



St. Paul's Church

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Word and Sacrament

*Lord, as I read the psalms
let me hear you singing.*

*As I read your words,
let me hear you speaking.*

*As I reflect on each page,
let me see your image.*

*And as I seek to put your precepts into
practice,*

let my heart be filled with joy.

St. Gregory Nazianzen (329-389)

Recently, I was reflecting with other clergy how hard the work of the church is, even under ideal circumstances. If we are practicing what we claim to believe, we are celebrating the indescribable gift of the risen Lord. At our best, we are "stand-up" people, hearing God in our psalm recitations, seeing God written on the pages before us and in the world of which we have been called to be stewards. We are even called to recognize the "alter Christus," the other Christ as s/he appears among us, in the guise of friend and stranger. Most, importantly, we are called to proclaim these things, to make them known through word and sacrament, to somehow call attention to the ineffable. Lately, of course, the idea of the sacramental has been confined to the presence we see of each other on computer screens

and the telephone. The sacraments we are used to, the real presence of the living God at the altar, baptism, anointing, all of it has been unavailable to us. I cherish the time I am able to talk with people of the parish via computer or telephone; as I have said before in other contexts, they are "sacramental" to me, in that they are outward signs of an inward spiritual grace. My next thought is that they are not substitutes for the honesty in which we lay before God our selves, our souls and bodies and receive back Christ's own self at the altar, and I will say in all honesty that I have missed those opportunities.

I mention these thoughts because clerics tend to get caught in the world of their own parishes, the concerns for their own communities. It is good, as someone relatively new to the diocese, to hear from others the way they are "solving" their problems, what they are doing to "get around" the difficulties of isolation. I cannot help but be reminded of my friend the former Franciscan, who reminded me more than once that life is not a series of problems to be solved but a mystery to be lived. I console myself in believing that we are participating in a global

mystery with many parts, some of which are only in very formative stages. A new awareness of human dignity and its importance has emerged into the general conversation. Many of us have become aware of freedoms we have taken for granted and are now aware that we must be tenacious about preserving them. Those realizations are gifts in themselves.

I say all this on the cusp of resuming "in-person" worship at St. Paul's, and the simple anticipation of it brings me joy. Joy, as C.S. Lewis defined it, is anticipatory by nature, "the desire for desire," as he put it. While we are planning to enter the sanctuary again on September 13, I want to share Gregory Nazianzen's prayer, that our real joy is in putting the words we hear into practice. I do not want anyone who is unable to join us to feel "left out"; we plan to continue with our online worship (more about that to come). My hope, however, is that we can think of this date as a marker from which we are able to see and proclaim new vistas of opportunity, to put the words we have into practice, to embrace both word and the sacrament

If there could be an event designed to have us adopt communally the idea of humility, it would be difficult to imagine something more brutally effective than a pandemic. Although it has not changed the tenor of our political discourse, it has offered us a tutorial in humility that few other events could, simply because it is small, silent and unobtrusive, apparently undeserving of our attention until it unleashes its grief. Humility learned under these circumstances seems cruel, until we realize that humility has been the centerpiece of Christian life since its inception, especially among the early monastics who have been some of our great teachers in the faith.

Although we tend to think of humility as a kind of cringing self-abasement, a taking of perverse pleasure in being forgotten or unnoticed, for the early desert monastics it provided the context for the rest of the Christian life, a means of loving God and neighbor; it was, for them, a simple way of seeing each human being as valuable in God's eyes as ourselves. Their external renunciations were a background for an internal transformation that real humility was supposed to effect.

In ancient texts, humility has nothing to do with "low self-image" or acknowledgement of our miserable sinfulness; rather, it

is about love of self placed on the same footing as love of the

Humility and Love

neighbor. It accepts the premise that we are vulnerable and consequently sin. The feelings of guilt we often carry and paralyze us are the opposite of what humility meant to them. Repentance for a transgression meant the commitment not to fall into the same sin in the future:

A brother said to Abba Poemen, "If I fall into a shameful sin, my conscience devours and accuses me, saying: 'Why have you fallen?'" The old man said to him, "At the moment when [a person] goes astray, if [that person] says, "I have sinned", immediately the sin ceases."

The goal is reconciliation with God by a combination of truth and mercy, as a harsh judgment of others can lead to self-loathing and, ultimately, to despair. The primary need was to put oneself on the same level as the sinner; the idea was that healing occurs in solidarity, not in condemnation:

There was a brother at Scetis who had committed a fault. So they called a meeting and invited Abba Moses. He refused to go. The priest

sent someone to say to him, "They're all waiting for you." So Moses set off, he took a leaky jug and filled it with water and took it with him. The others came out to meet him and said, "What is this, father?" The old man said to them, "My sins run out behind me and I cannot see them, yet here I am coming to sit in judgment on the mistakes of somebody else." When they heard this, they called off the meeting.

Far from accepting sin as a bland matter of no consequence, these men and women viewed separation from God and neighbor as very serious business. It is not about minimizing sin; it is about learning to recognize it from seeing the cost in yourself, as Rowan Williams puts it. "If it cannot be addressed by you in terms of your own needs, it cannot be addressed anywhere." The acknowledgement of solidarity in failure creates an opening to live in truth and hope.

Truth and hope is where we plan to reside these next few months. We plan to take the virus seriously in our worship not only because the state and diocese encourage it but because our life together begins with love of God and neighbor. It will seem unusual, in the precautions we observe and the deliberateness of our preparations, but it is how we demonstrate our love for each other. And we will do so in humility, as that is where our love for God and each other starts.

In a time that is inviting us into new conversations about human strength and fragility, oppression and hope, I thought I would offer some recent books that observe the moment and offer some reflections on its possibilities.

Intimations Zadie Smith

Those familiar with *Swing Time* and *White Teeth* will remember the Jamaican-English writer Zadie Smith as a great observer of the cultural moment in “the before-times,” as well as a simply terrific novelist. In her new slim collection of essays, Smith offers observations on living in the pandemic as a city dweller and as someone who has a foot in both American and British worlds. There are comments on the politics of the moment (most of the essays were written prior to George Floyd’s killing), as well as observations on the object of writing in “Something to

Do.” Worth the twelve-dollar cover price, however, is the postscript, “Contempt as a Virus,” which shows the

Books

dehumanization present in the moment of a deep divisions on race, ones as deep as the approach to the virus, that infect self-described liberal communities as well as conservative ones. Smith is every bit as incisive as she is in her fiction; all one would want is a vision infused with more hope.

Dignity Beth-Sarah Wright

Wright, the Jamaican-born author of several works on spirituality and mental health, director of Enrollment Management at Holy Innocents’ Episcopal Church in Atlanta and an adjunct professor at Emory University, has written a new book providing a rubric for assessing our response to politically and racially-

charged times and the conflict that attends them. Her point of departure is the Baptismal Covenant of the Episcopal Church, in which one of the questions is, “Will you strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being?” Wright uses the word “dignity” as an acronym and tool for assessing potential flash points in our communal lives, which she does through stories (which she created), to demonstrate how respect (literally, to “look again”) can be fostered by asking basic questions that can be acted-upon in any situation where conflict can threaten community.

Using strategies centered on diversity, identity, growth, nurture, integrity, transparency and yield, Wright invites us to assess, interrogate, reconcile and leverage these tenets as strategies for preserving and enhancing dignity for all. The book is brief but readable, with a straightforward approach to the thorny problems of community by using rubrics centered in our own tradition.

Other News

Restrooms Finished!

Thanks to the tenacity of Marisa Henry, the restrooms at the church have now been completed. We can look forward to hot water and all facilities and can be proud to show our guests these improvements to our corporate life. Many thanks to Marisa and all involved in this effort.

On-Line Service Questionnaire

For those who plan to continue to attend services on-line after September 13, please remember to fill out the survey about service times. If it turns out that many folks will not be able to attend either time, we will explore other options, but we need your input. Thank you!