

“The Humble Way”

August 25, 2024 at Chapel of the Transfiguration – Moose, WY

The Rev. Canon Stephanie Spellers

Canon to the Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church

Opening prayer:

Ubi caritas et amor (where there is charity and love)

Ubi caritas, deus ibi est (where there is charity, God is there)

Amen.

I was blessed to preach here at the Chapel of the Transfiguration last week. But when I posted photos of the Tetons from this altar, nobody on Facebook or Instagram believed it. They said it must be a screen. It couldn't be an actual window!

But you and I know, there are very few things as real as those craggy cathedral arches in the sky, formed some 10 million years ago.

I invite you now to pause and sit for 1 minute. Meditate on what you see out this window ...

Now please call out whatever word came to you as you gazed at the Tetons. And then call out how you feel in their presence.

The word that rises for me is humble. As in, before this creation, I am humble. Whatever I think I've done, whatever I think I know, what is it next to this creation, this power, this truth? Yes, standing in the shadow of a mountain, it oughta make you humble. And that's alright. In our world, in our nation today, and yes among church folks, we could use a healthy dose of humility.

A couple of years ago, The Episcopal Church commissioned a research group to survey Americans about their take on religion, Jesus and the church. In particular, they asked participants to choose words that best describe Christians. Believers said we are “giving,” “compassionate,” “loving” and “respectful.” But people outside of church had a whole different view of Christians. They overwhelmingly preferred words like “hypocritical,” “judgmental,” “self-righteous” and “arrogant.”

It's hard to hear, but I think I understand. There is one strand of Christianity – and it's present everywhere, so there's no pointing fingers at “those”

Christians – that needs to be exclusive and right and better than the rest. They might point to John 6, today’s gospel, as justification.

Jesus has finished a tough teaching. Some hear it and walk away. He asks his core group if they’re leaving, too. Simon Peter answers, “Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God.”

Passages like this have often been used to justify Christian exclusivity and exceptionalism. If the question is, “To whom can we go?” the instant answer is, “There is NO one else to whom we could go.” *Therefore*, the only way to God is through Jesus and through the church that declares his name.

We have come to believe and know you are the Holy One of God. *Therefore*, Others need to believe and know as we do. Jesus alone has the words of eternal life, and he has only given them to his church, therefore you should find the right maybe just to one of his churches, *therefore* you should find the right church quick!

But what if we brought humility to the situation? “We have come to know” could mean God has offered us this particular path closer to God’s own heart. But God is so generous, and God’s heart for God’s children is so huge, God has provided different paths for other people to find their way home to God, too.

It might make me and my church feel less special, but it doesn’t diminish God in the least. If anything, it makes God bigger than us. That’s the kind of God I can get behind.

That’s also the God Solomon is talking to in 1 Kings 8:22-30. No one could question Solomon’s devotion. His love and adoration drove him to build a dwelling place for the holy. It is a great temple for a great God, outfitted with the most precious stones and metals on earth.

But Solomon knows the truth: “Will God indeed dwell on the earth? Even heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you, much less this house that I have built!”

In other words, he’s saying, thank you God for deigning to dwell so close to us. Thank you for showing your face in ways we humans can see. And may we

never forget that nothing we've created, nothing we can see or touch or imagine, not the church, not that sun, not that mountain, not even heaven itself, can contain you.

That's the approach I hope I bring to faith. I may be Episcopal now, but I wasn't always. I was only baptized at age 28. I didn't make those turns because this was the only true path. It's not because we're right and all those other pathways were wrong. I've committed to Jesus because in him God has become most real to me. God went from being some spirit out there, to being the Spirit who lives within me and animates all creation.

All that is true for me. AND I've seen the devotion and holiness of Hindus, Buddhists, Jews, Muslims. I've been shaped by the witness and wisdom and faithfulness of Pentecostals, Baptists, Lutherans, Unitarians, Presbyterians and every other Christian group. I know God is meeting people on those other paths. That doesn't dim or diminish the revelation God shows me on this Christian, Episcopal path.

In his final days with his disciples, Jesus promised his Spirit would move in other places and in other ways we couldn't understand and don't have to know (John 16:12-13). That allows us to be deeply in love with him and deeply committed to serving in his name, and deeply respectful, grateful, celebratory of other pathways.

I hope it's helpful to hear a priest, someone who drank all the church Kool-Aid, saying God has given us multiple pathways to God's own heart. It feels especially important to me that we say this, own this, witness to this humility, in a time when Americans seem to have lost ability to allow for multiplicity on any front.

Everywhere you hear the refrain, 'My side has to be right. And the only way I know we are right is if you are wrong.' We do it in our politics. Do it around national identity. And yes, we especially do it around religion. "My God is a jealous God, and you better bow before my God my way, or he'll be very angry." Sound familiar?

But that rigidity, that either/or thinking - it's killing us and alienating us from neighbors. We don't need exclusivity to prove we or our beliefs are special, whole and true. We don't need someone else to be bad for us to be good, someone else to fail for us to succeed.

Jesus turned all those hierarchies around. He said the last will be first, first will be last. His disciples wanted him to ride a mighty steed and cut down their enemies with his sword. He was and is the very embodiment of radical love and sacrifice.

God is love, and love is unselfish. Love does not create conditions for embrace. Love knocks down every wall, every barrier, to get to all the beloved.

So all praise to the God whose love is as big as the mountains ... and bigger still. And all praise to the God whose generosity shines in many lands and many paths, so that all God's beloved children can find our way home.

Amen.

