

Twenty-second Sunday after Pentecost, Year A  
The Rev. Ian Burch  
St. Mark's Episcopal Church | Milwaukee, WI  
October 29, 2023

I overslept on Thursday. I have no one to blame but myself. I'm working my way through Downton Abbey again, and so of course I stayed up a little bit too late on Wednesday night, and I found myself oversleeping on Thursday. It was worth it. But it did mean I had to hustle to get everything ready to lead morning prayer over Zoom at 9 a.m. As an aside, if you didn't already know, there is a group here at St. Mark's that has been praying together Monday-Thursday over Zoom for a few years now, and it's a wonderful way to begin the day in prayer and in community. If you'd like to try it, just click on the church calendar on the website, and the link is right there. You'll be better for it, I believe.

Back to last Thursday. I just barely had time to handle the dog and get some tea before I needed to open up the Zoom and pray. Like a fool, right before prayer, I scanned the headlines of the news. That morning, two headlines caught my eye. One said that the US economy had grown 4.9% in the last quarter. And another said that 16 people had been killed and 13 wounded in a mass shooting event in a small town in Maine. I could feel myself sort of short circuiting right that minute. That's a lot of information to take in in the 30 seconds before I need to lead us in prayer.

Lord, open our lips. And our mouth shall proclaim your praise. Glory to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit. As it was in the beginning, is now, and shall be forever, Amen. Those are the words that begin morning prayer, and as I was saying them, instead of finding myself in deep communion with God and my neighbor, instead, I found that my mind was racing in a million different directions. How could there be another shooting? My sister lives in Maine—is this shooting near her house? Does the booming economy mean that interest rates will go down and will that make our new parish hall more manageable financially? These are just some of the questions flying through my mind when, really, I should have been concentrating on the words of my prayers.

But, this is sort of an industry secret, when you've been leading prayer professionally for twenty years, there is some muscle memory involved. Even though my mind was really not able to focus on the prayer, my muscles had enough practice to be able to shape my mouth around the words and to say them slowly and reverently. For awhile, I was sort of thinking that my prayer was not successful. I should be feeling more for the victims of another tragedy. I should be feel more connected to the others who were praying with me. I sould somehow be a little holier inside than I was.

I don't know if they do anymore, but there used to be governors on big semi truck engines that would stop them from going above 75 miles an hour. It didn't matter if you hit the gas all the way to the floor, the engine simply would not go any faster. And that's how my heart felt on Thursday morning. There was a governor on my heart that just wouldn't allow me to feel the levels of compassion that the situation no doubt called for. We prayed for friends with cancer, for the dying, for the war in Ukraine, for the bombing in Gaza and the torture of hostages by Hamas. Our prayers went all around the world and then landed right back here in Milwaukee. And that whole time, I just didn't feel like I had the spiritual or emotional fortitude to hold the cares of the world.

I was reminded right then of something that John Hickey, our priest associate, likes to teach us in his sermons. Love is not a feeling in the Christian context. It is an action. And, when I look back on my harried Thursday morning, the truth of the matter is that I was doing what I was supposed to be doing. I was gathered with the people of God, praying for the concerns of the world. I was sharing the burdens of other Christians just as they were sharing mine. And, it didn't really matter that I wasn't feeling as connected as I would have liked. The church, in its wisdom, has provided words for us when our own words fail. And God has promised to be with us when two or three are gathered. God didn't promise to be with us when we were feeling particularly religious or compassionate. God just promised to show up when we gather. I believe Jesus' commandment today—this famous command that we talk about on the Thursday before Easter—that we love one another works the same way. We don't love one another when we feel like it. We don't just pray for one another when we feel like it. Instead, we show up. And that, really, is most of the Christian life. We show up at the table and at the font knowing that our feet will lead us in the path of love in a better way than our fickle hearts will.

I cannot trust my feelings to know when my neighbors are hurting or when they need me. I cannot trust that I will be in the right head space to react to national emergencies or global geopolitical upheaval. But I can pray anyway. I can show up anyway. Because the God of love is going to show up whether I am feeling loving or not. It is in my nature to be a little bit fickle about these things. But God's nature is love, and so when God shows up, there is nothing but that love.

I know that this talk of God's love can seem a little vague, or maybe even too dreamy in light of real tragedies and real violence. My faith tells me that, in the famous words of Martin Luther King, Jr, "the moral arc of the universe bends toward justice." I know that this earth is not finished being made into the kingdom of God, and I know that we live in an in-between time when there is real pain, and real disaster, and real tragedy. And, because of Jesus, I also know that we live in a time of real love—the love that compels those of us who are lacking to get up and to pray anyway, to feed the poor anyway, to lobby for change in a government that seems hopelessly inept anyway, and to show up, show up, show up anyway.

He said to [the lawyer], “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.” Amen.