, send us out to do the work you have given us to do, to love and serve you as faithful witnesses of Christ, our Lord.

Let us go forth in the Name of Christ!

Let us go forth in peace!

Let us go forth into the world, rejoicing in the power of the Spirit!

Go in peace to love and serve the Lord!

Clearly, these are instructions for how we as disciples of Jesus Christ are meant to live in the world. And we can use these instructions at St Thomas/Grace as the pathway which leads us to provoking each other to love and good deeds, inside this sacred space, as well as in the wider sacred space of God's world.