

Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost, Year C
St. Mark's Episcopal Church | Milwaukee, WI
The Rev. Ian Burch
September 22, 2019

I spent the majority of my 20s single. Sometimes contentedly so and sometimes not contentedly so. I stopped referring to dates as “first dates,” and started calling them, “only dates.” I met lots of great people, lots of not-so-great people. Had lots of great meals and lots of not-so-great meals. I used online apps and let myself be paired up by friends. Then I would take months off and just focus on work and watching Dr. Who alone on Friday nights. I remember asking someone, once, after a few dates, “what do you think the spark level is here?” And my best friend told me later that that’s a horrible question because the person asking it is ALWAYS the one who isn’t feeling it.

And not feeling it kind of summed up the whole experience. I would tell anyone who was listening that I was searching for a partner. But then, over and over, that wasn’t what I was finding.

Some years later, I looked at some pictures from that time, and I realize that I was spending a lot of time getting on planes to fly either to Washington DC or to Anchorage, Alaska. Washington is where my dad was receiving treatment for cancer, and Anchorage is where he was recovering between surgeries. On a walk one day, I had this kind of lightning bolt. All those years I thought I was single, I actually wasn’t. I was in a romantic relationship with cancer. It was a terrible relationship, but it was a relationship all the same. Cancer was my priority. Romance was not.

There’s a funny quirk of the English language that’s relatively new. We can pluralize the word “priority.” Which makes no sense. For most of the time English has been English, priority was always singular. Priority comes to us from Latin, primus, where it means first. Strictly speaking, we can’t have priorities. Sometimes my close friends and I will have some kind of lengthy text exchange about not being able to do it all — kids, saving money, work, partnership or dating, working on the house, etc. etc... Of course, we can’t do it all. We cannot do all of the things. All of the things cannot be priorities. They can’t all be of prime importance.

And so it is with our God. You cannot serve God and wealth, Jesus says today in the Gospel. And I think that’s true. One or the other is going to take up the prime spot in your brain. Alas, you must choose one. I would add that you can’t serve God and youth. You can’t serve God and sex. You can’t serve God and ego. And you can’t serve God and the State. One of these things will be your master and one of them will not. Or put in language that makes more sense to us today; you will be in a relationship with one of them and not the other. It’s hard to go on dates when you’re already dating cancer.

So how does one figure out what in this life is a priority? Really, the only way I know how to do this is to pray. And I don’t mean to say prayers. While that’s nice, it’s not always so illuminating. I mean to take yourself away to a safe, quiet, spot and spend some with God. It is in this kind of silence and communion that you are going to hear what you need to hear from God. And it might

be that in this kind of silence and communion, you see that God isn't quite the priority you hope God to be. Here's a secret. This is pretty normal. I think we enter into and out of the orbit of focus on God many, many times in our life. Think of this time of quiet and meditation with God as a monthly tune up on the relationship you have with God. Last week I talked a lot about how our God is relentless in pursuing us. And taking some quiet time might be just the thing you need to feel yourself found.

Or, if silence isn't your thing, maybe talk to a friend or pray with a small group in your home. Or, and this is always a good one: serve the poor. If you seriously cannot figure out where your sense of priority is right now, give some of your time to those who need it most. Volunteer for a campaign that you think is commensurate with your Christian values. Tutor kids who are in danger of falling through the cracks. Feed the hungry. Clothe the homeless. Comfort the widow. Doing these things will set you straight very quickly about what your spiritual priority ought to be. Spoiler alert: your priority isn't you. Your priority is humility before the God who made you, loves you, and calls you into service in this world.

There's a technical problem with this sermon. I've given you suggestions about how you might take inventory of your spiritual priority. And that's fine as far as it goes. But I could have sent that in an email or made a little video or something. That's not a sermon; that's a self-help book. A good sermon talks about what God is doing rather than just giving congregants homework.

So what is God up to in this Gospel? I think it has something to do with God being patient enough with us to teach us lessons over and over again. The people two thousand years ago clearly needed a refresher from Jesus on the futility of trying to serve God and to serve wealth at the same time. And now, two thousand years later, it would seem that we need the same refresher.

The Good News that I see in this is that God was willing to be with those hard-headed people then, and God is willing to be with us hard-headed people now. Or, put another way, God is willing to make **us** a priority even when we're having a hard time returning the favor. You will be distracted by the shiny things of this world — money, fame, lust, — you name it. But they are empty masters — all promise and no substance. So, cleave yourself to God and serve God with all your heart, soul, strength, and mind. And if you forget how, your church, your loved ones, those you serve can all remind you to return to God. You can sometimes unchoose God, but it is never in God's nature to unchoose you. Amen.