



Lent 4A 3/22/20
The Rev. Dr. Elize Feyerham
Christ Church, Needham, MA

Grace and peace to all of you, from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. I am so glad to be with you this morning, to be breaking open the Word of God and joining together in the prayers that we as Church are called always to offer on behalf of the world.

Although we cannot be together in person, I have a strange sense that in some ways we are more “together” now than ever. Across our Diocese of Massachusetts, we are united by all the ways we have found to reach out to one another; our bishops continue to shepherd us as a diocese by reminding us of God’s love and assuring us of the presence of Christ in our midst. Now, more than ever, we know how much we need each other, not just in our own parishes, but in the wider Church.

You all know that these are not ordinary times. And the thing about extraordinary circumstances is that they can either diminish our sense of identity and purpose, or they can call us into a deeper experience of who we are and how we are meant to live into our identity. I think we will emerge out of the other end of this experience of pandemic and social distancing a different church – and, I hope, a more faithful one.

As we break open the Word of God this morning, there are two realities that I want to hold up for you, realities that are actually not new, but have always been. The gift of these times is that we have been given the chance to embrace them more fully. I did not come up with these on my own; I was reminded of them just the other day on a webinar that was attended by over 600 people across the Episcopal Church and beyond.

The first reality is that we are not just the Church when we come together for public worship in larger groups. We are the Church wherever we are – we continue to be the Church within the boundaries of our own homes. You are the Church whenever you gather as a family for prayer. You are the Church whenever you pray, even on your own, for the sick, the suffering, the afflicted, the oppressed, and the sorrowful, for when you do that you are doing the priestly work of the people of God. You are the Church when you break bread around your kitchen or dining table – it may not be Eucharist, but it is definitely Church!

We have forgotten how to pray at home, many of us. The Book of Common Prayer is a book for the church and for the home; for the altar and the kitchen table; for Sundays and for every other day of the week.

The second reality is that Christ comes to us not only in breaking the bread and pouring the wine of the Holy Eucharist, but also, and equally as powerfully, in the breaking open of the Word of God. Over the past forty years, we Episcopalians have rightly come to cherish weekly communion – I wouldn’t have it any other way. But in our rightful emphasis on Eucharist, we shouldn’t lose sight of the fact that Christ offers himself to us in many, many ways, not just in



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the consecrated sacrament. Towards the end of our service of Morning Prayer, we will hear the Collect for the Fourth Sunday in Lent, which goes like this:

*Gracious Father, whose blessed Son Jesus Christ
came down from heaven to be the true bread which gives life to the world:
Evermore give us this bread, that he may live in us, and we in him;
who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever. Amen.*

Is that just about receiving Holy Communion? I believe it is about so much more. And scripture also feeds us, if we are willing to taste, chew, ruminate, and take it into our very selves.

Although it will not be forever, we are fasting from the Eucharist for now. We have the chance now to rediscover the aromas and flavors and textures of scripture, together.

So this morning I want to invite you to a meal prepared from John's gospel. What we taste together doesn't require ordained clergy to serve it – it requires, simply, a longing to know Christ and the willingness to give ourselves to reading, marking, learning, and inwardly digesting the Word. It's also a meal that you can go back to, time and time again, on your own, with your family, or with friends. Each time the flavors and textures might be different, because each time your life circumstances might be different. Your heart might feel or need something different. And the food of the Word will be there – Christ will be there.

There are many ways to feast on scripture. Many questions to ask of the story. You could enter the story in your imagination, as if you were actually there. What do you see? Hear? Taste? Smell? Feel?

Where are you in the picture? Are you one of the characters? Are you the man born blind? Or his parents? Are you one of Jesus' disciples? Are you one those who criticizes Jesus? Are you just watching? What question or prayer rises in your heart as you find yourself in the story? Does Jesus say anything to you, or do anything?

There is also a way of praying with scripture called lectio divina – sacred reading. If you are alone, you can simply begin reading the text, slowly – maybe to yourself, or maybe out loud. When a word or a phrase stands out to you, stop. Dwell on that word, that phrase; repeat it to yourself. Write it down. Sit with it, meditate on it. Maybe you want to write in a journal – what does this phrase mean to you? What questions does it raise? Do you hear Jesus speaking to you in that phrase? Ask the question, pray the prayer, "Jesus, speak in my heart. Help me to see what you want me to see."

Another way of doing lectio divina is to read the story several times, each time with a different lens or question. During Lent, three questions are especially meaningful, as we journey our way



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to the cross and Easter, as we ponder the claim that our baptism in Christ has on our lives. I'd like to break open those questions with you this morning.

The first question is: In this story, what do you hear Jesus offering to you, to us, to the world? What do you hear Jesus offering? I hear Jesus offering many things in this story – not all of them will resonate with you, but perhaps one or two of them will. And you will hear things that I don't.

I hear Jesus offering the promise that God's work will be revealed in the man born blind – hence, a promise that God's work will be revealed in us. I hear Jesus offering light to the world, to us, to our hearts. I hear Jesus offering healing and insight. I hear Jesus offering an ordinary, seemingly useless thing like mud, as an unexpected tool for that healing. I hear Jesus offering courage, as he responds to those who criticize him. I hear Jesus offering himself as the Son of Man and Son of God, saying to the man who has received his sight, "You have seen him, and the one speaking with you is he." I hear Jesus offering the possibility of relationship with him, as the man responds, "Lord, I believe." What do you hear Jesus offering?

The next question is, where do you notice resistance to what Jesus is offering? I notice resistance in the religious leaders to what Jesus is doing – maybe they are afraid of the disruption that might be caused. Maybe they are afraid of raising people's hopes and not being able to respond to the crushing need around them. I notice resistance in those who might be afraid of being cast out of the community for following Jesus. I notice resistance in those whose arrogance leads them to believe that God does not listen to sinners. Where do you notice resistance to what Jesus is offering?

The last question is, what has to change in me, or in this community, to be able to accept what Jesus is offering? This is an intensely personal question and also absolutely necessary. Without asking what needs to change in us or our community, we stop short of the transformation that Jesus seeks to enact in us.

What needs to change in order to be able to accept what Jesus is offering? For me, the biggest obstacle is the feeling that I do not deserve Jesus' offer of healing and love. This is not something new – I have been feeling it my whole life. Maybe you have, too. Another obstacle is that I am afraid of what accepting Jesus' healing will demand of me. I don't know about you, but this pandemic and its disruption of everyday life is exhausting me, and I am afraid of being asked to do more than I have energy for.

What needs to change in you to be able to accept what Jesus is offering? As you reflect on this gospel story, don't be afraid to share your thoughts with those in your own domestic church, or beyond.



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Talk about it with your friends (over the phone!) or your spouse. Talk about it with your children.

And then, finally, pray with them, whoever is in your circle. Ask for forgiveness, for healing, for insight into the next step. Ask Jesus to walk with you.

You are the Church – we are the Church – in these difficult days, wherever and however we gather.

Jesus is feeding us with himself, through the Word of the Hebrew Scriptures and the New Testament, and in the love that we are still able to share with one another.

I want to close with this prayer, written for a time of pandemic by the Rev. Dr. Katherine Sonderegger:

*This hour we turn to you, O Lord, in full knowledge of our frailty, our vulnerability,
and our great need as your mortal creatures.*

*We cry to you, as one human family, unsure of the path ahead,
unequal to the unseen forces around us,
frightened by the sickness and death that seem all too real to us now.*

Stir up your strength and visit us, O Lord; be our shield and rock and hiding place!

Guide our leaders, our scientists, our nurses and doctors.

Give them wisdom and fill their hearts with courage and determination.

*Make even this hour, O Lord, a season of blessing for us,
that in fear we find you mighty to save, and in illness or death,
we find the cross to be none other than the way of life.*

*All this we ask in the name of the One who bore all our infirmities,
even Jesus Christ our Risen and Victorious Lord. Amen.*

- The Rev. Dr. Elise A. Feyerherm