

Yr. B, Proper 11
July 22, 2018
Preached by the Rev. Furman Buchanan
St. Peter's Episcopal Church
1509 Words

Lessons: Jeremiah 23:1-6
Psalm 23
Ephesians 2:11-22
Mark 6:30-34, 53-56

Do you remember the game called ‘Telephone’? A person on one end of a line of people whispers a message into the ear of the person next to them...and then that person, in turn, whispers to the next person and so on...until you get to the last person who reports what they heard. Often, the message bears almost no resemblance to the original spoken words. Rarely is the message passed precisely from beginning to end with no errors.

In today’s opening collect, we give thanks to God—“who knows our necessities before we ask. God knows our needs before we speak.”¹ We pray to the One “to whom all hearts are open, all desires known, and from whom no secrets are hid.”² We can be thankful that God’s grace does not depend upon our worthiness. We can be thankful that God’s mercy is not undercut by our blindness. The God of love is not hindered by what we dare not or cannot ask. We are assured by Psalm 23 that God’s goodness and mercy shall follow us all the days of our lives.

Many of you will remember that our vestry joined our youth a couple of months ago for dinner and conversation, as well as for some fun and games. I cannot say enough about the positive spirit and energy of your vestry. We meet together. We study Holy Scripture together. We listen to one another. We make faithful decisions together. We pray together. And we have fun together. They are a special gift to this congregation.

Along with the clergy, vestry leaders are called by God to be like shepherds, following in the way of Jesus, serving and having compassion for people—within and beyond our walls. Our fellowship with the youth was an example of this leadership. It expressed the solidarity our older leaders share with our younger leaders. We embodied the vision of the Church described by St. Paul to the Ephesians in today’s epistle—a vision of oneness.

St. Paul explains how—in Christ—we are all brought near...not just to Christ, but also to one another...like the spokes of a wheel get closer together as they join the hub! The dream of God is that those who were far off, are brought near; that the dividing wall is broken down; that peace and reconciliation are gifts we can open and share with one another.

The competition between St. Peter’s vestry and St. Peter’s youth was mostly friendly. (I’m just kidding. It was completely friendly.) Laura, our youth minister, taught us all a new game. It was like playing the ‘Telephone’ game I described a moment ago. The difference was that instead of whispering a message from one person to the next; both teams were seated in lines on the floor and had to ‘physically’ communicate a message from the back of the line to the front.

For example, Laura secretly showed this image (a house) to the vestry member at the back of their line and to the young person at the back of the youth line. *Without* speaking, they had to draw this picture on the back of the person in front of them. Then *that* person would try to draw the same picture on the back of the person in front of them. This went on and on to the front of the lines.

If you think a lot gets lost in translation during the ‘Telephone’ game; you won’t believe how much gets lost in translation with *this* game!

¹ The Collect of the Day for the 9th Sunday after Pentecost.

² From the Collect for Purity, found at the opening of The Holy Eucharist, *The Book of Common Prayer*.

The team members at the front of those lines used a marker to draw on paper what they felt had been drawn on their backs. The winning team was the first group to draw a close resemblance of the original image on the paper.

This is sort of like St. Paul's vision described in Ephesians of how the Church works. You see, it all starts with Jesus—the perfect image of the invisible God. He is the perfectly true cornerstone, level and plumb. He is the rock of our salvation. From his perfect alignment with God—*as God* in human flesh—the entire household gets built. The first layer, the foundational layer built from this cornerstone, is the apostles and prophets. *They* are not perfect, but they are good enough. Upon these leaders, the next layer of the house is built. Like the first ones, they are not perfect but they are good enough.

Over time, God's 'living stones' begin to form a holy temple—one holy, catholic and apostolic Body *through which* God's mission lives in the world. Each generation participates in this mission of God, passing along the image of God to the next. God *could* choose perfection, but God chooses *us*...instead.

So, God's imperfect temple includes all the imperfect living stones of the faithful, placed layer upon layer alongside one, perfect cornerstone. *That*—in God's eyes—is good enough. “Almighty God...you know our necessities before we ask and our ignorance in asking: Have compassion on our weakness, and mercifully give us those things which for our unworthiness we dare not, and for our blindness we cannot ask...”³

And this is what was happening all over Galilee. The people were like sheep *without* a shepherd. They ran after Jesus from every village and city and farm. They were desperately seeking him. They desperately wanted just to touch him. All who touched Jesus were healed.

So, how are you *in touch* with Jesus? He promised to be with us when two or more are together in his Name. He promised to be with us in the Sacrament of his Body and Blood. He promised to be with us when we seek out and serve the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the sick, and those in prison.

I believe the more we are in touch with Jesus, the healthier we will be. The more the Church is in touch with Jesus, the healthier the Church will be. The more *this congregation* is in touch with Jesus, the healthier we will be.

So, what does this have to do with that silly game that our youth and vestry played a couple of months ago? Well, this is the image (the shape of a hand) Laura showed to the vestry member and the youth at the back of their respective lines. I stood between these two lines and watched.

The vestry member traced the shape with the very tip of his index finger on the back of the person in front of him. The youth planted one hand firmly on the back of the person in front of her, and with her other hand she traced the outline. She was more 'in touch' with the person in front of her. There was no mistaking the image she was passing along. The rules didn't say you couldn't trace; only that you couldn't talk.

So it was with each person in succession along these lines. Each vestry member attempted to draw with the tip of one finger, while each young person pressed their full hand in order to be more 'in touch' while tracing the image and passing it on.

Here are the results! When you only touch with the tip of your finger, the image of a hand passed along kinesthetically through 12 people comes out looking like this! (a paper with 2 dots and 2 asterisk shapes) When you are much more in touch with one another, the image of a hand passed along kinesthetically through 12 people looks...like a hand!

³ This is drawn from the Collect of the Day for this 9th Sunday after Pentecost.

Dear people, we are not sheep without a shepherd. We have access to our Father in heaven through a well-beloved son in the power of God’s Holy Spirit. We have this image of God...in the flesh for all to see, to hear, and to touch.

He is our cornerstone, true and solid. In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple. We are built together spiritually—in touch with Christ and with one another—for the glory of God. And we have a God-given mission—to seek and serve Christ in other people. We are not doing this *for* God. It’s much better than that! We are doing this *with* God.

We are not perfect, and the good news is that we don’t have to be perfect. God knows our necessities before we ask and our ignorance in asking. So, we just aim to be faithful. We just aim to be more in touch—with Christ and one another—in thought and deed; in word and prayer; and in mission and service to those who are far off and those who are near.

May God bless us all with many opportunities to meet Jesus, as he promised. May God mercifully give us those things which we dare not or cannot ask, especially the healing power of being in touch. “Surely, this goodness and mercy shall follow us all the days of our lives, as we dwell in the house of the Lord”⁴—the imperfect house of ‘living stones’—now and forever.

Amen.

⁴ Adapted from the final verse of Psalm 23.