



A Call to Discipleship in Community

Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost || September 15, 2024 || 9:30 am St. Andrew's Episcopal Church, Hanover, MA ||
Proper 19B || Isaiah 50:4-9a; Psalm 116:1-8; James 3:1-12; Mark 8:27-38 || The Reverend Amy Whitcomb Slemmer, Esq.

What a beautiful day we have to celebrate church together after a fairly glorious week. If you've had an opportunity to read this week's Call – our weekly publication with all the news and goings on in our community – you know that we are shifting into high gear for the life of our church. We have celebrations of ministry – like Jesse's next formation step and Dane's ordination anniversary; we have celebrations of life with two funerals for long time parish members AND we are on the cusp of new youth ministry – our Middle Schoolers invited to St. Luke's Scituate tonight and all highschoolers invited to join me at St. Stephen's in Cohasset; for new ministry and opportunities to experience God and church a bit differently.

This morning's scripture readings also signal a shift, led by our very busy gospel passage that Dane just proclaimed from Mark. Jesus has been teaching and healing folks all over the countryside, and the common thread throughout most of these lessons has been that the disciples don't understand. Last week's gospel passage included cranky or perhaps tired Jesus trying again to frame God's kingdom and expectations for his listeners and seemingly losing his temper – he certainly eschewed ANY good manners, when a faithful woman asked for healing for her ailing child.

The shift this morning is that Jesus sets his sights on Jerusalem and begins to teach the disciples about his impending suffering and death. And – points for consistency, the disciples don't get it. They are so flummoxed that Peter takes Jesus aside and rebukes him – you can imagine this conversation. Why would they have to worry about Jesus' death, when Jesus is their hero, their champion, their chosen King. He has performed miracles and has not been defeated by foes.

But as we all know, though perhaps this is a struggle for us as well - Jesus is not THAT kind of king or leader. He is the Good Shepherd, the champion of the poor, the rejected, the least and the last. His work is to bring peace and equity to the world, not by force but by love.

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After the unpleasant exchange with Peter, where he literally calls Peter Satan – referring back to the temptations that challenged Jesus in his time in the wilderness. I don't think Jesus actually thought one of his most devoted followers – the person who first refers to Jesus as the Messiah – is actually evil. Rather, Jesus sternly rebukes Peter for suggesting the human way out of the future set before him, of setting his sights on human comforts, rather than understanding the divine things that Jesus is describing.

Jesus then calls together a crowd and says again – if the folks want to follow Jesus they have to take up their cross and follow.

I am always grateful for this version of this story, because the Gospel writer quotes Jesus as saying that each listener is to take up their own cross- not a literal cross, not the cross that will eventually claim Jesus' body, but their OWN figurative cross - whatever it is that is preventing his listeners from following Jesus' teaching. I don't know what that would have been in biblical times. Perhaps the dream of being the most prolific fisherman in the region? Or The richest person or cornering the village market on some valuable good in order to wield financial power? Whatever other pursuits were publicly valued, but not nourishing for the community - not expressions of faith or love – as Jesus has described them.

We are offered this scriptural turning point to consider what our individual crosses might be. What is it that prevents us from following Jesus? What is the barrier or distraction that is in our way of doing kingdom work?

Jesus isn't prescribing self-denial to cause suffering - or suffering for suffering's sake. Little wisdom, love or light is generated by pointless suffering. Rather Jesus is prescribing a life and a lifestyle that places the love of neighbor first – practices that translate into a meaningful life, a purposeful life that values love of neighbor and demonstrates the investment of time and love in community.

I have been blessed this week to get to know two remarkable parishioners who passed away and whose lives we celebrate with Christian burial. Yesterday, we celebrated the life and legacy of Judith Crawford. This afternoon and tomorrow we will host and celebrate hundreds of family and community members who are grieving the death of Vernon Gibson. We get to celebrate and remind one another that both Judy and Vern are with God, in wholeness and restored health, while we, their families, coworkers, and friends are left without a valued community member. We are grieving their passing.

St. Andrew's is creating a space and acting as a conduit for centering, grieving, remembering and celebrating these lives as we reflect on our own. On our own successes and shortcomings. On our own brokenness and gifts that we share generously, or could invest more fully. This is

the work of a Christian and this is our work together – in this morning’s gospel parlance to identify our crosses or stumbling blocks that prevent us from following Jesus - all the time!

For those of you who know the lyrics for the musical Rent, one of the anthems is Seasons of Love when the cast comes together to sing about how you measure the value of a year -

In daylights, in sunsets, in midnights, in cups of coffee

In inches, in miles, in laughter, in strife

In 525,600 minutes

How do you measure a year in the life?

The beautiful and harmonized chorus is “How about LOVE” - measure the value of a year and a life in love. How much love do we share. How many responses – even in times of strife are infused with Love? How many deep and abiding relationships do we claim that are built upon and dependent on Love?

I am going to challenge us this week to go into the world as conduits of Christ’s love. To love the grumpy people in traffic. To love the distracted clerk on her phone. To love our attitudinal children who may not see us fully, but count on us completely. To love one another, as Jesus taught. Love wins. It isn’t easy. It isn’t a quick fix. It takes practice to become a habit and doesn’t ask that we become emotional speed bumps for others. It means that we make the most of most situations.

Luckily, we are in the midst of radically inviting our community and loved ones to return to church next Sunday for our Welcome Back Sunday. You may have noticed the beautiful gardening and yard work that a group of parishioners undertook yesterday as their expressions of love for this place and welcoming of strangers. And I know that the success of our invitations is absolutely based on love – so we have the perfect opportunity to practice between now, and whatever next Sunday will be.

This week as we continue to experience the beauty of this gentle fall weather, may we be reminded of God’s love for each of us as the perfect example of how we love others. Without judgement, without pretense, without the human distractions against which Jesus warned Peter. May we do our best to model God’s examples – and then return again next week to see how we have done. Amen+ I hope that you will join me in taking comfort in today’s world prayer observance. That is the beauty of joining our prayers and voices together with siblings around the world in recognition of the World Day of Prayer for Creation Care. Today inaugurates a season that will extend all month and will culminate in our celebration of St. Francis and the blessing of the animals on Sunday, October 6th. This season has special readings and prayers designed to connect us to the gift of God’s creation. To remind us that we are stewards of this perfect gift – mother earth, our island home.

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I invite each of us to find time to appreciate and give thanks for the beauty that surrounds us – whether it is in the exquisite design of a flower that is blooming, the lovely altar flowers, or the sight of deep green foliage against the sapphire sky – find time to notice and to give thanks. Even if you just remind yourself to look up as you move from your apartment to your car – to look up and take a deep breath in – expand your lungs and give thanks. Give thanks for the air that we breathe and for the beauty that surrounds us. That moment of connection can invite better stewardship.

If you are lucky enough to live where you can hear children at play, give thanks for their joy and delight and the continued safety and availability of the fresh air and water that they need.

I have great faith that some scientists are going to help us leapfrog forward into the planet saving space, and I am committed to some personal responsibility. My contributions include not using Amazon next day delivery, unless it is truly an emergency. I've reverted back to glass storage containers, which would delight my grandmother, and I pay attention to plastic packaging. I am positive that there are thousands more modifications that I could make to lessen my draw on the planet's resources and I'm committed to trying them out. I've become wildly competitive with my neighbors and our energy usage. Do you get those statements? It is a source of pride to be in the lowest consumption category when I can be.

What if we all spent some time thinking and praying about how church could support conservation and how we might make our love of our planet a bit easier to express? If you have ideas that we might implement, please let me know. If you've found easy or successful ways to conserve resources – I'm all ears for that too. I am optimistic about some of the progress we might make together between now and the Feast of St. Francis.

We are each invited to fill the silence and reflection time that follows with our own prayer of appreciation and confession for our stewardship of the planet.

Let us pray:

Bountiful God, you call us to labor with you in tending the earth: Where we lack love, open our hearts to the world; where we waste, give us discipline to conserve; where we neglect, awaken our minds and wills to insight and care. May we with all your creatures honor and serve you in all things, for you live and reign with Christ, Redeemer of all, and with your Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.