



ST. MARK'S ON THE CAMPUS

Episcopal Church & Student Center

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The Rev. Jerrold Thompson
Sermon for the 13th Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 16
St. Mark's on the Campus
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Some of you know that I once served a parish in Ohio, in a suburb just south of Cleveland. I vividly remember one day when I had been at St. Matthew's about 4 or 5 years, and a relatively new parishioner made a suggestion to me about something, and I was shocked to discover a thought flitting through my head. You know how sometimes you sort of watch a thought as it passes by?

Well when this parishioner made her suggestion, the thought went through my head, "But that's not how we do it here at St. Matthew's!" I was horrified! I had not taken time to consider what she said. I had not weighed the pros and cons and considered the merit of her suggestion. My mind had gone immediately to, "We don't do it that way here at St. Matthew's."

Now as a religious leader, you learn to dread such words in others, so I was fairly mortified to watch that thought wander through my psyche, and I immediately told the woman that I would explore her suggestion with some people and see where we ended up.

Our gospel this morning exhibits a reaction to my initial one on the part of the leader of the synagogue. "What are you doing, Jesus, *healing* on the *Sabbath*? That's not the way we do things in this community!" And Jesus condemns him with one of the worst of all things you can say about religious people, whether leaders or not: he calls him a hypocrite. Actually, Jesus calls not just the *leader* a hypocrite, but *all* those who would condemn him for healing this woman on the Sabbath.

It's easy for all of us to get set in our ways about our service to God. Our readings this morning beautifully offer both sides of this dynamic. On one hand, our reading from Isaiah emphasizes the gifts received through those ways, the necessity even of the ways, those disciplines, that bring life to ourselves and the world around us.

“Remove the yoke, stop pointing the finger . . . satisfy the needs of the afflicted . . . and you shall be like a watered garden. . . . if you refrain from trampling on the Sabbath, from pursuing your own interests on my holy day; if you call the Sabbath a delight . . .if you honor it . . . then you shall take delight in the Lord . . . and I will feed you”

Disciplines such as keeping the Sabbath are crucial ways of enabling God to draw us closer, into more steady relationship, so that our hearts beat as one with the heart of God beating in the world around us. Some of you know that the word “discipline” is derived from the word for student. That's an appropriate concept this weekend, as the University begins another academic year, as both students and professors place themselves under the discipline of continued growth in the areas of study to which God has drawn them.

Sometimes people will go to certain universities to study with certain professors, to become their students, their disciples, in order to place themselves under a particular *person's* discipline, to be formed by him or her, so that they can be more like that person in their academic life. Hmmm. That sounds a lot like being a Christian, doesn't it?

- We become disciples of *Jesus*, students of his spirit, followers of *him*.
- We place ourselves very deliberately under his influence so that we may be formed by God to become more like Jesus in our service *to* God.
- Granted, it goes further than that for the Christian because we believe that through Jesus we enter more deeply into the mystery of God.
- We encounter that mystery in its hidden depths. We participate in that mystery, become part of it, live it out in our lives.
- We are formed by spiritual disciplines to become ever more the like Jesus, and so we treasure those ways for their importance in our life of faith.

Breaking bread together, keeping Sabbath, our daily prayers, reaching out together to the larger community, loving whatever neighbors God brings across our path each day, from our parents to our professors to the stranger on the street – living our lives through such disciplines forms us into more Christ-like human beings and reveals the image of our creator to the people around us. Is there any doubt that God wants that for us all?

However, our gospel this morning reminds us that those very same spiritual disciplines given to us as gifts from God to draw us into more profound relationship and deeper service can also become idols when we think they are the end of our devotion rather than the means to it.

When we begin to think that those disciplines must always be a certain way – when we find ourselves saying, “We don’t do it that way in this community,” then the discipline has become an idol. When we say something about our community life *must* be such and such a way, we are probably clinging too tightly – and we might not be letting enough room in for the Holy Spirit to continue to draw us into the service of God. Anyone or anything through which we draw more closely to God has that potential to become an idol.

Our own Christian history is filled with such abuses as well as critiques of those abuses, some which became abuses themselves. Think of the iconoclastic controversies in the eighth and ninth centuries, when some Christians said others were venerating icons too much; the controversy led to violence among people who are called to love, beginning with each other.

Or think of Oliver Cromwell and his cohorts ridding the English countryside of beautiful images because of a dedication to Puritan theology, which knew perhaps *too* well the danger inherent in disciplines of beauty, without adequately appreciating their ability to draw us more deeply into the mystery of the God who of course transcends all things.

Our reading from Isaiah, with its emphasis on keeping discipline in order to live into the blessing of God, reminds us that we give glory to God by keeping disciplined lives; the gospel reminds us that spiritual disciplines exist to help us serve God, and that serving God ultimately comes before any discipline. When service and discipline are in conflict, as they sometimes will be, service comes first.

Any discipline can become idolatrous when we cling too tightly to it and act as if God draws us closer only through it. It’s deadly when we proclaim that for others. It’s self-mutilation of our soul when we claim it for ourselves. There’s a reason that the first commandment warns us against idolatry.

In this wonderful world in which we live, in which God has granted us so many gifts that reveal the divine presence breathing at the heart of creation, it’s all too easy for us to become inordinately attached to ways of life that help keep us in touch with God, to

confuse the gift with the giver, and it's all too easy to begin to give ourselves to the *gift* rather than to the *giver*.

The process happens subtly and slowly, and then one day individuals and communities find themselves giving their hearts to that which is passing rather than to that which is eternal, unable to distinguish the difference without considerable pain.

We always need to be asking of God, how does this activity in which we are involved serve you? Is it the service to which you are calling us as a community at this time? Are you calling us to sustain this work, or are you calling us to move on to another? Sometimes the answer will be to keep up a particular work, at other times it will be to change it.

There's that old joke about how many Episcopalians does it take to change a light bulb?
CHANGE????!!!

But of course that which does not change and grow dies. And we are not called to death; or at least we are called only to the deaths that are necessary for us to continue to grow into fuller life.

So I send you out this morning as a community with these marching orders: a request for prayer. I ask you to pray about what we need to let go of at St. Mark's on the Campus in order to continue living into fuller life in God. You see, like you, I love this community with all my heart. And I know that we are being called to fuller life, as we always are. And that always means movement and change rather than stasis. And that's ok. It keeps us healthy; movement exercises our spirits.

Most critically, it keeps us faithful -- faithful to incarnating the God we love and serve in Jesus Christ our Lord to the world around us, and in particular to the campus on which we sit, and which we are called to serve.