

St. Andrew's Episcopal Church
The Rev. Barbara Hutchinson
6th Sunday of Easter

Someone unattached to our parish family recently recounted a story which included a future-son-in-law and his conversation with his future in-laws who were observant Roman Catholics. The young man plainly stated, "religion is only for those who can't handle the truth that when you die, you die, and there's nothing more".

As I was listening to the story unfold, I was wondering what my response would have been, had I been in the conversation. How ever would I defend not only my belief in God but also my understanding that organized religion can indeed be a path toward a deep and abiding relationship with the divine?

I actually pondered this question a lot this week, and came to the conclusion that yes I do believe there is something after life on earth, and yes, whatever it is, I believe it is of God and therefore it is good, but that's really not why I'm a Christian and certainly not why I am a priest, promoting engagement in the church and dedicating my life to re-presenting Christ to the world by our church's actions.

So I had to really ponder the question, "Why am I a Christian?", apart from the deep yearning inside of me to be connected to the God who is beyond us, within us, and among us.

Many of my answers to this demanding question fell into place as I reflected upon our story from John's gospel this morning.

For in today's reading, we hear Jesus promise his followers the gift of the Holy Spirit as the way to stay in union with, and to feel the presence of the living Christ, after his earthly departure.

This is one of the reasons I am Christian, for as I feel and live out of the presence of the living Christ, I know I am in a relationship with a living and breathing God who continually recreates me and transforms me into what God intended. I know I'm always growing and changing and being formed into the person I am called to become and I like knowing my soul is doing this growing and moving work. I am grateful that God continues to reveal to me something of God's nature, or a new path to be in communion with God, such as sitting in my woods. I am grateful that when I preach on a scripture I preached on before, that new insights emerge, new truths are revealed, and new pathways to make them real to others are discovered.

I am grateful for this living and breathing presence of the Risen Lord, which at times feels like a warm sensation in my soul, at other times, a deep sense of awe that draws me to my knees, and at other times, a joy of abundance I could never have imagined possible. When I reflect upon all of the grace of being in a relationship with a God who is real and living and breathing within and among us, I think this is a large reason I am a Christian, not because I care what happens after death, but because I care what happens in life. I love knowing God to be present in my ordinary life and I love opening my life to God so that I can be in communion with Christ, and by doing so, knowing that I am accepting the offer made by Jesus that I may share the relationship Jesus and God share.

Being a Christian makes a concrete difference to how I live each day~ as I imagine it does for you too, for as a Christian I live in hope, I live in the expectation of goodness being born from all

things and all situations, and I live in confidence of a guiding force within me, pushing me toward truth and wholeness. This is the gift Jesus left his disciples with and the gift offered to each of us every moment.

I think this sense of a living life abundant through my relationship with Christ is what I would have spoken most about to that young man who thought religion was centered on what happens after death.

Our religion allows us to live from the knowledge that we never face life alone, that there is a God in whom we live and breathe and have our being, and which allows us to always hope for the coming of the kingdom. And the good news, of course, is that we aren't doing any of this alone. Jesus has given us an advocate, a helper, a guide, a pursuer, which allows us to do our part to bring in that kingdom of God, here and now.

Our being Christian is not really about us; it's about us, as Christians, making a difference in the world. I love this about Christianity~ that the pattern of our life is to be renewed by worship to then go out into the world as the apostolate, the apostles, sharing the good news, making a difference to others. A church I heard about yesterday, Uses as their dismissal, "Go in peace and be the church." What a marvelous idea!

In our gospel story today, Jesus shows us how to do this work in the world. It's by washing each other's feet. Jesus showed us that by assuming the stance of humility, by being certain that through showing our vulnerability we are exhibiting strength. Where else, but here within the church, on Maundy Thursday when we wash each others feet, or each week as we kneel at the altar rail, would we be reminded that it's not about us, that's it's about serving others.

Being a follower of Jesus gives me my purpose – bringing in God’s kingdom – and shows me how to do this – by serving others with humility. Jesus went around the table washing everyone’s feet, not skipping anyone, not making anyone more important than the next.

It’s a joy to know my religion honors all people equally for Jesus loved all gathered around that table, and shows me how to order my life accordingly, with steadfast love for all people.

But perhaps for me, the most important truth of being a Jesus follower which is revealed in our gospel story today , and which makes me again glad to be a Christian, is that Jesus shares this good news of the arrival of the Holy Spirit to the disciples as a group. The gift is not given to them individually or conditionally upon their own worthiness, but it is given to the community as a whole.

It is the Spirit that will make it possible for the disciple’s ongoing union with one another in the love they are commanded to carry out. In the farewell discourse today, Jesus sets up the relationship that when we love one another, the spirit will dwell within us. Jesus shows us that our love of God, our ability to be present to the living presence of Christ and to the indwelling of the spirit, necessitates that we love others. With the arrival of the Holy Spirit, our lens through which we see our reality will always be one of compassion and love. The Holy Spirit continually calls us into community with people whom at times we may struggle with to get along with, and yet at other times we may delight in each other’s company.

Community matters to Christians and that perhaps is the greatest challenge and greatest joy the gift of the Holy Spirit offers us. We are to do this work in Christ and with each other.

For in community, we encounter the living Christ. In the broken bread and poured wine, as we come forward as a parish family, we find the Risen Lord. In the passing of the peace, we may feel the

draw ever closer into community. These are all actions of the Holy Spirit.

In our parish community, the Spirit shows up in lighting upon our hearts the passion for our community meal program, or through the excitement about a children's bell choir so that we feel an imperative, not just as the parents of the parish to make this happen, but an imperative of the Holy spirit to search out bells which we could borrow or share while we test out this pocket of energy, or through the emergence of perhaps a contemplative prayer service outside in the summer in the memorial garden when we can allow the setting sun and the taize music to draw our hearts to Christ in a brand new way, or in becoming the inviting and welcoming community we feel called to be by offering a warm hearts café as part of our coffee hour, so we can know each other better and we can once again look out in the pews and feel we know everyone.

There are an endless number of possibilities of how the Spirit will shape and move our parish into living into the commandment of Jesus - of loving one another as Jesus loved them. We're never done. And that is the joy of being a Christian.

Now the rub here of course is that when we open our lives, individually or communally to the Spirit, we can't determine where the Spirit will lead us. We can't say, oh come over here and ignite a fire in our hearts for outreach and children's ministry formation, for there's so much more to do there - and then say, but don't touch this area - we like that just fine the way it is. We need to merely trust in the spirit to guide us into the truth of who we are and can become. It's all about trust. Trusting one another. Trusting God.

It can be hard work following the Spirit. But our gospel story today tells us that the spirit is a gift from Jesus, so that we may know his presence, and feel his pull upon our hearts into the resurrected lives he intends for us to live today.

So why are you a Christian? How would you respond to this young man's declaration that religion is only for those people who can't handle the truth that when you die you die?

My sense is your response, like mine, is complex and perhaps even complicated. It may be that your life is so terrible now, the only hope you can hold onto is that eternal life will be better. It may be that your sense of being a Christian is tied up in not what's later, but what is right now, and you see the Christian life as an abundant one and you want that joy and sense of hopefulness. It may be that you understand God to be something "other than yourself" and that compels you to bring in this "other life", this life of the risen Lord, into our world so our life is expanded. It may be because you are similar to Alice Rumphius, in the beloved children's classic book, *Miss Rumphius*, who had a burning desire to make the world a more beautiful place, and did so by scattering lupine seeds everywhere she went along the Maine coast. Perhaps you want to leave the world a more beautiful, or more caring or more just place and by being Christian you have been given the desire and the tools and the strength through the Spirit to do so. It may be that you know in your heart that you are called to be in community, and even when that's a struggle, which it often can be, it's one you will faithfully engage in, so that through loving others, you know the spirit dwells within us. You are connected to something bigger than yourself and somehow you know that's what God intends for you.

Or it may be something completely different. And if so, I hope you tell me. I want to know.

But, whatever it is, I encourage you to think about why you are a Christian, I invite you to ponder the question, and set it within the framework of today's gospel reading.

For the key is in the gift of the Holy Spirit, which we learn from Jesus in today's reading we have been given, not to tame, but to follow, to follow into life abundant. May we always find the way to do this together, as Christ desires.

Amen.