

Twenty-third Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 25, Year B – October 27, 2024

“Set your mind on divine things”

The Rev. Anne Hartley

ALL SAINTS EPISCOPAL CHURCH

SOUTH BURLINGTON, VERMONT

Jeremiah 31:7-9 | Psalm 126 | Hebrews 7:23-28 | Mark 10:46-52

Campaign signs are popping up everywhere, like crocuses in the spring. Recently, this ad popped up on my news feed: “If you’re a Christian, stop spending hours on biased, divisive news. Instead, read Christianity Today’s daily briefing. Clear, faith-centered updates in minutes.” That sparked my curiosity, so I checked it out.

I expected a faith-centered news source to publish stories on poverty, health care, and criminal justice reform, maybe an investigative report on universal preschool. Instead, the headlines were about British actor Ralph Fiennes’ new movie about the Pope, the legacy of Gustavo Gutierrez’ liberation theology, an article on “Radical Hope in an Age of Climate Change Doomsday,” and finally, a piece about the upcoming election, written by a Christian political scientist for evangelical Christians who can’t choose a candidate. The title of this article was: “Voting is important to me. That’s why, this year, I won’t vote.” The author wrote that although voting is not a biblical mandate, “Choosing to vote in democratic elections and, more generally, to engage in peaceful civic participation is in alignment with virtually any reading of the Bible.” The Episcopal church agrees and encourages us all to vote.

There is always something to worry about, isn’t there? We experience waves of bad news from mass shootings to Hurricane Helene tearing up the center of the country. We can’t know whether these specific hurricanes were caused by climate change. Still, for many, climate change sparks a fear of the future like election reporting does. Locally, we stay indoors to avoid contracting eastern equine encephalitis, stay away from downtown Burlington to avoid crime...there’s always

something. We walk around feeling fearful, because we don't know what the future holds. The disciples were fearful, too, because they didn't know what the future would hold.

During the past few months, Mark's Gospel narrative has taught us what it means to be a follower of Jesus Christ. The disciples weren't exceptionally brave, enlightened, or noble. Sometimes they were competitive, ambitious, self-absorbed, and full of pride. At other times, they were afraid and struggled to see the promise of salvation that Jesus offered them.

Today's story of Bartimaeus ends a whole section of Mark's Gospel in which blindness is the unifying theme. In Chapter 8, Jesus restored sight to a blind man at Bethsaida by baptizing his eyes with the only water he had, then laid his hands on the man so he could see. In Chapters 9 and 10, Jesus confronted the spiritual blindness of his disciples, who seemed to be unable or unwilling to accept Jesus' difficult teaching—that the Son of Man must undergo greater suffering and be rejected by religious leaders, and killed, and after three days he would rise again.

Though Peter had just told Jesus he knew him to be the Messiah, after Jesus repeated his teaching, Peter took Jesus aside and rebuked him. Can you imagine that? Peter accepted Jesus as Messiah in one breath and rebuked him in the next. Jesus recognized Satan, the adversary, at work. In the Hebrew scriptures, Satan was God's adversary. You can download my sermon from last week I preached last week on the book of Job at St. Paul's, and explored Satan's role. Jesus looked at all of his disciples—not just Peter, all of them—and said, “Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind, not on divine things but on human things.”

The disciples used their earthly eyes, so that fear, self-absorption, and pride possessed them. Paul's prayer in the letter to the Ephesians would have helped them to see more clearly: “I pray that the **eyes of your heart** may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in his holy people, and his incomparably great power for us who believe.”

This is an important reminder for Jesus' disciples, then and now. We are called to see and set our minds on divine things, not human things. We are called to take off our worldly glasses that cause us to see the world distorted by fear. Instead, we are called to see with "the eyes of our heart."

The blind beggar, Bartimaeus, showed us what that looks like. He called for Jesus. People around him tried to quiet him, but he called out "Son of David, have mercy upon me!" Bartimaeus understood that Jesus was the new Davidic king, the Messiah, the anointed one. Bartimaeus "saw" with the eyes of his heart what the disciples were unable to see. Only when Jesus said, "Call him to me," did people stop telling the beggar to be quiet. Bartimaeus stood up, threw off his cloak, and went to him, again, seeing with the eyes of his heart. Though Jesus probably knew what Bartimaeus wanted, he did not restore his sight until the beggar asked to see.

Jesus will not repair our broken world until we ask him to. We can't see him with our eyes, but we can only see him with the eyes of our heart.

Fear is stealthy. It sneaks up on us. We know what it feels like. We can feel it in our shoulders, our furrowed brows, in the pit of our stomach, in our restless nights' sleep, and our growing paranoia. Those are signs for us to turn back toward God. When we pass the house of a person who has a campaign sign in their front yard, do we feel compassionate and curious like Jesus or pride-filled and judgmental like God's adversary, Satan? Do we avoid that house, that neighbor, or do we seek connection?

Every Sunday in our intercessory prayers, we pray for our leaders that they may serve the common good. The upcoming election is important, but it can also distract us from the work we are given to do. There are people suffering now. The homeless and hungry, the sick and dying, the imprisoned. They never leave us. Stay focused.

For the next few weeks, practice spiritual self-care: Continue to pray and read the Bible. Turn off the TV and radio. Get outside more. Organize a food drive in your neighborhood so that

people of all political persuasions can come together to build up the community. Come volunteer at the Holiday Bazaar, for the same reason. Keep praying.

Rob Hirschfeld, Bishop of New Hampshire, told the story recently of his decision to go introduce himself to a neighbor whose yard was filled with campaign signs. When the neighbor invited Rob into his garage, he was stunned at the political posters with unkind messages, but he withheld judgment. As he looked around the garage, he saw a portrait with the first line of the Lord's Prayer written in French on the frame. The neighbor said he found it at a yard sale, but didn't know what the words meant. Rob translated it, then the two of them recited the Lord's Prayer together. That is what happens when we set our minds on divine things.

God works through all of us in ways we will never understand. Trust in God.

I'll close with a prayer that I say every morning that brings me comfort.

There's no storm that God won't carry you through.
No bridge that God won't help you cross.
No battle that God won't help you win.
No heartache that God won't help you let go of.
God is SO much bigger than anything we will face today.
Leave everything in God's hands and embrace this day confidently knowing that God will take care of you.

God is with us. Now and always.