

“Life-long Learners”

Sermon on Holy Trinity Sunday, June 12, 2022

Dear church,

“You don’t understand that yet.” Parents sometimes say that to their children when they want an easy out of a contentious conversation with a minor. “When you get older, you will know what I mean,” they say. Well, sometimes they may be right and certain things are not comprehensible yet for a child; but other times they are just looking for a way out of an uncomfortable argument. It’s not always the case that the length of life gives us better judgment or insight. We have to be honest. Sometimes people get set in their ways as they age, more rigid, less able to adapt to the times, less tolerant, and that’s usually not good for them or the people around them.

“I have so much more to say to you,” Jesus is quoted in John 16 when he prepares his disciples for a future without him. “There is more than you can bear now,” he adds. To me that sounds almost like, “At some point you’ll get it!” But this statement, while it may sound patronizing, is actually very important and comforting to me. It means that, from the earliest time of our faith, Jesus planted an expectation in his followers that there was more to come. Some truth, some insights, some revelations would come our way in the future, our Lord said. And since Jesus uttered those prophetic words, additional insights and truths have gradually emerged among us, although not usually without resistance, counterarguments, finger pointing and the pain of deep disagreements.

I would like to mention as an example the issue of slavery, a common practice at the time of the New Testament, found almost anywhere in the Roman Empire. Jesus doesn’t criticize the institution. He even compared discipleship a few times to being a servant, serving others. The words servant and slave were used interchangeably. Paul had no problem calling himself a “slave of Christ” or “a slave of the gospel” on several occasions. It is clear that the early Christians did not challenge the institution. But over time, a very long time I might add, people realized that if God created all of us in his image, the enslavement and submission of another human being might not be what the creator intended. Besides, slavery ran counter to some core teachings, such as the Golden Rule

or loving your neighbor as yourself. It took the abolitionists of the 19th century to move the needle on that issue, to conclude and inscribe in law that slavery is morally wrong. We learned something, but it took us a mighty long time. When you think about it, it's scary, isn't it, how long it took humanity to figure that one out!

I want to say something that fits with the theme of graduations this time of year. As Christians we are meant to be life-long learners. We are meant to engage and wrestle with Scripture and tradition, with faith and prayer, with the deepest questions about life and the most appropriate response to Jesus' call to ministry. So, what could it be that Jesus' advocate, the Holy Spirit, is trying to teach us today? What is the truth which may be awkwardly, contentiously unfolding before everyone paying attention to God's work among us? I believe there is something – and more than one thing – that we learn anew in every generation. Sometimes that may be a new spin on an old teaching. And at other times it may be a lightbulb moment, a small revolution. What have we learned about our faith in the course of our lifetime?

I don't want to answer the question for you, because each person ought to discern that for themselves; different people will come to different insights. I would be curious to know how your faith and understanding of God has evolved over time. In the last couple of decades, we have learned something about accepting and welcoming people who are not heterosexual. For many of us that was not necessarily the norm when and where we grew up. Many churches considered homosexuality "sin" deep into the 20th century. Another example... Many of us have also learned to see creation in a different way. The environmental crisis has further accelerated that learning. Looking at nature purely as a reservoir for human consumption is not as "normal" an attitude as it once was. We know more about how all life is connected and we re-discover sacred traditions that have always made that point. We know that ignoring this lesson could endanger our future.

Not always are new teachings and insights better than the old ones. Sometimes we go overboard. My point is not to tell you what to believe on the issues that are talked about these days, issues that all have spiritual implications. My point on this Holy Trinity Sunday

is simple: be a life-long learner! Never stop listening to the Spirit, the advocate, the revealer who will lead us further into the truth. Jesus promised us his spirit because he didn't want his church to be stuck in 1st century Judaism and its purity laws. He wanted us to be free and learn and grow from one generation to another. We also don't want to be stuck in 19th or 20th century Christianity, which had limitations and rigidities of its own. We need to follow Christ in our time and discern what his teaching mean for us today. It's an adventure and it's a good exercise. To say it in a more pointed way: it is not wrong to be wrong on certain issues. What is wrong is never bothering to figure out what God is trying to tell us. As Christians we are meant to be life-long learners.

May God bless us on that journey! Amen.