

Well isn't this just the best passage in the Bible? Isn't it great to see that even thinking about a sin sends us straight to hell? How many times have you gone to hell this morning based on this passage from the Sermon on the Mount? Don't admit it out loud: we're in church and I'm a priest... And if you think the answer is zero just remember your brain keeps working while you're asleep. But of course we know this passage isn't about being perfect. Rather, it's about being perfectly human. It's never about checking a list, but living deeply.

Ironically, Christians have done the opposite of what the disciples are called to do here by creating such a framework for our faith practice that we focus on the framework more than the practice. We see this in an intense devotion to orthodoxy, an emphasis on the Ten Commandments, a passionate commitment to a particular brand of Christianity, and even in devotion to a type of prayer practice or liturgy. Rather than seeing our religion as the way to know God we would do better seeing it as a framework for wondering about God. My framework for wondering about God is the Episcopal Church. I am happy for this framework. It does well for me. But I will not worship a framework.

Such a focus draws us from the true purpose of the gospel message which is to walk in love as Christ loved us. Have we truly followed Christ in this way? We wring our hands for decades now over the decline in numbers in the Church. In some churches that is. Churches like the Episcopal Church for example. And I wonder if the question we should be asking ourselves is: why don't people feel this experience is worth their time while so many other experiences are? Consider what we do. We sit facing forward in uncomfortable benches and recite some stuff and listen to some guy dressed in a funny outfit. Now, for some, the stuff we recite and the things the guy says are really worthwhile but not for everyone. So what next? We also try to gather to enjoy one another's company and to serve those in need. But how deep do we go? How much do we really feel like this gathering is one where we can truly be ourselves and make real connections?

Each week the liturgy begins with what is called the collect for purity and in this prayer we admit that God knows everything we are thinking. It's a great way to begin because it invites us to be honest and open before God. It should be freeing and healing. It should feel like we can let out a deep exhale and just be who God created us to be. But how many of us really live into this? For so many, isn't it just a prayer we breeze by as we move along through the rest of the liturgy? Another way to ask this might be: is church for perfect people to gather, or for real human beings to gather, to experience the grace of God?

I think that people gravitate to places and activities where we can feel like we are accepted for who we really are. People need to know we are loved by God however we look and no matter what we've done. The Church, the Body of Christ, us, we are the sacrament that helps people experience this truth. So it's one thing to believe God loves us, but we need to experience it in other people to really know it's true. Because we have so much trouble with this, therapists will never go out of business. But if we are following Jesus' words today, it is not enough to go through the motions; we have to go deeper.

One way we do this here at St. Mark's is to get out of our pews and greet people at the Peace. Now, the Peace is a real part of the liturgy, like Communion. It is to be taken seriously. It's not fake coffee hour. And since it is a real part of the liturgy to be taken seriously, I am glad we get out of our pews and stretch our introverted selves and greet one another with a sign of our desire to be at peace with one another. But the Peace isn't enough. If our pews aren't filled week to week, I'm concerned we might not be creating an environment where people not only feel welcomed but truly integrated, just as we are.

I want to stop for a moment on this word integrated. We have had this wonderful catch phrase for decades now: *the Episcopal Church Welcomes You*. I'm sure for some, it has helped them go to an Episcopal church. But what we are really looking for is integration. We want all of us to be who we truly are and to feel part of the community. In this we are a sacrament: a visible sign of God's grace and the experience of that grace. Integration is not an easy thing to do. Can we integrate the homeless person who hasn't had the opportunity to bathe? The person suffering from severe mental illness who can't sit through our liturgy? Can we integrate even the average person who has had a few difficult experiences and actually has a personality? A variety of ethnicities and races? And so on: all of God's children.

It's an incredible challenge put before us this day by readings which are not satisfied with checking off boxes but invite all disciples of Christ to heal the world by living in true community, which doesn't simply welcome people but integrates them, just as they are. I'm not saying this kind of thing is easy. But Jesus is trying get humankind to experience a way of life not a prayer service. And yes, the prayer service should be a regular part of this way of life. And so should a willingness to be ourselves around each other in such a way that all people feel integrated into a community and part of what is going on. We have to design the way we operate so that real hospitality is at the heart of all we do.

So, how is coffee hour, going to St. Arbucks, greeting people as they come for prayer, renting the parking lot, everything we do, how is it done? Why is it done? To that end we will be doing a couple of new things this year and I hope they will be done in this spirit of integration and going deeper. One is for the feast of Pentecost, we will have one service, probably at 9 am so both the 10 am and the 8 am attendees will be equally miserable. It's only fair. Weather permitting it will be on the front lawn and it will be designed to live into the spirit of Pentecost where the Church became visible to the world and began its ministry. The second will be home groups which have happened here at St. Mark's called Coventry groups. The idea is to have homes monthly host gatherings which will include a bit of prayer and sharing our responses to scripture and then time for casual gathering over food. If you'd like to be part of running a home group or just want to learn more, come to the meeting on Feb. 22 at 10 am.

Even a cursory reading of the gospels shows Jesus at the work of renewing humankind by asking us to go deeper. By asking us to stop checking off boxes and to live into our fullest humanity, without fear or reservation, by sharing who we are and accepting others as they are. It's time for the Church to realize her fullest potential and be a community which accepts all of God's children and loves them just as each of us would want to be loved. It is time.