

Bookends

Sixth Sunday after the Epiphany—Year A

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St. Mark's Episcopal Church | Milwaukee, WI

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I imagine every profession has peculiar weeks. Parent-teacher conferences for educators. St. Patty's day for bartenders. Fiscal year end for businesspeople. It's no different for church folks. We have peculiar weeks. St. Mark's just finished an unusual week in the office. Typically administration, clergy and music staff spend the week preparing for Sunday worship. There's nothing unusual about that. But, this week, in addition to regular Sunday services, we found ourselves preparing for a baptism and a funeral at the same time. We're so lucky to be welcoming little baby Adam Boyd into the family of Christ on February 26. We will baptize him in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. And it is our sad honor to bury Peter Lunsford's ashes in the Memorial Garden this coming week. We will commend his spirit to God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit. Both children of this parish, beloved of St. Mark's and beloved of God.

What I found most remarkable about having to prepare for these two liturgies at the exact same time was how similar the two events are. At both a baptism and at a funeral, we gather together, we sing songs, we share bread and wine and the Gospel stories. At both, we dress up the church in white, light candles, prepare beautiful flowers. At both, we commend someone to God—either at the beginning of life or at the end. Both the baptism and the funeral try to convey something of the Easter hope that we celebrate each year in the mystery of Christ's action on earth. We affirm in both cases that there is nothing on heaven or on earth that can separate a Christian from the love of a benevolent God.

The feelings at the two services are so different. But the shape of the services is essentially the same. I started thinking of the baptismal rite and the funeral rite as these gorgeous, sacred, matching bookends to the Christian life.

Which, of course, begs the question: what goes in the middle?

What goes in the middle between your baptism and your funeral? I suppose that's the million dollar question of existence. How ought a person live all the days and the nights allotted to her while the earth circles around the sun?

I think Jesus is trying to answer this question in the Sermon on the Mount. There's a reason it's famous. We've been listening to excerpts of this massive sermon—the longest bit of speech we hear from Jesus in his entire ministry—for a few weeks. This gigantic sermon teaches us how to pray—it's where we learn the Lord's Prayer. This sermon teaches us to pay special attention to the poor, the meek, the grieving, the pitiable. This sermon teaches us about proper relationships—relationships that privilege kindness and forgiveness; justice and compassion. There's not much that the Sermon on the Mount doesn't cover.

“Ask and it shall be given; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you,” preaches Jesus.

“Beware of false prophets who come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly they are ravening wolves. You shall know them by their fruits,” preaches Jesus.

“Everyone then who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on rock. The rain fell, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on rock,” preaches Jesus.

St. Augustine, one of the early architects of the Christian faith, famously writes about the Sermon on the Mount:

“If anyone will piously and soberly consider the sermon which our Lord Jesus Christ spoke on the mount, as we read it in the Gospel according to Matthew, I think that he will find in it, so far as regards the highest morals, a perfect standard of the Christian life.”

A perfect standard for the Christian life. Please note: I do not believe that Jesus is preaching here to teach us how to get God to love us better or more. As we say in the funeral rites and the baptismal rites—God’s love is a foregone conclusion, and you can no more get rid of God’s love than you can get rid of taxes on April 15.

But when Christians throughout the history of our sect have felt the love of God, they have always turned to the next question: knowing that God loves me, how should I live?

And so, the Sermon on the Mount is not so much a treatise on the love of God, but it is a primer on how to be a disciple of Christ.

I get it. There are some times in life when we are not in a place to hear about all the roles and responsibilities that come with the Christian life. Maybe we are new to the faith or new to church, and the idea that we need to look seriously at our relationships and our actions to see if we are measuring up to the example of Jesus can be overwhelming. That’s fine. If that’s where you are, then lean into the love of God and soak that up as much as you can.

But, usually, I find that after someone realizes he is loved by God, they tend to wonder what to do with that love. It’s like water running downhill—it has to have a place to go.

Christian spirituality has spent a lot of time trying to figure out what it means to die and to be with God. And, I will be honest with you: I don’t find this to be an interesting question. I am so absolutely convinced of God’s love for us that I lose no sleep worrying about our immortal souls.

But I do think a lot about how Christians ought to live in this world—in the time between that baptism and that funeral. And I am grateful that God saw fit to send Jesus to us—to walk with us, teach us, and to preach to us about his vision for a world in which we care for one another

with radical love in spite of the sometimes cruel world. That is Sermon on the Mount. That is what we do between the bookends of our baptism and our funeral—love one another as justly and well as our strength allows, because we were first loved by God. Amen.