

St. George Talk
October 17, 2021

So, you guys really know how to put some pressure on a girl. I have to say, I was more than a little shocked when I was asked if I would speak this morning. And then, last week's visit from the Bishop definitely set a high bar, and left me with a tough act to follow. So it took me a little while to figure out where I was going to go with this. In mulling it over, I realized I needed to turn to voices much wiser than mine, and I settled on three: the Gospel, our Presiding Bishop Michael Curry, and our own Pastor Gail.

I'll start with the Gospel. Today we hear about the very relatable, human desire for recognition, and consequently the power that comes with it. In this story, James and John ask Jesus to guarantee that their hard work and dedication will result in glory. Let's face it. Jesus had his core followers, but he was not a popular person in the circles of power. James and John were with Jesus from the beginning. They had loyally backed the dark horse and made sacrifices, and they wanted assurances that when this was all over they would get a prominent share of the glory that was to come. When the other apostles found out that James and John were lobbying Jesus, they got mad, because they wanted and deserved a piece of that recognition and power as well.

This is not a dynamic unique to the early disciples. It goes on every day in our lives, in our families, at work, in politics, and yes, sometimes even at church. But Jesus explains that the glory that James and John are asking for isn't what he's about. He says, "Whoever wishes to become great among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many." This puts a whole new spin on the concept of glory. It's not an individual endeavor with the final goal of prestige. It requires being in relationship with others and the world around us.

In Michael Curry's book, Love is the Way, he talks a lot about being in relationship. And he challenges us to consider how we relate to others and the world around us. He uses the Jewish Rabbi, Martin Buber's It/Thou concept to make his point. He says, when we relate to the other as "It" we make ourselves the Supreme Being. The "It" is a thing instead of a creation of God. "Thou", on the other hand recognizes the other as what he calls, "an active spirit". He points out that you can't own a "Thou". You can't stereotype a "Thou". You can't throw a "Thou" away. And he says, "The loving way to experience others is through a relationship, which requires you to forget what you think you already know and open yourself to new possibilities." It's this "Thou" relationship that Jesus is talking about.

Throughout his book, Michael Curry emphasizes the "loving" component of relationship. He acknowledges that it can be hard work. As Church, we typically engage in acts of charity that usually require contributing time and money to help others. This is a good and necessary thing. But, Bishop Curry points out that this sacrifice of our resources can be the easy part. It has a start and end point. I wrote the check and sent it out. Done. I showed up to the work site and now I can go home. Done. He makes the point that, "It's far tougher to maintain a humble and dedicated relationship with God and with others, especially others who are not like you." But this is how we create the new dynamic that Jesus spoke about in today's gospel. As Curry puts it, "It's a dynamic where there are no saviors. There are only people working together for a better future for the good of all."

So how do we begin to establish this "Thou" connection, especially with people who we perceive are not like us? One way is by sharing our stories. To quote Michael Curry again, "Sharing

stories is a powerful opportunity, but it requires us all to step outside our comfort zones. That stepping out is emotional, but it is also literal. Many of us live inside bubbles, whether we mean to or not. It's time to step out and, in listening to each other, to write a new story." He refers to this sharing of story as, "standing on holy ground".

So now, I'm going to ask you to stand on holy ground with me as I share a piece of my story, how Gil and I came to the Episcopal Church.

As I shared last week, Gil and I were raised in the Roman Catholic Church. It was a huge part of our life and identity. We never had a problem with our faith, but as adults we did question many of the actions, and sometimes inaction, of the institution. Eventually, we made the decision that we could no longer remain affiliated with the Roman Catholic institution and needed to make a change.

We knew other people that had come to the same conclusion whose response was to leave organized religion completely. This was not an option for us. Like I said, our faith was not in question, and a key component of that faith was the need to be in community, to worship and be in communion with others. So I started researching other denominations. It was the Episcopal Church that stood out to us. We were especially drawn to the liturgical worship style, the belief in Eucharist, and the inclusiveness of all people. And so we decided to check it out.

We weren't aware of any divine intervention that brought us to St. Anthony on the Desert. It was just the closest parish to our house. Our plan was simple, just slip into the back and check it out...unnoticed.

Have you ever heard the phrase, If you want to see God laugh, make a plan? Slipping into the back, unnoticed is impossible to do at St. Anthony's, especially on Labor Day weekend in Arizona. It's a holiday weekend, and people do their best to get out of town one last time before the end of summer. There were not a lot of people to hide behind. But even if the church had been full, St. Anthony understood that going unnoticed is counter to what community is about.

Our first contact was with Jill. She was more than a greeter that just handed us the worship aid. Jill understands that she has the gift of putting people at ease, and she uses that gift as a Minister of Evangelization, welcoming new people to the parish. She kept it quick, but took the time to introduce herself, get our names, and ask us what brought us there. Unbeknownst to us, she gave our names to the person reading the Prayers of the People, and during that part of the liturgy we were thanked by name for worshipping with the St. Anthony community on that day. During the sharing of the Peace, people left their pews and intentionally came up to us to shake our hands and say, "peace be with you". (This was obviously before the days of Covid.) The worship style and format felt familiar, and at one point Gil leaned over and said something to the affect of, "If there wasn't a woman standing at the altar, I'd think this was a Catholic Mass."

By the end of the service I was overwhelmed. It had been emotionally draining to make the decision to leave the church we had known our entire lives and seek out another option. If I had to describe how I was feeling walking into St. Anthony's on that first day, I would say vulnerable and afraid. As we were exiting the church, the pastor took my hand and said, "We haven't met yet. My name is Dorian." The warmth and simplicity of her statement was like a comforting hug. I knew there was a new home for us and I began to feel at peace.

Remember that saying? If you want to see God laugh, make a plan. Well, up until April of this year, our plans never included spending our summers in Roseburg, Oregon where, keep in mind, we did not know a single person. So, as God laughed once again, we looked for a spiritual home here, where we could begin to establish community. For a small town, Roseburg has a lot of churches. But I knew right away where I would start, the Episcopal parish.

Even though our experience with the Episcopal Church had been so positive in Arizona, I was still a little nervous on my first day at St. George. I've got to admit, it would have been nice if I could have just slipped in the back unnoticed. But once again, that was impossible. I think that is one of the things I have come to love about St. George. Gil and I are different. We are part timers from another part of the country. But you have welcomed us for who we are, and made it clear you value our participation in this community. I've come to understand that this is part of the culture of the Episcopal Church. There is no slipping in unnoticed.

In this month's edition of the Dragon Slayer newsletter, Pastor Gail talks about building unity. She writes about one of the Judges of Israel, Deborah, and how, under her leadership, unity of the tribes of Israel increased. Gail writes, "Believing in others created a community of coequals. It makes a scattering of humanity into a gathering of community. The Church, and more specifically our Episcopal Church, is this gathered people." I think this ties in so well to what Michael Curry is trying to say in his book, and what Jesus says in our gospel reading today. Our glory lies in being a gathered people.

I want to say a big thank you for welcoming us in a "Thou" relationship. Gil and I are headed back to Arizona soon, so this is probably our last Sunday worshiping with you at St. George this year. A couple of weeks ago Gail asked Gil and me what we missed about Arizona. We looked at each other and our response was the same, "nothing." That's not to say we don't look forward to going back for the winter and spring. We know we are not substituting one home for another. We were never homesick here because we found a community that did not just let us slip in the back. You actively accepted us and made us feel at home. We want to thank you for that. You will be in our prayers while we are away, and we ask you keep us in yours.