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St. Andrew's, Encinitas
2/25/2018

Second Sunday in Lent

When I was invited to join you all here at St. Andrew's, no one told me it might actually get chilly here! This week was downright cold! Many of you engaged in false advertising with me. "Come to San Diego," you said, "It'll be warm all the time," you said! In all seriousness, each passing week confirms for me what the Holy Spirit hinted at when I was able to visit eight months ago. This is a vibrant community with immense potential, in terms of inward and outward spiritual growth.

As I thought about this in combination with what Brenda and I decided to do thematically with this season, it dawned on me that St. Andrew's is gifted with people who aren't afraid to live what we believe as a Christian community. That willingness to live the gospel as the body of Christ creates that room for potential growth in our knowledge and understanding of who and what God is and what God is up to around us. It prepares you to discern where God is in our communal life together. And that's awesome!

But being unafraid to live that Christian life in community is only one part of our need of each other and God. There's yet another, deeper level of connection with God that we all have and need, and that's at the personal level. Who is God for us as individuals?

There is no easy answer for that question, is there? I'm a priest, and I don't have an easy answer, to that or a lot of other questions, much to the chagrin of the confirmation class. We read the Nicene Creed together as congregation, but think about the words you as you are saying them after this sermon. You may come to realize that the Creed is less a manifesto of answers than it is merely a place from which to begin conversation. Because not only can few, if any, of us say that

the Creed sums up our individual understandings of God, but we cannot even say that when one person uses the words “Jesus” or “God” or “Holy Spirit” that we all have the same imagery in our heads. It turns out, God is different to each of us, and maybe different to each of us by the day, or hour, or minute.

Peter, in our gospel today, has Jesus standing directly in front of him, telling Peter and all present exactly how Jesus’ ministry will end. Peter even though he hears and sees God face-to-face doesn’t understand. Listen to the first part of the Gospel again: “Jesus began to teach his disciples that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him.”

Peter is so upset, so stymied by what he is hearing from his friend and leader, that he pulls Jesus aside and starts to scold Jesus about what the message ought to be! I’m just imagining now what Peter might have said. “Jesus, you have got the messaging all wrong, you sound so dreadfully moribund. Drop the suffering bit, for all our sakes. How about jazzing up the message a little bit? Maybe you can add a bit about overthrowing Caesar, and condemning our political enemies. Oh! And maybe something about how awesome we your disciples are!”

And then the stunning moment comes, ““But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, “Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.”” Not only does Jesus turn, physically away from Peter and his little consulting gig, but he announces to the rest of the disciples that “Satan” can stay out of his sight. This is where, if Peter had a prayer book, two paragraphs we read from the Litany of Penitence would have served him well:

We have been deaf to your call to serve, as Christ served us.

We have not been true to the mind of Christ. We have grieved your Holy Spirit.

Have mercy on us, Lord.

Our negligence in prayer and worship, and our failure to commend the faith that is in us,

We confess to you, Lord.

Peter, with the best of intentions, decided that instead of listening to what Jesus had to say, that he could better manage the message and mission of God. It got him a solemn, public, and dramatic rebuke. And how often do we all do that? I know I mess this up all the time, replacing the message God is giving me with my own machinations.

But Jesus, being a good teacher, does not let the conversation end there. “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? Indeed, what can they give in return for their life?”

Jesus’ message for Peter, and all of us, is not simply to listen for the will of God in our lives, but to drop our defenses and to serve God’s people with abandon. And let’s be clear here, he probably means actual abandon. Those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for Jesus will save it.

It’s fair to stop here and ask, “what the heck does that actually mean?” And much like in confirmation class, I’d stop us there and say, “I don’t know, what do you think?” And there’s the rub, how do we discern the will of God in our lives? We certainly are informed by our common life here at St. Andrew’s, in worship, prayer, in the food pantry, at Friday lunch, etc... Yet, there’s still a deeper piece, the personal, individual piece. Where does God speak to each of us in our own lives?

I believe that is the best question to start with, not just what we think God is saying to us, but to really focus on the places we feel most connected to God. For some it may be exercise, others it may be the food pantry, for some it may be the commute home, or hiking, or a mountain, a certain vista, or the beach.

Wherever it is you hear God in your life, I encourage us all to spend more time in that place this Lent. God is doing something at St. Andrew's, and the Spirit is at work, but the fundamental need of a Christian community is to repent of our own selfish intentions, and to continually return to where we can listen for God best. It's there that we can discern what God is calling each of us into, and that will inform what we as a community can accomplish in the light of Christ's love for us.

So, when we read the words of our Litany of Penitence, and we think about the those two I quoted earlier, about grieving the Holy Spirit and our failure to commend the faith that is in us, don't just mouth them out and stop there. Use this opportunity of repentance to go a bit deeper with God. Go to that beach, go on that hike, really live into the moment at the food pantry, or on the commute, or with your kids, wherever that place or moment is. Not only will we have truly repented and lived our own personal faith, but we will have taken that next, deep, step into the unique relationship we each have with Jesus, and he won't even have had to call us Satan.

God doesn't ask us to repent or to lose our lives to feel awful about ourselves. God asks us to repent and to offer ourselves because God knows the true potential of each and every one of us. God chooses each and every one of us, out of love, out of excitement, and out of a deep desire to be closer to each and every one of us.

Amen.