

St. Andrew's Episcopal Church  
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Proper 21 Year A  
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For all of my childhood and a good part of my adulthood, I thought being a Christian was pretty easy. When I was a child, our family went to church when it suited our schedule, so that was easy. Occasionally we baked a few brownies to be sold at a bake sale to earn money for a good cause. Once again, it was easy and fun, with the added benefit of feeling good afterward for making a difference. It was easy to bring my little white UNICEF box along with my trick or treat bucket which I gladly handed in at Sunday School, after delighting in shaking the box to hear all the coins I had collected. For confirmation preparation, we had to take notes on a few sermons and memorize the basic Christian statements, like the Apostles' Creed, the 10 Commandments, and the Lord's Prayer, but no one asked us what they meant to us, or what questions we might have - such as what happens to people we love when they die and how that fits into what we've just memorized, so we evaded any complex thinking about how to fit God into lives or our lives into God. I didn't even know that was what we were supposed to do. I grew up in a time when the norm was not to discuss politics or religion, so I can honestly say, sadly, I have no idea what my parents did or did not believe about God, what struggles they'd had, or hadn't, with our church's doctrines, or how God fit into our family life. We prayed the same prayer before dinner each night and that was about the extent of our prayer life. Although there would have been ample opportunities to connect the dots between our scripture and the social justice issues of the day, such as the Women's Liberation or the Civil Rights movements, or anti-war protests of the Vietnam War, I never heard a word about these topics from the pulpit. I remember as a teenager being passionately against capital punishment, but the church never taught me how to think about it using our three-legged stool of scripture, tradition, and reason to evaluate a position, so all my thoughts or arguments about this or other issues existed in a vacuum, absent the teachings of Jesus, so it was pretty easy to compartmentalize my life: there was 'going to church on Sunday,' and then there was the rest.

I also grew up with the familiar song, "Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so..." running through my mind and imprinted on my heart, and so I thought being a Christian was really all about me, or more precisely, about Jesus loving me. When I was old enough to realize that there were some people that others thought Jesus *didn't* love, (due to their race, ethnicity, or social status,) I wasn't practiced in seeing the disconnect between what I said I believed and how others were treated in the world. I never felt the call of action from Jesus to change the world. I just cared that Jesus loved me. That seemed to be the grand sum of my Christian formation. It's not a bad place to *start* one's Christian faith, but it's not a great place to stay.

Then something happened. I woke up. I felt the tug of the Holy Spirit on my heart and recognized it as such. I became more involved at church. I had a great epiphany: Kristin, the woman with whom I taught Sunday School and whose company I greatly enjoyed at church, could actually become my friend "outside of church". One of the priests introduced spiritual practices such as contemplative prayer, spiritual direction, and retreats at Holy Cross Monastery, and something

shifted inside. I came to know God. Not just to learn about God or the church's teaching about God, but I began a relationship, a give and take with that God. I sat with others as this priest taught us how to look at social justice issues, such as what constitutes a "just war" from a Christian point of view – not to tell us the answers or tell us how to vote, but how to think faithfully, how to take the teachings of Jesus and apply them to these issues, so I could wrestle with what God was calling me to do or care about. I so remember thinking, "Oh, now that I know God, and had actually fallen in love with God, my life would be easier." Maybe it was a flashback to the Sunday School song running through my mind: Jesus loves me, and if I now love Jesus too, and if I now fit Jesus into my life (or my life into Jesus), then Jesus will love me even more, and if Jesus loves me even more, he'll want me to be happy and have an easy life.

But the opposite happened. My life got more complex and complicated. Easy answers weren't enough anymore. I couldn't skip church like I did before. I missed seeing my friends, I missed being in worship, I missed absorbing the truth heard from the pulpit. My priorities shifted. I wanted to give more of my money away. My heart broke when I saw the long line of homeless or at-risk people waiting to receive a hearty breakfast from our Anchorage Program, and I wondered what else we as a church could be doing. If I hurt someone's feeling, I couldn't just brush it under the rug and forget about it; I felt compelled to apologize. This was not easy. This was more complicated and more difficult. I found it harder to go to the Country Club and listen to people fussing about getting their nails done or how difficult it was to find a "good cleaning woman". Life had changed. It was hard and exhausting—and it was filled with the movement of the Holy Spirit, to whose voice I felt compelled to listen and respond.

What happened to me was that I had learned how to repent. The more modern interpretation of this word is contrition for sin, but the original meaning, to which I am referring, is to embark upon a way that goes beyond the mind that you have. The Greek word for this is *metanoia* and it means a continual process of stretching your mind to look at your life and your world from a new perspective, not just at one point claiming Christ, but learning how to continually live into Christ, living a life in which Christ is constantly calling you to stretch and grow in your relationships with others and with God, continuously inviting you to look for and evaluate new expressions of the truth of God rather than attesting to a static set of doctrines of creedal statements. This means constant change, which is hard and exhausting work.

Oh, sometimes I wish I could go backwards in my spiritual journey. It would be so much easier to stay in the Sunday School faith where a few memorized statements would be sufficient to guide my life, and allow me to rest in the knowledge that Jesus loves me, rather than in the truth that Jesus challenges me.

This is Jesus' challenge to the chief priests in today's Gospel: to stretch their minds beyond their known set of beliefs and see the newly revealed truth of God standing before them. Our story today is set during Holy Week. Jesus had arrived two days before, on the back of a donkey, with people shouting his praise. He then went directly to the Temple and turned over the money-changing tables, and cursed a fig tree on his way out, alluding to the destruction of the Temple. He rode back into Jerusalem on the morning of this story, with the crowd on his side, and strode

directly to the chief priests and scribes, who asked him with what authority he seeks to disrupt the temple. His response is a deliberate attempt to discredit the chief priests - not only because they were collaborating with the Roman officials, but because they were blind to the new things God was doing. Their response, "we don't know," was awkward at best. Jesus raises up the tax collectors and said they will go into the Kingdom of God first because they were able to change their minds. Before Jesus, they didn't believe God was for them; through Jesus, they knew God was for them, in a new and life-changing way. Their perspective changed because of their encounter with Jesus. The chief priests, who were supposed to be the ones teaching and knowing about God, were blind to the new revelation, because Jesus didn't fit into the box they had created around God - they chose not to see a new way. They didn't repent, didn't stretch their minds to the truth before them which had taken a new form. Jesus' direct confrontation with the chief priests guide us in imagining that it made Jesus so angry that they refused to look beyond their own structure of orthodoxy or right belief to accommodate a new vision of God.

The basic premise Jesus offers to us in this gospel is that the eternal truth of God continues to be revealed in ways that may seem surprising, confusing, or difficult to make sense of, but that's the challenging work we're called into. It is so much easier to hold onto the single and simple belief that "Jesus loves me" and stop there, or throw in a few good works to feel good about, rather than to wrestle with the Spirit, the gift Jesus left with us, to continue Jesus' work of transformation of the world, until all are brought into God's realm of love.

While it is true that the love of God does not change, the face of God does. Think of a prism, with light diffracted by different facets as the light moves through. As if an ever so gentle breeze causes the prism to sway, so we see the light of Christ, illuminating different truths from different facets. Our work is to discern the truth that continues to be revealed from the false ideas which may also come our way. I believe what Jesus is saying is that the gospels should be instructive to us and the criterion for what is false cannot merely be whether or not they fit into our previously held beliefs. That's what tripped up the chief priests and Jesus doesn't want that to happen to his followers.

Sometimes it seems easy to discern the new truths revealed and that we could easily stretch our minds around something new or different. These are situations in which we are invited into deeper love, compassion, honesty, and care for our neighbor. These are pretty easy to spot. Those invitations are always of God. Other times, in some of the messy social justice issues we face today as a nation, we really struggle to know what is true and of God when the answers or even the questions aren't so clear-cut.

One suggestion I have for a way to look at difficult decisions and places of discernment is to recognize that each time we are offered a choice, each time we are invited to see something in a new light or from a new perspective, each time we are willing to entertain an opposing point of view, each time we are able to imagine something brand new as being of God, we can ask ourselves if that something new is turning some deep and inner part of ourselves into something that is in harmony with God and God's purposes in the world, or is it contrary to them. Each of us at each moment progresses one way or the other. Our work as Christians is always to move into a place that moves us and our world toward the purposes of God: love, mercy, peace, and reconciliation.

The final line in the gospel story today speaks of the tax collectors going first into the Kingdom of God, which means the chief priests can follow. They can follow the ones who changed their beliefs, by being open to change; they can follow the ones who felt the mercy of God in their hearts through Jesus' acceptance of them, by accepting others; they can follow the ones who looked for the new thing God was doing, by opening their spiritual eyes to the movement of the Holy Spirit.

There are times when I get exhausted from the constant pull of the Holy Spirit to shape and remake my heart and soul, so that I can be more aligned with the will of God. I imagine you do too. There are times when I wish I could escape for just a moment back into my Sunday school faith and believe it is as simple as believing Jesus loves me. I imagine you do too. There are times when I want my life to be simpler, when I wish I could compartmentalize my life into church on Sunday and the rest. I imagine you do too. But I know that's not my life as a Christian. Rather it is to be deeply fed by times of silence before God and spiritual retreats, by receiving the prayers of our healing ministers, by finding a group of spiritual friends with whom I can wrestle with the issues of today set within our three-legged stool of scripture, tradition, and reason, so I can continue the hard work of discernment of God's new revelation among us that instructs me how to faithfully live in response to the movement of the Spirit.

Being a Christian is not easy. It's not just "Jesus loves me, this I know." Yet, we never do this work alone. We always do it with God and with others. That's where God's grace faithfully shows up. Thanks be to God! Amen.