

St. Mark's Episcopal Church
Albuquerque, New Mexico
Sunday August 27, 2023, Proper 16A RCL
Text: Romans 12: 1-8
Preacher: Christopher McLaren

Our website reads:

The things we really desire cannot be bought but must be lovingly crafted through relationships. Together we are blessed to be making something beautiful for God in our neighborhood.

I really like what this says about being a church together. I believe that we need each other to grow in loving relationship with God in Christ. It matters to our spiritual lives to have a spiritual home, a faith community that we belong to and invest in. The quality of our lives is shaped, enriched and changed by our shared practices here in this place.

What do I mean by shared practices? I mean that as a community of people we embrace these practices: worship, prayer, building relationships, growing in intimacy with God, nurturing children, welcoming newcomers, serving those in need, giving generously, and having fun. We know that living a deep Christian life requires practice. It requires encouragement from other fellow pilgrims along the way. It requires some real commitment on our part, as the things in life that are valuable rarely come easily, prepackaged or cheap.

Our culture works to package and commodify almost every aspect of life. We all experience the ongoing barrage of advertisements telling us that life can be really good if only we will purchase this product to end our boredom, that we will be happy if we own this item, that we will be so much better looking if we will wear this kind of clothing and so on. It is really easy to get sucked into our world's consumerist mode as it is so pervasive, right in the hand now on your phone and it works on each of us individually preying on our insecurities or our own deep needs. I think almost all of us are really tired of those creepy algorithms that bring us more of what looked at, bought or liked somewhere else.

However, many of the things we really want in our lives cannot simply be purchased, they have to be thoughtfully created, lovingly nurtured, and playfully enjoyed. There are so many things in life that cannot be bought, and a faith community is surely one of those things. I think this is part of what Paul is talking about in today's epistle reading from Romans that challenges us to live differently than the dominant culture around us.

I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God-- what is good and acceptable and perfect. Romans 12

I like to describe St. Mark's as a practicing congregation. We know we don't always get it right. In fact, if we haven't let you down or disappointed you yet, give us at least another 30 minutes,

we're human after all. We know that there are things we haven't even attempted yet, but we are pretty adventurous as a community. We are a place and a people that are trying to become a community, and that is something so many people lack and desire and wonder where to find. We are practicing growing in intimacy with God through our worship, our prayer, our relationships, our service, and our learning. We want to be a church where all who enter our doors are welcomed as Christ, and so we practice hospitality and encourage one another to be open to the newcomer or simply to the person they haven't yet met. I recently visited another Episcopal Church in our diocese and at the peace the person said, "I don't think I've ever seen you before, so I guess welcome!" It wasn't exactly how I would coach someone to handle that first encounter, but it was actually kind of sweet and he did welcome me. For record, you don't point out that someone is new, just say, "Hi my name is Michelle, and I don't think we've met." Or ...

In these verses from Romans, Paul is exhorting us to focus on what is good and acceptable and perfect. The quality of our relationships here in this place is one of the most important fruits of our spiritual life. The degree to which we love each other, work out our conflicts by talking things through and treating people with a deep respect and kindness is at the core of what it means to be a faith community. Reconciliation is meant to be at the core of our community because that is at the core of who Jesus is for us and for the world. So, saying you're sorry if you know you've hurt or offended someone is important. It's a spiritual practice that goes a long way. If you torched someone off, take a risk to try to reconcile, restore a relationship and gain a better understanding of yourself and another fellow pilgrim on this Christian journey. Truthfully, if we can't do it here, we will struggle to be people of reconciliation in this world.

As the faith community of St. Mark's what we are trying to create is a community of love that others can actually see and be invited into. Every week I see tangible signs of deep love and affection for one another in this place. A meal brought to someone recovering from a surgery, a coffee conversation that was vital to someone's mental health and encouragement, someone dropping off groceries at an immigrant's home, or someone just taking time to call a person they haven't seen at church in a while. That is our most radical work. We all need a community of love and to the degree that we create that others will see it and desire to be a part of it. For the most part we are blessed in this way at St. Mark's, and I hope and pray that we continue to grow to be more loving, more accepting, more nurturing of one another's spiritual life. Each time we attend a meeting at church, go to a choir rehearsal, participate in a class, help with an outreach project, teach children, whatever we are doing here – it is an opportunity to encourage and strengthen one another in Christ. Every time we gather in small groups or for corporate worship, we are the body of Christ, and the way we care for each other as members of that one body shapes the quality and life of the whole community of faith. Paul knows this and calls us to take our responsibilities toward one another seriously; to love one another, to reconcile and forgive one another, and to help one another grow.

We have all been a part of groups or organizations that were unhealthy, and churches are certainly not exempt from this. In fact, some of us are in recovery from our childhood church experience. Some of us have been terribly wounded spiritually by mean-spirited and clueless human beings. I'm sure that you know what I mean, churches that are full of judgement and hate instead of acceptance and love. Places that are full of people gossiping about each other- tearing them down, an environment where complaining is an Olympic sport, places where people nurse

their grudges and collect resentments, places where kindness and encouragement of one another is studiously avoided. These are also practices, they are dark and negative practices that do not lead toward community but toward division, in-fighting and death. So, Paul reminds us of the beauty and interdependence of community. He is saying, remember, the ekklesia, the church is not a place that is meant to follow the destructive patterns of the world, it is a place that is meant to be far different to be transformed by the example and power of Christ. It is a body of people meant to be rooted in the loving presence of Christ in their midst, grounded in the compassion of God, full of the practice of forgiveness, and merciful to one another. The truth is that if we cannot do that here among those who love God and those who are part of this congregation, how can we even hope to be a witness to the world around us of anything resembling good news? I like remembering the words of our Presiding Bp. Michael Curry who is fond of saying “if it’s not love, live-giving and liberating, it is not of God.”

I’m not sure if you realize how counter-cultural it is to be part of a church. Not everyone does what we are doing on Sunday morning. Not everyone understands themselves to be part of a worshiping community that each week through music, prayers, confession, sacred story, holy Eucharist, and reflection endeavors to point ourselves in a Godward direction, to orient our lives toward what we believe matters to God, to become God’s people in the world. There are a lot of other ways to spend Sunday morning, and post-covid we are discovering that many people find different things to do and different ways to be on Sunday morning. Nationally all churches, mainline or evangelical saw a 25-30% decline in Sunday participation. However, God has drawn us, the People of St. Mark’s together, to work at becoming the people of God in this place, to as our website says, “build something beautiful for God in our neighborhood.”

I know that I am quite biased, but I wouldn’t miss what we do here each Sunday together as a practicing congregation. Frankly, just like you, I need the practice. I need to handle the scriptures and reflect on them. I love to sing, and I am moved and nurtured by the words as well as the melodies of the hymns old and new that teach me about my faith. I want my children to have meaningful relationships with adults that are not their family members or teachers at school. I want them to have role models who are everyday saints, who have been shaped by the life and teaching and ways of Jesus. I need to say my prayers, to hand some things over to God that are simply out of my control and to join my own spiritual energy to God’s ways and purposes in this world. I need to be reminded of who I am, of what people are for, and to whom I belong.

The Apostle Paul reminds us that we need to have skin in the game. That we live out our faith from day to day in our bodies and that it will require something of us, some sacrifice, some giving, some inconvenience if we are to live like God desires for us. We are an incarnational people. We are convinced that God demonstrated his love for us in the person Jesus. In this peculiar way, of God coming to us in the flesh of a Jew from Nazareth named Jesus, God gets to us, and shows us as much of God as we hope to see. We love God because we believe that God first loved us in the person of Jesus. The Christian faith is not so much an adherence to a set of great ideals (ethics), nor is it a great set of ideas (philosophy), but rather it is a way of life, a way of walking with Jesus, a relationship.

I want to conclude this sermon with a story that some of you may have heard before but like all good stories its retelling opens up new and fertile ground. Every time I hear it, it challenges me to live into these words of Paul, to be transformed by the renewing of our minds:

The Rabbi's Gift

There was a monastery, which had fallen on hard times. Its many buildings had been filled with young monks and its big church had resounded with the singing of prayers, but it was now nearly deserted. People no longer came to be nourished by the prayers and presence of the monks. Only 5 older monks were left. They shuffled through the cloisters and praised God with heavy hearts. Clearly it was a dying order, and they mourned the loss of the vitality they once enjoyed.

Deep in the woods surrounding the monastery was a little hut that the Rabbi from a nearby town occasionally used for a hermitage. One day, it occurred to the Abbot to visit the hermitage to see if the Rabbi could offer any advice that might save the monastery. The Rabbi welcomed the Abbot and commiserated. "I know how it is" he said, "the spirit has gone out of people. Almost no one comes to the synagogue anymore." So, the old Rabbi and the old Abbot wept together, and spoke quietly of deep things.

The time came when the Abbot had to leave. They embraced. "It has been wonderful being with you," said the Abbot, "but I have failed in my purpose for coming. Have you no piece of advice that might save the monastery?" "No, I am sorry," the Rabbi responded, "I have no advice to give. The only thing I can tell you is that the Messiah is one of you."

Finally, the abbot and the rabbi exchanged an embrace and the abbot returned to the monastery, pondering the words of the rabbi, 'The Messiah is among you'. Whatever could the rabbi mean? Could Christ be cantankerous Brother William? Could Christ be mean and spiteful Brother Stephen? Could Christ be the one young novice, petulant and withdrawn, and still to be named? Who could Christ be? The abbot pondered this all afternoon and all night.

The next morning, the abbot called the few monks together and shared the teaching from the rabbi. 'You can never repeat this', he said. 'The rabbi who walks in the woods says, "The Messiah is amongst us"'. were deeply puzzled by the rabbi's teaching. But according to the instruction, no one ever mentioned it again.

When the other monks heard the Rabbi's words, they wondered what possible significance they might have. "The Messiah is one of us? One of us, here, at the monastery? Do you suppose he meant the Abbot? Of course – it must be the Abbot, who has been our leader for so long. On the other hand, he might have meant Brother Thomas, who is undoubtably a holy man. Certainly, he couldn't have meant Brother Elrod – he's so crotchety. But then Elrod is very wise. Surely, he could not have meant Brother Phillip – he's too passive. But then, magically, he's always there when you need him. Of course, he didn't mean me – yet supposing he did? Oh Lord, not me! I couldn't mean that much to you, could I?"

As they contemplated in this manner, the old monks began to treat each other with extraordinary respect, on the off chance that one of them might be the Messiah. And on the off chance that each monk himself might be the Messiah, they began to treat themselves with extraordinary respect. They lived with one another as men who had found something special. They prayed and read Scripture as men who were always looking for something. There was a gentle, wholehearted, human, yet divine, quality about them which was hard to describe but easy to see.

Because the forest in which the monastery was situated was beautiful, people occasionally came to visit the monastery, to picnic or to wander along the old paths, most of which led to the dilapidated chapel. They sensed the aura of extraordinary respect that surrounded the five old monks, permeating the atmosphere. They began to come more frequently, bringing their friends, and their friends brought friends. Some of the younger men who came to visit began to engage in conversation with the monks. After a while, one asked if he might join. Then another, and another. Within a few years, the monastery became once again a thriving order, and – thanks to the Rabbi’s gift – a vibrant community of light and love.

This community of St. Mark’s is a beautiful thing. This body of Christ is capable of nurturing and encouraging each of us. It needs each of us to give generously of the gifts that God has given us. Community is also a fragile thing capable of being wounded from within if we forget what a great gift it is so that we nurture and guard it with care.

The things we really desire cannot be bought but must be lovingly crafted through our life together.

And one last thing.

The messiah is among us.

Note: The Gift of the Rabbi is attributed to both Scott Peck, MD and to Rev. Francis Dorff, O Pream and I have no idea whose original creation is really is, but it is a timeless story that I first read at the Norbertine Library in Albuquerque, NM.