



The Company We Keep

Early in life, I remember hearing that you could tell a great deal about someone by the company they kept. This idea of having the people with whom one ate, conversed and spent time as an arbiter of one's moral compass has stayed with me for decades; it is hard to be objective, much less critical, about the voices that have formed you. It is why I believe that the ministry toward the food-vulnerable at St. Paul's has been so fascinating to me, because it is way of living into our identity as Christians in the most radical way imaginable. The people with whom we keep company come from incredibly eclectic backgrounds; what they have in common is their vulnerability and, for many, their marginalization. We have many folks who come to us from Joseph's House, others who are silent when asked where their address is. If you are like me, spending time with these neighbors, talking with them, eating with them is not our first impulse; it is because Christ is present in each of us and something in us hardens if we shy away from the opportunity.

Recently, I had a chance to talk with neighbors of ours who are just getting to know us. They are the students from the Honors College at Rutgers, many of

whom have used the evening Sunday meal here as an opportunity to earn hours for their civic engagement requirements. Dr. Lee Ann Westman, who has brought many of them here, frequently tells me that they have told her their experience at St. Paul's has been one of the most meaningful of their college career. Several have returned, despite having satisfied their requirement. When I met last with them, I told them about the idea of *ubuntu*, roughly translated from the Swahili, "I am because you are". It has no cognate in English or any European language I know (someone correct me if I'm wrong!), partly because we are so focused on ideas like individual independence and self-determination. But in many parts of sub-Saharan Africa, there is an implicit acknowledgement that, unless all members of a family or a community are well, everyone suffers. As Anglicans, we have had giants like John Donne to remind us that no one is an island, but the African model is perhaps closer to what we see in the table fellowship of Jesus with those who would otherwise be excluded. As the priest and author Kenneth Leech has said, "The religious authorities saw such behavior as sacrilegious; to the political leaders it was seditious. In a sense, we

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can say that Jesus was killed because of the way he ate and the company he kept".

Prior to the growing concerns about COVID-19, we had planned to see more of these young people in the days and months ahead. Our hope was to have them with us to help with some badly-needed painting and cleaning, in addition to the work they are currently doing in our dining room. If they are at all like I was, there is something deeply attractive at that age about being seditious, even sacrilegious, but I don't think they see what they are doing is especially radical. As we move closer to Holy Week and Good Friday-Easter, I hope we can pray for these young people and their formation, in the classroom and our corner of the kingdom.

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St. John of the Cross and Spiritual Discipline

In his book about discipleship, Rowan Williams has some wonderful insights about faith, hope and love as filtered through the thought of St. John of the Cross, who (if we needed more paradoxes in our tradition), sees the feeling of the absence of God in one's life as the surest sign of God's presence. For anyone who has had spiritually "dry" periods in his or her life, St. John is one of the most inspiring writers on the gift these times give us, precisely because he lived through them and the mystery they contain.

St. John believed that in process of Christian growing-up, one of the most difficult things is the sense we will have that we have lost our way. What we thought we understood we discover we never did; what we thought we remembered is covered with confusion; and what we thought we wanted turns out to be empty. We have to be re-created in faith, hope and love for our understanding our memory and our will to become what God really wants them to be.

Rowan Williams, *On Discipleship*,
21-22

As a point of departure, St. John accepted the idea that the mind works in three fundamental ways: it understands, it remembers and it wants. The great gift he offers is a picture of a journey from reason, memory and will to faith, hope and love. Needless to say, this is a hard road because we are fighting our basic inclinations all along this journey. The gift, as Williams reminds us, is that maturing in the Christian life begins in the understanding that our original goals were unattainable or illusory. Only faith, hope and love can save us, and it is these qualities we are cultivating when we feel deprived of the presence of the divine.

It is this sense of being stripped of our illusions about what we feel we want that is the heart of our Lent for many of us. "Stripped" is the most accurate description; going through these dry periods usually happens without our consent and, if you are like me, we need all the help we can get, especially the feeling of the warm, enfolding presence of a loving God. Lent offers us the chance to see our original goals as misleading or downright duplicitous. If we are sure about the presence of a God among us during Epiphany and the season that follows it, the journey that begins on Ash Wednesday gives us the gift of cleansing ourselves of intermediate goals (which is all the intellect offers us anyway) to immersion in a place where all we are left with is the faith, hope and love that God desires for us. It can

feel spiritually isolating, even painful, to go through this process, but it allows us to scrape the accretions off our spiritual life and stand defenseless before a God who is inviting us into the greatest mystery of our tradition.

Whether you are taking on a spiritual discipline (an extra few minutes of prayer each day) or sacrificing something for this season (sugar, T.V.), know that these practices are only a means to the end, which is offering oneself completely to this mystery, cleaning out the God-shaped hole inside us that we desperately try to fill with other things. This is difficult work and something we could never attain without God's help. It is in this spirit that, in the words of our Ash Wednesday liturgy, I wish you a holy Lent, in the name of the Church and of a God who knows our misunderstandings, confusion and emptiness, loving us through them all.

Holy Week and Re-Membering

Near the beginning of Thomas Merton's book *Thoughts in Solitude*, he writes of the wilderness experience that many of us associate with Lent, Holy Week and particularly the Three Days that the church has sanctified as the hinge of the Christian year. It is in the wilderness or the desert (the word is the same in the Greek of the gospels) where we will find ourselves the further we enter into Lent and we feel the pull of Holy Week on us. And because we have so few words for it (despite our tendency to fill our lives and our world with words), we have few terms for it besides despair. Merton writes:

This, then is our desert: to live facing despair but not to consent. To trample it down under hope in the Cross. To wage war against despair unceasingly. That war is our wilderness. If we wage it courageously, we will find Christ at our side. If we cannot face it, we will never find Him.

Our tendency, understandably, is to believe that there is a way around the despair and mystery of Holy Week. I don't even need to consult my memory. All I need to do is to walk into the church office and look at the numbers of people who attend Easter against

those who attend Good Friday. I have a friend who says, if it were in his power, he would prevent people from attending Easter services who had not been to Good Friday. That would feel like disaster but I understand his point. Easter is the central day of promise for us, the great "nevertheless" of our lives in the world, when things that were cast down are being raised up, the things which had grown old are being made new and all things are being brought to their perfection by him through whom all things were made. But it cannot mean much without the time we spend between the cross and tomb.

I don't need to enumerate the ways in which the world is coming apart, even leaving out the tone of our political discourse. As of this writing, our diocesan convention has been postponed by a fast-moving virus we are all watching with great interest, something that is affecting all our lives. Many of us have people we love who are enduring pain for entirely different reasons. And so many of us look toward the cross at the end of our Lenten journeys in this strange dissonance of despair and hope that Merton describes.

It is only with our consent that we can see this paradox play-out in front of us and finally to give ourselves to the task of "re-membering," to put ourselves back together in the assurance of the hope at the center of our faith. I believe this happens in ways for each of us that only God can understand. What I can offer are Merton's words from a different part of his book:

My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end. Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think that I am following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so. But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you. And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing. I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire. And I know that if I do this you will lead me by the right road though I may know nothing about it. Therefore will I trust you always though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death. I will not fear, for you are ever with me, and you will never leave me to face my perils alone.

God be with you through the remainder of your Lenten journeys.

Holy Week 2020 Schedule:

In my view, the end of our Lenten journeys this year will feel far more meaningful if we make it a point to attend the services leading to Easter Sunday. With that thought in mind, our schedule for Holy week services is as follows:

Palm Sunday (April 5) 8 and 11am, Evensong at 5pm

Maundy (Holy) Thursday (April 9): 7pm

Good Friday (April 10): 12 noon and 7pm

The Great Vigil of Easter (April 11): 7pm

Easter Sunday: 8am, 11 am and 5 pm (evensong)

Please join us for one (or all) of these services! See you there!

COVID-19 and our Ministries

As many of you know, a number of local institutions have temporarily suspended operations in response to the virus that is currently being tracked by the CDC and the World Health Organization. Believing that hunger is as much a threat to our guests as any pathogen, we have elected, for now, to continue to serve our guests while putting a number of health precautions in place. We will keep all informed as we move forward in a very fluid health situation.

Welcome Shinjoo Cho!

After some unavoidable delays, we welcome Shinjoo Cho as our pianist for the 11am mass, beginning March 15. Shinjoo is a very accomplished musician, having trained at Westminster Choir College and having a specialty in Argentinian music, including some exotic instruments—ask her about it! Please make her feel welcome as she joins our Sunday morning gatherings.