

Tenth Sunday after Trinity

I Cor. 12: 1-11

Lk. 19: 41-46

+In the Name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Ghost. Amen+

Paulo Coehlo once commented, “The simplest things in life are the most extraordinary. Let them reveal themselves.” This conundrum is as the English say, ‘spot on’. Consider the kiss of a grandchild for no special reason or seeing a sunset that illumines the entire horizon (just like in the pictures). Such encounters initially belie the waiting depth to be discovered. The discovery requires that we stop merely observing the obvious and become open to the spirit which is present within the ordinary. Listen some time to Beethoven’s Concerto for Violin and Orchestra and realize that mere notes on a page are translated into this stunning audible experience.

In the last century 2 brothers from Wisconsin appeared on the American religious and literary landscape; Amos and Thornton Wilder. Amos became professor of N.T. at the University of Chicago and Harvard and made striking inroads to our knowledge of N.T. rhetoric. His brother, Thornton, became a teacher, then a writer, and playwright winning a Pulitzer Prize for literature. The one work with which he is most closely linked is the 3-part play, *Our Town*, about Grover’s Corners in New Hampshire. The play was written in a time of the Great Depression, ideologies and political chaos, and in the shadow of a great war. Wilder was criticized for his optimism in the face of social and political disintegration in America and Europe. This play does not attempt to cover up the hypocrisy or phoniness or smallness that occurs in every burg and town. Nor does it whitewash human struggle and weariness in the face of external and internal forces. The play does not pretend there are no social injustices, tragedies, or human errors. It does not paint a Pollyanna view of small-town life as if we could all live idyllic times if we just lived in such an imaginary place. What it does do is find lessons about life in a world with virtue and vices. Most of all Wilder wants people to focus on the life they are living in the present-moment and to come and see as well as value the preciousness of what is being offered to them.

We Anglicans, when we are at our most faithful, know well that reading Scripture is like this; it is never merely a matter of moral teaching or historical reporting; it nearly always is a matter of being engaged with very real human stories and behaviors, seeing how we share and participate in those events, and how God is active in and through them. We read Holy Writ using imagination in the best sense of that word—not as fanciful dreaming, but as seeing what just might be with God who is always creating new life, even in us!

A cursory reading of St. Paul’s words in I Corinthians this morning fits into that category. On first blush one is inclined to muse, “Yes, I get the obvious. I can look around me and see the variety of abilities present, and many of them are pedestrian or at least ordinary and expected.” But, if you hear his words contextually, and place them within a theological and pastoral frame of reference, they take on a different luster. Where I hope we land this morning is on the center of Paul’s message, which is first to recognize the spiritual qualities of life, and second, that those are charisms—from the word *charis* or Grace, are therefore derived only from God, and we are called to begin to value and appreciate them beyond the obvious.

With more than a modicum of irony Paul says, “I would not have you ignorant (agnostic) about your life as spiritual beings. He is speaking to people who have been pagan gnostics—people who view themselves as having special powers and knowledge of holy things. Paul has just focused in

the previous chapter about their behavior at the Eucharist and how they have not properly discerned the Body of Christ. (I know full well that we have tended to interpret this as a failure to understand the Sacrament and the Real Presence of Christ in it, so that people who 'don't get it' should not participate. But Paul is talking about the failure to see that all who are baptized into the Body of Christ share by means of the Eucharist in this Body. Failure to discern this is to have faulty view of the Sacramental life that binds us together in the Spirit.). Now he takes a very pastoral tact and allows them to see that spirituality is a charism—a gift from God, perfected in faith, hope, and charity, (as he addresses in Chapter 13) and finally lived out **in** the community and **for** the sake of the world. “You were drawn and carried away by dumb idols” may seem like foreign and archaic concepts, until we realize that idolatry has to do not simply with external objects, but our own wills worshipped above the needs of others. There are many current versions of this idolatry. One is the belief that the rights of the one out-weigh the good of the many. It is the belief that citizenship in America means that the desires of the individual are the highest good and over-ride the well-being of many. Another is the ever popular “I'm spiritual, but not religious”. So, what spirit is it that is being talked about, served, and lived out? This is usually rather rootless. Paul's response to the Corinthian version is strikingly simple; we have not received a spirit which serves ourselves but is subservient to the image of Christ. He is what the spiritual life looks like. Anything else is a false substitute. There must be a common source—God as giver, and there must be a common goal—to serve as Christ does in order to heal and sustain the life of the world.

Just what might this mean for us in the life of our parish? Paul's words are so obvious and familiar that it would be easy to not see the depth of them. Taking his analogy of the body at the very least it means that no gift which serves Christ's healing in the world is lesser. In fact, any measure of our spiritual life is Jesus. I know in any bookstore these days there are a million tomes on being and gaining in becoming spiritual. But the regula-the measure-is Christ, not some elevated sensed of our development. The first rule of the spiritual life is ‘it ain't about you’, or feeling warm and fuzzy! **It is about Jesus.** This is where our discernment begins and ends.

Second, our community is charismatic in the best sense of that language. That is, it is rooted in charism, gifts of grace. Some of those may appear to be pedestrian and simplistic, but where they alter the lives of people around us in acts of mercy and sustenance, they share in Christ's work and living mission. (last year your will recall we had a visitor during Advent who was destitute. He asked for help and you opened yourselves. Someone asked if we knew for sure about the need, or, it if was phony. Patrick Murphy made a very insightful comment. The meaning of our giving isn't whether someone deserves it, but in our doing the work of Christ. What motivates us is the Spirit of Christ and not the size or magnitude of what we do. Spectacular isn't always better!!

Third, we are a community of the Spirit. We derive our live and energy, our work and rest, our hope not from ourselves, but from God who has created and instituted us and put us in this place. We are not a social club even though our social life is rich (and I hope will be energized in the future far after the days of Covid-19). But it is the presence of the Spirit's life calling us to go beyond mere human efforts and good wishes to be an outpost of Christ here, now, unrelenting. There have been few, if any, times within our memories where we need to realize this more than we do now!

God provides the gifts and strength to serve Him, sometimes when we do not have as clear a view as we would like. In loving God we may, in fact give far more than we know. Several years ago a family gathered around their brother in ICU to hold him in their love and care, and assure

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St. John's Anglican Church, Greensboro, North Carolina

Father Mark Menees, D.D.

him that he mattered to them more than anything else. It would be hard to imagine a more powerful setting or deeper example of filial/familial love. It was a gift to be there and a moment that became filled with Grace. Remembrances were spoken, events recalled and honored, humorous stories shared, and his unique contributions to the family and community affirmed. Hymns were sung, prayers offered, and we read Psalms. As we read Psalm 31, and reached the phrase, "Into Your hand I commend my spirit, for you have redeemed me, O Lord, faithful God", a hand was placed on his head and he took one last breath. Human language can barely capture what was transpiring among us. The family wanted to give thanks for all the care and support they had received from a variety of sources over the few days of critical illness. BUT, in truth those of us who were with them were given grace beyond all expectation. That family was unknowingly a vehicle of God's presence and the spiritual gift of faith. There ARE varieties of gifts...Let us pray that we recognize and are willing to be vehicles of just such grace. Amen+