December 27, 2018 The Twelve Days of Christmas

There’s a lot to be said for the Church’s old tradition of celebrating 12 days of Christmas (from Christmas day through the feast of the Epiphany on January 6th). I love the excitement of Christmas Eve at All Saints’, with thousands of people and glorious worship on a grand scale.

But I also love the quiet remainder of this short Christmas season: the precious days leading up to Epiphany in whose simple joys we can linger. Come this Sunday, December 30 as we keep our usual Sunday schedule, but with congregational lessons and carols at 9 and 11am. Hear the Christmas readings and sing your favorite carols one last time, before we put them away for another year.

With all of our gift-giving over, may we not forget the most important gifts of all: God’s gift to us of a Savior, and our humble offering of ourselves in return.

No one says it better than the poet Christina Rosetti, in the poem that is set to music as hymn #112:

In the bleak midwinter, frosty wind made moan,
earth stood hard as iron, water like a stone;
snow had fallen, snow on snow, snow on snow,
in the bleak midwinter, long ago.

Our God, heaven cannot hold him, nor earth sustain;
heaven and earth shall flee away when he comes to reign.
In the bleak midwinter a stable place sufficed
the Lord God Almighty, Jesus Christ.

Angels and archangels may have gathered there,
cherubim and seraphim thronged the air;
but his mother only, in her maiden bliss,
worshiped the beloved with a kiss.

What can I give him, poor as I am?
If I were a shepherd, I would bring a lamb;
if I were a Wise Man, I would do my part;
yet what I can I give him: give my heart.

I wish you and all whom you love a merry Christmas season, and a blessed new year.

Peace,
Poulson+
December 20, 2018 After Rejoicing

This past Sunday, my sermon (based on the Epistle reading) was about choosing to rejoice always, by trusting in God. You can find it in the e-news and on the website, if you are curious. When we trust that God is near, we can rejoice even when we may not always feel like it.

But what’s next, after we rejoice? It is reaching out to others. At this time of year, with Advent wrapping up and Christmas right around the corner, I am thinking of two groups in particular that we might reach out to:

• **The sad and lonely.** For some people, the holiday season is painful, especially if they have lost a loved one with whom they used to celebrate. If you know of someone who you think may be sad or lonely, who is grieving, or unable to leave their home, or under financial strain, or facing some other challenge that may keep them from rejoicing this season, consider reaching out to them with a gesture of kindness. A phone call, or card, or bag of cookies might make a difference for them.

• **Guests at church.** For those of us who are All Saints’ regulars, we will see a large number of guests in our church, especially on Christmas Eve. We are glad they are with us. Let’s keep an eye out for people who look like they need a little help. Help people know where the restrooms are, move over to make room in the pews, greet everyone with warm words and a smile, be helpful and understanding if parents have a fussy child, and so on. How we show hospitality to guests says a lot about our church community and reflects God’s loving welcome to all.

As we head into this busy season and the end of the year, I want to extend my sincere thanks to all of our volunteers and staff for a remarkable year of ministry. It gives me joy to serve at All Saints’ with such kind, dedicated, talented, and generous people. Wherever you may be this holiday, have a very merry Christmas, as we celebrate with joy the good news of the savior’s birth.

**Notes**
• Please save the Rector and Vestry some gray hair between now and the end of the year, by fulfilling your 2018 pledge, making a new pledge for 2019 if you haven’t, and (if you are able) making an end of year donation. We always count on a big December to make our
budget, but we are rather more behind this year than usual. Thank you for helping, as we seek a 7th consecutive year with a small surplus.

Blessings,
Poulson+
I find that there is sometimes confusion about how we fund our ministries at All Saints’ Church, so as the year end approaches, I thought I would share a few frequently asked questions.

**Where does the money come from to fund our annual budget?**

The vast majority comes from the fulfillment of pledges. Our members and friends submit pledges (estimates of giving for the coming year) each fall, and then fulfill those pledges over the year with financial contributions. Some pay every week using pledge envelopes, others through weekly or monthly automatic bank withdrawals, recurring credit card payments, or through a larger check or stock transfer once or twice a year. Pledges can be adjusted if life circumstances change, either down (for example, with a lost job) or up (a promotion!). Because our pledges don’t fully cover our budget (very few churches’ do), we raise additional money to support some of our most important ministries and be sure they have the funding they need (as with our Music Ministry, and our Children Youth and Family Ministries). We also share some expenses with the day school.

**What about our endowment?**

We only established a proper endowment about eight years ago, invested through the Arizona Community Foundation. Since then, we’ve added several other invested funds: A Music Legacy Fund, a Saint John’s Bible Fund (for guest speakers and other needs related to that Bible), and most recently, a Close Fund (for the care and maintenance of our Close). These funds grow with the stock market, and we withdraw modest amounts from them to support these ministries, but they mostly grow through bequests (someone remembering All Saints’ in their will). You can designate your bequest to go into any of these invested funds (undesignated bequests to All Saints’ Church go to our regular endowment, though we can use up to $10,000 for the operating budget at the Vestry’s discretion - any amount over that must go to the endowment). Our invested funds are relatively small but growing through these bequests by members of our Legacy Circle. Please remember the Church in your estate planning and contact Barbara or Gary in the office to let us know you have done so or for help (we never ask the dollar amount).

**And the offering plate?**
As the cash economy is changing, and fewer people carry cash, we are getting less and less money in the offering plate on Sundays. In the past, those not pledging would put a few dollars in the offering plate (and some pledging members would do the same). We are encouraging those who use smart phones to text small donations to the virtual "plate" and to support the coffee hour (instructions are in the bulletin and on the coffee hour table) - it is quick and easy.

Don't we get funds from the Diocese?

No. Like all churches in the Episcopal Diocese of Arizona, we give 16.9% of our “plate and pledge” to support the ministries of our diocese and the national Church. In recent years, Episcopal churches in Arizona have received back a small rebate to use for mission efforts (about 1%).

How can I help support our ministries?

I’m so glad you asked! One of the features of church economics is that we depend greatly on end of year donations in December. If you appreciate our ministries at All Saints’, and the difference they make in your life and those of others, please:
• make a pledge for 2019 if you haven’t done so
• fulfill your 2018 pledge by the end of December (check with Barbara or on Realm if you need a balance)
• make an extra end of year donation, as you are able, in the Christmas envelopes, in the plate, with a stock gift, or online (contact Barbara for help).

Through the wonderful generosity of our members and friends, and prudent budgeting and expense management by our Vestry, Finance Committee, and staff, we have been able to finish each of the last six years with a small surplus. Please help us at year end with your giving, so that we can have a 7th year of a small surplus, starting the new year on sound financial footing.

Notes
• Speaking of generosity, it has been wonderful to see the church offices packed with presents for the children of the incarcerated, and needy seniors at Maryland Gardens. Thank you!

Blessings,
Poulson+
December 6, 2018 President George H.W. Bush, Lived Faith, and The Episcopal Church

Last week, as I was driving, I heard an interview on NPR with the Reverend Russell Levenson, the Rector of Saint Martin’s Episcopal Church in Houston, where President George H.W. Bush and Barbara Bush were members for over 50 years. Levenson said about President Bush’s faith:

*This was not a man who wore his faith on his sleeve, but he was a man who was very committed to his church, to God, to the Christian faith…for him, I do think it’s fair to say it was - and I mean this in the best sense of the word - it was a simple faith. He didn’t have to work at it. It's something that, of course, his family was brought up in, kind of the bosom of the Christian faith. And so it was just something like many parts of his life that he accepted, embraced. But I think the most important piece…is it’s something that he lived.*

Like so many, I have been moved this week by the recent death of President George H.W. Bush, in part because it feels like we are nearing the end of an era. For him, and for many other leaders of his generation, genuine love of country, family, and faith were bedrock values. His Episcopal faith, as described by Father Levenson, was also typical of his generation: a faith that was quiet, lifelong, strong, and above all, lived. One could not separate his devoted love of family, or his selfless and brave service to his country as a young Navy pilot all the way through his time in government, from his faith. They were all connected: strands woven together, like a strong rope, each reinforcing the other.

Some people rejoice in the decline of what is sometimes called “the Establishment.” To be sure, it is refreshing and right that our institutions are now led by women and men from more diverse family, cultural, racial, economic, educational, and religious backgrounds, instead of largely by the “WASP” elites. Certainly, The Episcopal Church, which even in my childhood forty years ago was still called “the Church of Presidents” and sometimes, jokingly, “the Republican Party at prayer” or “the frozen chosen,” is now a far more varied, open, and welcoming environment, which is a blessing. The Episcopal Church is also a lot smaller than it once was, and far less influential. That’s not necessarily a bad thing. An influential Church with worldly power faces many temptations, and Church and State or Church and Culture often make uneasy bedfellows.

Still, we Episcopalians do weddings and funerals exceptionally well, whether small and intimate or large and stately. I hope that as people watched President Bush’s funeral at the National Cathedral, with its majestic and comforting Episcopal liturgy, and as people
heard about his lived faith, they may be inspired to explore or renew their own faith, perhaps at an Episcopal church like ours. Many aspects of the old establishment order such as virtue, institutions, modesty, cooperation, civility, and family honor were salutary, and some remain, if rather dusty and underappreciated. Take our own dusty institution. There are still many churches across this land that do what we have always done: reverent worship, yes, but also the weekly, often unglamorous work of forming children and adults more into the likeness of Jesus, equipping them with faith to live more selflessly, more kindly, more compassionately, and more decently. Flawed but basically good people, and flawed but good institutions are still out there, far from the headlines, quietly serving others, like a thousand points of light.

Notes
• I want to commend all those staff and volunteers who were involved in the magnificent Messiah performance last weekend. We had an enthusiastic audience of 250 people, many of whom were not church members. What a gift it was to share this performance with our community and beyond (one couple came all the way from Prescott!).
• Someone described my sermon from last week as a “meta” sermon. I think what they meant is that it was, in part, a sermon about preaching, and about how we, as preachers, go about preparing sermons. The video is on the website and in the eblast if you are interested.

Blessings,
Poulson+
November 29, 2018 Strengthening Our Core: Our Wednesday Worship, Bible Study, and More

It was a number of years ago that the exercise experts began emphasizing strengthening our core muscles. The idea was that if our abdominals and back muscles were strong, they would provide a good foundation for our fitness and overall health. Truth be told, I am rather unenthusiastic about “planks” and “crunches,” but I do find the metaphor of a strong core helpful in thinking about the common life of our church community of All Saints’, and the individual spiritual lives of our members.

On the church level, having a strong core means offering plenty of ways for those with a committed faith to grow as disciples of Jesus. It is easy in churches to get so caught up in the excitement of special events that we fail to encourage the basic practices of faith that lead to spiritual growth. At All Saints’, we describe the categories of basic faith practice as Pray, Learn, Serve, and Connect. As individual members, then, we know that if we prioritize prayer, Christian learning, serving others, and connecting with our fellow Christians and those in need, we are strengthening our spiritual core as disciples.

This Advent, there are several ways that our All Saints’ community is strengthening our core. A group of about a dozen of us is following a rule of life for this Advent season, consisting of daily prayer, reading a book together, helping others, and sharing a meal (it’s not too late to join if you missed the November 18th class on it). There are several different ways to serve those in need in our area. And since Advent is a perfect time for Bible Study, we will have four classes on the Bible on Sunday mornings in December, focusing on the Book of Daniel, and then the stories of Jesus’ birth and the Holy Family. Although they are not new this Advent, you might also consider checking out our Centering Prayer group on Saturday mornings, Evening Prayer Monday through Thursday evenings, or the Rosary Prayer group on Sundays.

And last, but not least, we are experimenting in December with a different schedule for our Wednesday Eucharists. Our 7am Wednesday Eucharist will continue as usual (it’s a wonderful and friendly group of 10-15 who are always glad to welcome others). But we will experiment this month with a 12:10pm Wednesday Eucharist instead of the usual 10am. Our Wednesday 10am numbers have been lower of late, and we hope that a 12:10pm service lasting about 30 minutes will be appealing for those who seek some spiritual nourishment on their lunch break. We’ll assess at the end of December whether to keep the later Wednesday service at 12:10pm, move it back to 10am, or try another option. Let us know what you think, if you are or might be a regular worshipper on Wednesdays. And
if you’ve never tried it, come experience this simple weekday service and see what a blessing it gives your week.

Blessings,
Poulson+
November 21, 2018 Giving Thanks: It’s Not Just For One Day

*If the only prayer you said in your whole life was “thank you” it would be enough. (Meister Eckhart)*

There is much to appreciate about the holiday of Thanksgiving, for example the four “f’s” of food, family, friends, and football. But it is also a great blessing to have one day each year that is dedicated to giving thanks. Many families include some ritual of giving thanks in their annual celebrations, whether going to church or stating things for which they are grateful around the dinner table or doing something kind for those in need.

Giving thanks is one of most powerful and beneficial spiritual acts there is. When we say, “thank you,” we are acknowledging that we have received a gift, not something we have earned. And so, thankfulness is a deep form of humility. We are appreciating the giver and recognizing that so much of our life depends on the love and generosity of others. As Christians, our most important thank you is to God. We call our Eucharistic Prayer “the Great Thanksgiving,” because in it, every week, we give God thanks for all our many blessings, especially the gift of God’s own son, Jesus, who lived among us and gave himself for us.

This week, I give thanks for my own blessings, in particular my loving family, and this wonderful church and school of All Saints’. What are you grateful for? And if it’s a person, have you thanked them?

**Notes**

- This Sunday gives us a couple of opportunities for worship with beautiful music. At 11am, we are keeping the feast of Christ the King, the last Sunday of the Christian year, with special music and incense. And Sunday night is our monthly Compline service, a time to rest in God’s presence. Come and join us as we give thanks to God in these offerings of worship.
- Thank you for helping us spread the word about the December 2nd performance of Handel’s “Messiah.” It’s going to be extraordinary.

Blessings,

Poulson+
November 8, 2018 A Special Invitation: 11:11:11

This Sunday, November 11th, is the 100th anniversary of the conclusion of World War One. The armistice that ended fighting between the Allies and Germany went into effect on the 11th hour of the 11th day of the 11th month of 1918. The United States had joined the war beginning in April 1917, losing in those 19 months an estimated 116,000 soldiers to death, with more than 200,000 wounded. In our country, every year we celebrate Veterans Day on November 11th to honor all veterans both living and dead, while many countries who were our allies in the First World War celebrate Armistice Day. In honor of this special 100th anniversary, this Sunday morning, at 11:11am, just after the start of our worship, we will keep a minute of silence in the church to remember all veterans, living and dead, and to pray for our country. With our recognition of veterans on Sunday, we will be remembering our nation’s history, honoring those who have selflessly given of themselves, even to the point of death, for the sake of others, and in service to the freedoms and ideals that we hold dear.

There has been much conversation in recent years about the erosion of trust in our institutions (governmental, civic, cultural, and religious). We can shore up that trust by strengthening the fairness and effectiveness of our institutions, operating with integrity for the common good. But we also build institutional trust by telling our communal stories and remembering our past. When we pass down to the next generation our shared history, not ignoring the challenges and faults in that history, but celebrating our heroes and our noblest virtues, we build trust in our common life.

Notes

• Another important remembrance this weekend is our annual Requiem eucharist, on Sunday night. The choir will sing the stunning Duruflé Requiem, and we will read aloud the names of loved ones who have died that have been submitted to us. If All Saints’ Day is our celebration of the great heroes of the Church down the ages, the All Souls Requiem is a more intimate and familial experience, as we give thanks to God for those we have loved personally, saints or not, who are now at peace.

• Last week, I had the pleasure of attending the investiture of one of our church members, Margaret LaBianca, as a Judge on the Superior Court of Arizona. I counted at least seven members of our church in attendance, in addition to Margaret’s family. It was a wonderful honor and celebration for Margaret, of course, but I was struck by how the ceremony was also a celebration of our justice system itself. As Margaret was presented with her robe
and gavel, sworn in with the oath of office, and as we heard remarks from her friends, family, the Presiding Judge, and from Margaret herself, a common theme was working to be sure the justice system is seen by all as fair and impartial, especially by those who are most directly affected by it. It was an inspiring afternoon.

Blessings,
Poulson+
November 1, 2018 How We Fight Evil

There’s a wonderful and strange moment in the Great Litany, that we sing at 11am on the first Sunday in Advent and Lent: *that it may please thee to strengthen such as do stand; to comfort and help the weak hearted; to raise up those who fall; and finally, to beat down Satan under our feet. We beseech thee to hear us, good Lord.* For those who are not expecting it, that line about beating down Satan under our feet (quoting Romans 16:20) can seem surprising. But it’s fitting on both a Biblical and spiritual level. Whether or not we believe that Satan is an actual, real being, evil certainly exists. And as Christians, we strive to fight evil as Jesus did, not with force, nor by matching hatred with hatred, but with forgiveness and compassion: strengthening people, comforting and helping the weak, and lifting up those who have fallen.

This past week in the news was surely confirmation that evil is real. I don’t know how else to explain someone killing peaceful worshippers in a synagogue, while shouting anti-Semitic, hateful words. Did you hear that the doctor, Dr. Jeff Cohen, who treated the gunman in the hospital, also attends the synagogue that was attacked, Tree of Life? “He’s some mother’s son,” Dr. Cohen said of the attacker, “and how did he get from that to where he is today? That’s going to be a large debate we have to wrestle with as a society.” We can all learn from the heroic actions of Dr. Cohen. He showed extraordinary compassion in treating an injured man, even though that man had murdered his friends. And then, afterwards, he asked us, as a society, to consider what leads someone to such horrific violence, and what we can do about it. Even amidst the darkness, it has been heartening, this week, to see moments of hope, including numerous expressions of solidarity with those of the Jewish faith, with many people of all faiths and none joining together in compassion to reject hatred in all its forms.

This Sunday we celebrate All Saints’, our feast of title, and one of the most important holy days of the year. And we will have with us Bishop Smith and his wife Laura for their last official visit before Bishop Smith’s retirement in the spring. We are so grateful for both Bishop Smith’s and Laura’s ministries in our diocese over the past 15 years. On All Saints’ Sunday, we remember the great heroes of our faith who have died, having lived lives of virtue and sacrifice. Now in heaven, this “great cloud of witnesses” encourages us by their prayer and example to imitate Jesus Christ, as they did. Bishop Smith and Laura Smith certainly followed the way of Jesus and of the saints in many ways in their leadership in Arizona. May we all have grace to do so, as well, with God’s help.

Notes
• Last weekend was a joyful celebration of Bishop Burrill’s ordained ministry of 60 years, including 16 as our part-time Bishop in Residence. He and Marilyn are heading off on a well-deserved cruise, and we look forward to seeing them in our pews around Thanksgiving. Last weekend was also Commitment Sunday. If you were not able to attend, we ask you please to make your pledge (your estimate of giving) for 2019 as soon as you can. As Bishop Burrill mentioned in his final sermon with us, our generosity with what God has given us is one of the most important spiritual disciplines in our lives. Each pledge also helps the leadership of All Saints’ Church budget responsibly for 2019. We thank you for your generous support.

• For those who missed it, the Pipescreams event on Tuesday was a great time for all ages. We had spooky music (by 2 and even 3 organists at the same time!), sang Halloween songs, had a tour of the organ, and trunk-or-treat. Given the success, I suspect this will become an annual event. Well done, musicians, and other staff and volunteers!

Blessings,
Poulson+
October 25, 2018 Why I’m All In for All Saints’

It’s hard to believe that next summer I will have been the Rector of All Saints’ for 10 years. When Megan and I arrived from Colorado on a sweltering August day in 2009, our son had just turned one. Now he’s 10, with two younger brothers who have been born in Phoenix and baptized at All Saints’. I’m all in for All Saints’ because this place is much more than a job to me. This is my family’s home away from home. In fact, with my boys at school here, in choristers, acolyting, in children’s chapel, and Sunday school, and with Megan involved at church, and teaching lessons and classes through the music school, along with my busy schedule as Rector, it sometimes feels like we spend more time at All Saints’ than at home! And we love it. This place helps us be more the family we believe God wants us to be.

I’m all in because I believe All Saints’ has a vital role to play in our community. Our day school is molding young people of good moral character, who go out into their lives away from here not only prepared for their own success, but ready to serve a world in need. And All Saints’ church is a spiritual hub, forming disciples of Jesus Christ through our worship and prayer (both majestic and musical, quiet and contemplative), learning in classes and groups and sermons, serving others at and through the church, and connecting with each other in a big tent spiritual family that welcomes everyone. As I’ve written about many times, the spiritual landscape of the culture is changing rapidly. Our church staff, Vestry, and volunteer ministry leaders are working hard and strategically to engage people where they are and invite them to go deeper in faith. When I see new ministries get started and thrive, like our chorister program and music school for neighborhood kids, or our prison ministry, or Compline, or our Living Room Conversations, or Evening Prayer, it gives me encouragement and hope. In what is new and in what stays the same, All Saints’ is a haven of peace and a source of renewal in turbulent times. We make a real difference in people’s lives, or rather, God makes a difference through and in us.

I’m all in also because we have dynamic new leaders coming to join us in the fruitful work of the Gospel. Dr. Emma Whitman, our new Head of School, begins on July 1, building on the strong legacy of Leo Dressel. And on March 9, the new Bishop of Arizona, the Reverend Jennifer Reddall, will be consecrated. Bishop-elect Reddall was elected at last week’s diocesan convention at All Saints’ on the first ballot (which is rare), giving her a strong mandate for change. I’ve known Jennifer Reddall for over 20 years (we sang in the same church choir at Yale when she was an undergraduate and I was in seminary), and she will be a smart, spiritual, energetic, and visionary bishop for our diocese. I couldn’t be
more excited for the leadership of these two outstanding women who are coming to Phoenix.

Sometimes people ask me: what keeps you up at night? As Rector, part of my job is to keep a bit of holy anxiety - just enough concern to be aware of the Weaknesses and Threats in our SWOT analysis, without losing positivity and joy by keeping focused on our Strengths and Opportunities. Without a doubt, what I worry about most is money. Will we have the financial resources at All Saints’ church to do the life-changing ministry to which we are called? The finances were pretty grim 10 years ago. Thanks be to God, with a lot of hard work, careful budgeting, and the generosity of our members, we’ve had seven consecutive years of a small surplus. But every year I worry, because our endowment is new and small (though growing!), so we depend on the generous pledges of our members and friends for most of our budgeted income. Sometimes there is the misconception that we receive funds from the diocese - it is actually the other way: like all parishes, we give 16.9% of our pledge and plate to support diocesan and national ministries.

I hope most of the members and friends of All Saints’ will attend one of our worship services this weekend, to celebrate Bishop Burrill’s ministry among us with deep gratitude, and to make our pledge commitments for 2019. In the meanwhile, please take some time in prayer and conversation with your loved ones to decide what percentage of your income reflects your thankfulness for God’s blessings in your life. A percentage pledge (called proportional giving) is the best way to give our first fruits to God, not what is left over, which is why our faith since Biblical times has taught the tithe (10%). But if that is not possible, start at a percentage that is realistic, and then strive to go higher. It took Megan and me a few years to hit 10%, but we’ve been there for at least the past 12 years. The root of my financial anxiety as Rector is that some people pledge 10%, but many pledge 1% or even less, and some pledge nothing at all. I can say with confidence that if every single member or friend of All Saints’ pledged even 5% to support our mission and ministry, we would set a pledging record for us, and would have more than enough funds to meet our budget, and indeed do even more.

What I believe is that God will give us, through each other, what we need to meet God’s calling for us. I’m all in for All Saints’. Will you join me?

Notes
- As I mentioned last Sunday, I am so grateful for all of our staff and volunteers who worked in some cases for days and in some cases for months to make our hosting of the
diocesan convention and bishop election such a success. I heard countless compliments from guests about our hospitality, buildings and grounds, and about the splendid Eucharist just before the election.

• Have you seen church member Francey Potter’s amazing art in Saint Barbara? I love how our Creative Community has helped us see the hidden talents among us.
• Our second monthly Compline of the year is this Sunday. Come and see! It is a tranquil balm in a hectic world.
• As we did before the Presidential election in 2016, we are sharing prayers this weekend for the days leading up to the mid-terms. Praying for our nation is one of the most important things we can do as Christian citizens.

Blessings,
Poulson+
October 18, 2018 Not To Be Served, But To Serve

“The Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve.” —Mark 10:45

As I write this on Wednesday, we are preparing to host the annual Diocesan Convention this Friday and Saturday. Usually the Convention is at a large conference center (something like 800 people attend, both clergy and lay delegates chosen by their parishes) but the Bishop’s office asked if we would host this time, and of course, we said yes. What makes this year’s Convention historic is that it is the last Convention for Bishop Smith and includes the election of the next Bishop of Arizona. After a diligent and thorough process, three final candidates for bishop were identified. A few weeks ago, those candidates were in several town halls all over the diocese, answering questions about themselves and their vision for a bishop’s ministry in Arizona. Since then, many parishes (including ours) have had delegate meetings to discuss and prayerfully discern who we think the Holy Spirit is calling us to vote for. And by sometime Saturday afternoon, we will have a Bishop-elect. If you come to my class on Sunday, I’ll share about the process and about the new bishop to be!

There are a lot of reasons why I love serving in a large church. One of them is that our impact for good is so significant. There are very few churches in the Diocese of Arizona with the facilities and personnel to host a Diocesan Convention. Our church staff and volunteers, and day school community are to be commended for the many hours given to make this Convention happen (the school even had to cancel classes on Friday to accommodate). This Convention is a particularly major example, but in truth not a day goes by when All Saints’ is not doing something to fulfill our mission: welcoming all to transformation in Jesus Christ through prayer, learning, service, and connection in the Episcopal tradition. As Rector, I get to see or hear about a fair amount of what happens around All Saints’, and I am often awestruck at the ministry that takes place.

Compline, Evensong, our new chorister program and music school, the DUET program for caregivers, our prison ministry, Evening Prayer, revitalized SAGES and youth ministries, Bible study, Centering Prayer, the Rosary, pastoral care, weddings and funerals, Christian education for all ages, our phenomenal day school, weekend and weekday Eucharists, volunteers at ICM and André House, item collections for the poor, Altar Guild, Ushers, Vergers, greeters, readers, the Creative Community, the Library team, Front Line, Book Discussion, discernment committees, Vestry, and other leadership groups: these are just some of what has been happening in the last few weeks, and I could go on and on. All
Saints’ is an amazing place, and it is so not just because of the number of ministry activities, but because of how our staff and volunteers plan and fulfill those ministries: with an attitude of humble service, doing what God asks us to do. Thank you for all the countless hours you give to the mission of God in and through this holy place.

Blessings,
Poulson+
Do not conform to the pattern of this world but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. (Romans 12:2).

In recent years, it has become popular in churches to rename what used to be called “Sunday School.” Sometimes “Christian Education” is used, but one of the most common terms these days is “formation.” I have mixed feelings. I’m not in favor of simply sticking the “formation” label on the same old “Sunday School” curricula. But if we’re serious about formation, I’m all in. Real formation includes education but is more holistic. It is about using learning, practices, reflection, and community to shape our character: who we are, and how we interact with others. True Christian discipleship is a life-long experience of formation: of being formed, re-formed, and trans-formed.

At All Saints’ Church, our formation for all ages is grounded in our four, core spiritual practices: pray, learn, serve, connect. When we pray and worship, learn about the faith, serve others especially those in need, and connect with each other in community, we are opening ourselves to God’s power to form us, more and more, into Christ’s image. We are, to use the language of Paul in Romans 12, forsaking the unhealthy patterns of the world, in order to be transformed by the renewing of our minds. In computer lingo, we are installing a whole new operating system, one oriented away from selfishness and bitter tribalism and towards love of God and our neighbor.

At All Saints’ Episcopal Day School, I would say we are also about formation and not just education, but the formation is somewhat different from that of the church, with some overlapping areas. The mission of our day school is: to educate children in the light of God - mind, body, and soul - in a nurturing community. We combine academic excellence with spiritual and moral formation, preparing our students to live fruitful lives and to serve a world in need.

An Episcopal school welcomes a diverse cohort of students and families (most Episcopal schools are only 15-20% Episcopalian, and include students of many faiths, and no faith). To be “Episcopal” in a school context means not only to have regular chapel, and to serve those in need, but also to learn appreciatively about all of the major world religions (not just Christianity), and to foster a community that is intentionally inclusive, nurturing, and respectful. Our students are being formed to be compassionate, kind, intelligent, hardworking members of the global community, who practice their faith (whatever it may
be) and live out their values with integrity while understanding and respecting the beliefs of others.

For those of us (myself included) who are blessed to be part of both our church and school at All Saints’, there is a wonderful synergy in the way our children are formed in both parts of our one community. And for those who are involved in the church but not the school, I hope you will join in appreciating the students who emerge from their day school experience formed in mind, body, and soul to lead fruitful lives and serve a world in need, and also the faculty and staff who guide them so wisely in that formation.

Notes

- This Sunday is our first Choral Evensong of the new season, at a new time, 4pm (with the organ recital to follow at 5pm, and then a reception). Why the time change? There are many of our members who don’t like to drive at night, so hopefully the earlier time makes it possible for more to take part in this beautiful and ancient service. 4pm is also a more traditional time for Evensong across The Episcopal Church and Anglican Communion. We have one of the finest music programs not only in the Southwest but in the country. Please help us spread the word about this amazing ministry by inviting friends to Evensong. Because it does not have Holy Communion, Evensong is often an easier point of entry for guests.

- We are blessed to have Dr. Serena Beeks as our guest preacher at 9 and 11am and teacher at 10:10am this Sunday, as we celebrate our day school ministry. You won’t want to miss her. I got to know Serena on one of my trips to Haiti, and she is one of the most caring, interesting people around.

Blessings,
Poulson+
October 11, 2018 Are You “All In” for All Saints’?

If the answer is “yes” (and we hope it is!), here is what you can do to support this church that we love and help us budget accurately.

Plan to attend any of our regular worship services on October 27 or 28 to make your pledge (your estimate of giving) for 2019, hear Bishop Burrill’s last sermons at All Saints’, and then celebrate Bill’s ministry among us at a celebratory meal after each service.

Between now and then, think and pray about what All Saints’ has meant to you, and how much God has blessed you through All Saints’ and in other ways. Talk with loved ones and decide what percentage of your income reflects your gratitude for what God has done for you. The Episcopal Church has held up the standard of the tithe (10%) for many years, but many begin with a lower percentage (5, 4, or even 3%) and then try to increase each year.

"If you really want your heart to be with God - and I believe you do - then you might want to change how you give to your parish and to God's work accomplished by other charities. Make your gift a first fruits offering. Fix a percentage in your heart and in your head, and give that percentage off the top to God every time money goes into your bank. If you get money once a month, then give your percentage off the top once a month. If you get paid twice a month or every other week, then give at those times. Give weekly only if you received money weekly.

If you want to try putting your money where you want your heart to rest, I strongly suggest you try giving at least 5 percent off the top back to God whenever God gives you anything. Giving God off the top a percentage of what God has given you is good, strong medicine for the heart. Ten percent is the recommended dose. Five percent is a therapeutic dose but giving back to God any percentage off the top - 2.5 percent or 3 percent or 4 percent - is better for your heart than giving any set amount that is not off the top and that has no relationship to your income.

This will change your life. You may think that paying your bills is the least religious thing you do. Percentage giving off the top begins to change all of that, because each time you sit down to deal with your money, the first thing you do is to make a thank offering to God that is in proportion to what God has just given you."

—The Rev. Gerald Keucher
October 4, 2018 Honoring Bill

When I arrived at All Saints’ over nine years ago, I was intrigued by one staff position: Bishop in Residence. It is a quite rare position in Episcopal churches, in part because most bishops in their retirement aren’t particularly interested in jumping back into parish ministry, even on a part-time basis! But it has been perfect for our own Bishop Bill Burrill for the past 16 years at All Saints’, allowing him to use his gifts especially for celebrating, preaching and teaching, while blessing us abundantly with those gifts. Bill is one of the great preachers and teachers in The Episcopal Church, and to have been able to hear regularly from him over these years has been a wonderful experience for all of us.

Bill and I have had an understanding that every year, we would talk about whether or not he wanted to continue in ministry for another year. This year, in conversation with his wife, Marilyn, Bill decided that 2018 would mark the end of his active ordained ministry. I was enormously sad to hear it, but respect his desire, at age 84, to step aside while still near the top of his game. Fortunately, Bill and Marilyn will continue to be at All Saints’ as members, and we will see them in our pews except when they are traveling.

On a personal note, I am grateful to Bill not only for his service at All Saints’ in his retirement, and before that for many decades (as a rector, and then as Bishop of Rochester), but also for his support and friendship. I was 39 years old when I started here, and I wish every new rector had a bishop in residence on hand to guide them! Any number of times, but without ever overstepping, Bill offered me wisdom as I grew into my role. When his wife Kay died of cancer, many of us were incredibly moved to see Bill working through his grief with such honesty, love and faith. And when God brought Bill and Marilyn together, and we celebrated their wedding at All Saints’, it was one of most joyful experiences of the past decade for our church.

As Bill and I were talking about a fitting last Sunday, we agreed that a perfect time would be our **Commitment Sunday, October 28th**. Bill has been known throughout his ministry as a compelling preacher on the topic of financial stewardship. And so, he will preach at all four services that weekend, as we make our pledge commitments to All Saints’ for the coming year. And then, after each service, there will be a celebratory meal to honor Bill and his extraordinary ministry among us. Thank you, Bill, and thank you, Marilyn.

Blessings,

Poulson+
October 4, 2018 The Three Scariest Words (For Episcopalians)

October, especially towards its end, is a month about scary things. But in my experience, the three scariest words for Episcopalians aren’t vampire, ghost, and werewolf. They are evangelism, sin, and tithe.

Perhaps we have a vague sense that Episcopalians are different from some other Christians, taking a gentler approach to the challenging topics that are front and center in more evangelical denominations and megachurches.

We may fear evangelism because we don’t wish to feel awkward or encroach upon someone’s personal beliefs by inviting them to a church event or even mentioning how our faith in Christ carried us through a tough time. We may fear thinking about sin because it can be unpleasant to look at ourselves in the mirror and identify the ways we are selfish and falling short of God’s plan for us.

And especially at this time of year, as we enter into our annual pledge campaign with Commitment Sunday on October 28, we may fear the word tithe. But it’s actually not nearly as scary as we think. A Forward Movement brochure that we have in our narthex entitled “A Tip or a Tithe?” describes the concept well. A tip comes at the end of a meal or some other service, out of what we have left over. That is our secular way of giving. If I leave a tip at a restaurant or give to my university or public radio or the symphony, I do so out of what I have left, what I think I can comfortably spare from my resources.

The Church has taught a different kind of giving for two-thousand years (and Judaism before that for several thousand more): giving to God first, not last. It began with giving the “first fruits” of one’s crop (see Deuteronomy 14), ten percent of the harvest, and then became money as the agricultural economy became more specialized.

Giving ten percent of one’s income back to God in gratitude for all that God has given us is the traditional Biblical standard of the tithe. But most people start much more modestly, with one or two or three percent.

Many people find this “first fruits” approach to giving to be refreshing and even transformative in their spiritual lives. As a 10% tither for almost fifteen years, my experience has been that it is liberating to know that our family finances line up with our
values. We may not be able to have everything we want, but God always provides us with what we need.

The point is not so much the percentage as the intentionality: pledging some specific percentage in advance, to thank God for being blessed with resources, friends and family, and a church that makes a difference in our lives and in the lives of others. A pledge is a spiritual commitment, not a contract, and can always be adjusted during the year if circumstances change, like a job loss, move, or unexpected expense.

I urge us not to be afraid of these three traditional words, but to embrace them joyfully. Evangelism is nothing more than sharing with others how excited we are about our faith and our church. Sin is just a shortcoming that we can work on, with God’s help, to become happier and more fulfilled. And a tithe is simply our freewill gift to God from our hearts, grateful for God’s many gifts to us, and trusting in God’s abundance towards us in the future.

Blessings,
Poulson+
September 27, 2018 Therefore Let Us Keep the Feast

For the last few years, on 4th Sundays at 11am we offered devotional additions to the liturgy from our rich Anglican tradition: incense, choral mass settings by the Chamber Choir, and more sung parts for the clergy and congregation (like the Lord’s Prayer and Prayers of the People). On those 4th Sundays, the Senior Choir sang at 9am. This year, we’ve changed the pattern a bit for several reasons, the most important of which is that our new choristers singing every other week at 9am makes the former practice impractical. Fortunately, there will still be opportunities to appreciate these beautiful practices of praise, and in a way that makes more liturgical sense.

This year, we will add incense, choral mass settings, and other sung parts at 11am on special feast days of the Church calendar, beginning this Sunday with the feast of Saint Michael and All Angels. Every Sunday is a feast day, a celebration of the Lord’s resurrection. But some days are particularly worthy of our best efforts, like All Saints’ Sunday (November 4) or Christ the King (November 25), and we will give these important feast days extra emphasis in this way.

This renewed attention to the feast days of the Church fits well with our new Evening Prayer ministry (Monday through Thursday). While the quiet, said prayers of the evening office might seem to have little in common with grand, choral Eucharists, both are part of All Saints’ doing our part faithfully to keep the lamp of prayer burning. The discipline of daily prayer that remembers even the more obscure saints combines with the weekly celebrating of the holy mysteries and the occasional days of greatest majesty. These daily, weekly, and seasonal patterns are one means by which God, through our prayers, hallows time.

It is helpful for Christians to remember that, underneath the varied changes and dramas of politics, cable news, and social media, there is a deep, ancient cycle of prayer and praise that follows an endless pattern. That cycle calls us back to God, in whom we are renewed for compassionate service to a broken world. Therefore, let us keep the feast.

Notes

- If you are interested in following the calendar of saints, we use Lesser Feasts and Fasts 2009. An online calendar of saints and feast days can be found here on the Forward Movement website: http://prayer.forwardmovement.org/the_calendar.php.
- Compline last Sunday was marvelous: peaceful, contemplative, beautiful, and restorative. I took our 4-year-old, who wanted to go to “night church,” and he was so intrigued by the
candles and chant that he didn’t make a sound (much to my relief!). We will offer it again next month on the fourth Sunday, with chant this time by our women’s schola.

- The concert this Sunday afternoon by our musical school faculty is going to be great. What a talented group of teachers we have, at the start of our new All Saints’ music school.

Blessings,
Poulson+
September 13, 2018 Our New Choristers at 9am on Sundays

“Train up a child in the way that they should go; even when they are old they shall not depart from it” (Proverbs 22:6).

The other day, I was getting ready to go into Evening Prayer, about 5:25pm on a weekday, and I was struck by all that was going on in our church building. There were 7 or 8 people waiting for Evening Prayer in the Chapel, a ministry group was meeting in St. Barbara, and the choristers were rehearsing in the choir room. One of the things I love about All Saints’ is that there is so much activity on our campus, with the many ministries and programs of church and school. Still, it used to be the case that the late afternoon and early evening, after the school dismissal, was relatively quiet at the church many days before the start of evening programs. But more recently, you are likely to hear a variety of music rehearsals and lessons (through our new Music School) taking place before, during, and after Evening Prayer.

Three late afternoons a week, our student choristers from the community have been rehearsing (choristers choose two rehearsals out of three each week), and beginning this Sunday, we will start to hear the fruit of their labors. Our choristers will sing every other Sunday at 9am, supported by the trained adults of our Schola Cantorum. A number of the choristers and their families were not connected to All Saints’ before, and we are delighted to have them with us. This is the beginning of the fulfillment of a vision: students from the community coming into the orbit of All Saints’ Church, learning how to sing and play instruments, and sharing their talents in worship. As someone who sang in church choirs for most of my life until I was ordained, I know how important those experiences were for me not only musically but spiritually, and in my growth as a person and as a leader. As the quote from Proverbs reminds us, the training we impart to our children will be with them for a lifetime. I couldn’t be more proud of our young musicians, and of their outstanding leaders, Joseph Ripka and Ilona Kubiczyk-Adler.

Notes
• One my biggest areas of focus this summer was working with the search committee for the next Head of School for All Saints’ Episcopal Day School. Tim Haskins, our Senior Warden, and I were part of a committee of nine that evaluated candidates, leading to the selection of three finalists who visited All Saints’ for two days each a few weeks ago. Now the search process is complete, with the appointment by the school’s Board of Trustees of Dr. Emma Whitman, who will begin on July 1 following Leo Dressel’s retirement. I am thrilled with the appointment. Dr. Whitman has just the right gifts, experiences, energy,
and vision to build on Leo’s excellent work and help lead the school into its even brighter future. Dr. Whitman is also an Episcopalian, currently serving in an Episcopal school, and appreciates the central importance of our Episcopal identity to our school. We look forward to welcoming Emma, her husband Dave, and their daughter Molly to our All Saints’ community next summer.

Blessings,
Poulson+
September 6, 2018 Priest, Pastor, Teacher, Coach?

Members of the clergy exercise a variety of roles in our ministry, all of which are interrelated and ever-present. Sometimes our priestly identity comes to the fore as in our sacramental duties, or the pastoral as we support people in their times of need, or the teaching role as we instruct members of all ages in the essentials of the faith. But lately, in addition to those essential aspects of my ministry, I’ve been seeing myself more and more as a coach.

When I was a student, the distinction between teacher and coach seemed clear: a teacher taught in a classroom, and a coach coached on the ball field or in the gym. But other than subject matter and location, the differences between a teacher and a coach are actually quite subtle. In general, teaching has traditionally been understood as somewhat more top down, a transfer of knowledge from an expert to a novice. Coaching often involves guidance that the participant, who already has some proficiency, can use to facilitate their own growth. Sometimes coaching implies more one-on-one or small group training, and the perfecting of a skill or practice more than the learning of a concept or set of facts.

My sense is that in education, more coaching skills are being brought into the classroom: less lecture and “sage on the stage” and more group work, “flipped classrooms,” individualized instruction and the like. Meanwhile the term “coach” has become widespread in many different fields. No longer is the coach only on the athletic court or field; we hear of “executive coaching,” with professionals seeking expertise to hone their skills, and “life coaches” guiding wellness and self-improvement.

I do still enjoy at times the traditional teaching model of the well-researched lecture, or the presentation with some interaction, a style I use with some regularity when teaching adult Christian education on Sunday mornings. But increasingly, I find the coaching approach more effective. With our Evening Prayer teams, for example, I’ve enjoyed more a coaching than a teaching role, making some suggestions but assuming a high level of proficiency and spirituality on the part of the leaders. Learning to pray the Daily Office works much better in trial and error practice, in repetition and muscle memory, than in attempting to memorize a sheet of instructions.

This Sunday begins a new program year with Kick-Off Sunday. It will be a grand celebration, with the return of our choirs and Christian education for all ages. Our new community choristers will be singing at the 9am service every other week beginning September 16th, and there are a host of ministry opportunities available for all ages as we
pray, learn, serve, and connect together. As part of that Kick-Off, I am beginning a three-session class called “A Rule of Life for Busy People.” In it, I see myself much more as coach than teacher. There will be pieces of teaching, mixed in with a good deal of practical coaching on how to train our spiritual lives. As with a first day at the gym, we will begin where we are and build, from there, an individualized action plan for spirituality, health, and happiness. Come ready to train!

Notes

- Last Saturday over 50 people gathered for an amazing reception to welcome to All Saints’ art by the women of Perryville Prison. Lora Villasenor and a team of volunteers put together a program with wonderful food, over 100 pieces of art on display, and a lineup of speakers (including one who shared her firsthand experience as an inmate at Perryville). Come enjoy the art in Saint Barbara during the month of September.

Blessings,
Poulson+
I’ve just finished reading Senator John McCain’s farewell statement to our state and the nation, and it is remarkable not only for what it says about him, but for what it says to all who read it. For in his straightforward but stirring prose, Senator McCain has left us not only a reflection on his own honorable life, but a blueprint for our own. And it comes at just the right time, for our nation is caught up in converging crises in which our major institutions (especially our government and politics, and most recently the Roman Catholic Church) are hemorrhaging credibility and trust. If we are to rebuild confidence in our civic and moral institutions (and we must, for the sake of our children and theirs), it will come over time, through the selfless, courageous actions and example of honorable women and men.

Here are some specific lessons from Senator McCain’s statement that we might adopt, for the good of ourselves, our families, our communities, and our nation.

• **Serve.** Over and over in his statement, Senator McCain speaks of the honor of serving his country in uniform and in government. To serve others selflessly and humbly, in our family, work, church, community, and civic life, with more regard for others’ good than for our own, is to walk in the path of God. As Jesus taught, “the greatest among you will be your servant.”

• **Acknowledge Our Mistakes.** He mentions having made mistakes and having regrets but says that “I hope my love for America will be weighed favorably against them.” It is healthy to admit our mistakes, and to share our regrets, for that is how we grow, and how we are reconciled with those whom we have hurt or disappointed.

• **Be Grateful.** Senator McCain says that “I have observed that I am the luckiest person on earth…I would not trade a day of my life, in good or bad times, for the best of anyone else’s.” To be grateful for our many blessings, and for the uniqueness of our own life’s path, is a practice that leads to true happiness.

• **Love Family.** At the base of a good life, second only to our love of God, is the love of family and friends, those who stick by us in the best and worst of times. As he says, “no man ever had a more loving wife or children he was prouder of than mine.”

• **Love Country.** Ours is not a perfect country, but as Senator McCain says, "We are citizens of the world's greatest republic, a nation of ideals, not blood and soil. We are
blessed and are a blessing to humanity when we uphold and advance those ideals at home and in the world. We have helped liberate more people from tyranny and poverty than ever before in history.” Love of country, which includes the calling always to improve it and make it more just, is something to embrace and proclaim, not shy away from.

- **Seek Common Ground.** A famous maverick and often a centrist, Senator McCain sought common ground and common sense. As he writes in his statement: “We are three-hundred-and-twenty-five million opinionated, vociferous individuals. We argue and compete and sometimes even vilify each other in our raucous public debates. But we have always had so much more in common with each other than in disagreement. If only we remember that and give each other the benefit of the presumption that we all love our country, we will get through these challenging times. We will come through them stronger than before. We always do.”

A wise letter, with insights gleaned from a lifetime of honorable service, and a last gift to a grateful state and nation. May we read his words, reflect on them, and live them. Thank you, John McCain.


Blessings,
Poulson+

At the end of this month we bid a temporary farewell to Patrice Al-Shatti, our Health Ministries Coordinator, and we welcome Jane Irvine into the role. Patrice is in training to be ordained a permanent deacon, and part of the standard diocesan process is that she leave us for a time to serve as an intern at another parish, in her case Saint Augustine’s in Tempe. Patrice will return to All Saints’ in late spring, and will be ordained a deacon in early June, at which point (pending the Bishop’s approval) she will serve as a deacon at All Saints’, alongside Jim Bade. Permanent deacons are unpaid but vital leaders in our churches, with involvement not only liturgically on Sundays, but also as an important link between the Church and the needs of the congregation, the wider community, and the world.

As Patrice moves into this new phase of ministry as intern and then deacon, we are delighted to have Jane Irvine entering into the Health Ministries Coordinator role. One of the blessings of this volunteer ministry is its flexibility: it has been different depending on the person in it, and their skills and interests: first Marta Smith, then Patrice, and now Jane. Jane’s foci will include pastoral care, ministries with and to our seniors, and opportunities for connection across generations. Jane brings to the position extensive experience in healthcare (including hospice care), and a longstanding and deep relationship with All Saints’, where she has served in numerous volunteer capacities (including currently as a member of the Vestry). The Health Ministries Coordinator will continue to be a point of connection among our various pastoral ministries (the clergy, Community of Hope, Daughters of the King, and others).

What is health ministry and why is it important? One answer is the practical one: so many areas of pastoral need involve health concerns, and health ministry is the intersection of health with spirituality and pastoral care. Wellness, illness and death all have spiritual components. Our health ministries at All Saints’ in recent years have touched on areas as broad and varied as mindfulness, sabbath, loneliness, addiction, healthy eating, exercise, caregiver support, treatment of disease, assisted living, end of life care and much more.

Health ministry is not only practical; it is also deeply theological. God came to earth as a human being in Jesus, in a human body, and in so doing showed the importance of our earthly humanity to God. Jesus healed the sick, the blind, and the lame, and was raised from the dead not as a spirit but as a body. We come from the dust, and to dust we shall return, but we, like Christ, will one day have resurrected bodies (as we proclaim in the creeds). Since God cares so much about our earthly bodies, it is fitting that the Church
also care for humans in this transitory life, whether through relief of the poor or pastoral care.

Godspeed, Patrice, and blessings for this next chapter. We thank you for your impactful ministry so far, not only in our health ministries but with our Creative Community of artists and in so many other ways, and we look forward to your ministry among us as a deacon. Welcome, Jane, as Health Ministries Coordinator, and thank you for your willingness to serve those in need with compassion.

Blessings,
Poulson+
The Pew Research Center regularly surveys religious belief and practice in the United States, and their comprehensive data provide valuable insights not only for scholars but for churches. Their most recent report is no exception. “Why Americans Go (Or Don’t Go) to Religious Services,” released on August 1st, confirms some suspicions but challenges others.

What the Report Shows

For the full report, go here: [http://www.pewforum.org/2018/08/01/why-americans-go-to-religious-services/](http://www.pewforum.org/2018/08/01/why-americans-go-to-religious-services/). But here are some highlights. Among those who attend church regularly, most do so, not surprisingly, to “become closer to God” (81%), followed by “So children will have a moral foundation” (69%), “to make me a better person” (68%) and “for comfort in times of trouble” (66%). Two things that are often touted as extremely important to church goers were only in the middle of importance: sermons (59%) and community (57%). And the metrics of obligation were quite low: “to continue my family’s religions traditions” (37%), “religious obligation” (31%), and “to please my family or spouse” (16%). Women are more likely to attend worship than men, older people more likely than younger, and Republicans more likely than Democrats.

As for why people do not go to church regularly, the top reasons were: “I practice my faith in other ways” (37%), dislike for religious services either generally or specifically (37%), not a believer at all (26%), and logistical reasons (22%). A fairly large percentage (26%) could not or would not say why they don’t attend worship.

Some Reflections on the Data

Assuming our congregation is similar to those reflected in the data, we might consider the following:

• nurturing those who attend regularly by prioritizing a solemn but joyful worship experience and spiritual practices that help people feel close to God, offering excellent programs for families with children, preaching and teaching on how to be a better person, and providing pastoral care in various forms to those in need of support.

• at the same time, being careful not to fall into a self-centered, consumer-oriented faith (what critics call Moralistic Therapeutic Deism) that softens the Gospel’s
call to repentance and sacrificial service to others. Healthy churches keep a balance of comfort and challenge as we follow the narrow path of Jesus as his disciples.
• finding opportunities to reach out creatively to those who “practice their faith in other ways,” a group almost half of whom prays regularly.
• finding ways to reach out to those who are not with us for practical reasons (illness, transportation issues, busy schedules).

Some Final Thoughts

There is not much we can do as a church to appeal to those who are not believers or interested in believing. That work of converting the heart is up to God, though we can, each of us, live lives of Christian joy and compassion that can inspire others. Neither can we any longer count on a sense of obligation to get most people to church. The days of people coming on Sundays solely because of their family or spouse or family history are mostly gone (though the data show that men are more likely than women to attend to please a spouse!).

But there is much we can do, individually and collectively, to invite and assist those who are “spiritual but not religious” and those who have practical obstacles to attendance. For example, this year we will begin offering monthly sung Compline Sunday evenings. Might this mystical, atmospheric worship appeal to some who are not comfortable with the Eucharist, or who have Sunday morning commitments? How do we spread the word about our contemplative options like “Centering Prayer” on Saturday mornings, and the Rosary, and Evening Prayer? Our Seniors Task Force is considering how to help with transportation for those who can’t get here on their own. How can we get people here more easily and often? Do those who are seriously ill and homebound know that our Community of Hope will bring them communion and a listening ear wherever they are? How might we communicate about our support groups, and special events that are easier points of entry for some than worship?

The Pew study gives us a great deal to think about, as we continue to develop and execute our mission strategy. In all of this, we will need help from every single member of our All Saints’ community. Some ministry ideas are staff-driven, but many of the best ones bubble up from our membership (like our Prison Ministry, and Women’s Breakfast). Above all, ministry growth requires “word of mouth.” As you read and hear about the great things that are happening at All Saints’ this year, can you help us spread the word?
Notes

• The third and last of our summer Living Room Conversations is on Tuesday. The first two have had good sized and enthusiastic crowds. After this next one, the Diversity and Reconciliation Committee will consider whether we might offer additional conversations on important topics, building connections across political and other differences.

• This past week was the first week of class at our day school. What fun it was to welcome our more than 500 students to campus, for the start of a new academic year. One of my most significant activities this summer, along with our Senior Warden Tim Haskins, has been with the committee seeking the next Head of School for All Saints'. The new Head will begin her or his service the summer of 2019, after Leo Dressel's retirement. I am pleased that we have narrowed it down to a small group of three excellent finalists. Please keep this search in your prayers as we seek a worthy successor to Leo, someone who can build on his thoughtful and dedicated leadership.

Blessings,
Poulson+
August 9, 2018 Pope Francis on the Death Penalty

Pope Francis is the most prominent Christian leader in the world, by a wide margin. With the death of Billy Graham last February, it’s hard to know what living Christian leader is the second best known (certainly in the top ten would be our own Presiding Bishop Michael Curry, after his sermon at the royal wedding). When Pope Francis speaks, especially on controversial topics, it makes news. The sense I get is that Pope Francis likes to stir the pot, as the saying goes, getting people talking about things he thinks are urgent or in need of challenge or re-evaluation. I, for one, am often glad for it. Because even though there are some significant theological differences between the Roman Catholic and Episcopal Churches, there are many more areas of similarity between our two traditions. Moreover, when the Pope makes news with a statement, it reminds the world that there are moral and ethical dimensions to much, if not all of life.

We live in a cultural environment that is becoming so pervasively secular and polarized that political affiliation has become an idol. Every issue is interpreted through a crudely partisan, winner take all world view (will it “energize the base” or appeal to “swing voters”?). As Christians, though, whose kingdom is not of this world, we are called to interpret everything through a moral world view, with politics as a secondary consideration. On any issue, we ask ourselves: what would God have us do? Is this consistent with the life and teachings of Jesus? Ideally, we answer these questions not governed by our personal feelings, but with humility, through our careful reading of the Bible, through the teaching of the Church’s tradition over time, and, when those are not clear, through our God-given reason.

And so I was interested that Pope Francis recently re-ignited the debate about the death penalty, when he changed the Catechism to say that the use of the death penalty is never morally permitted. The core sentence reads as follows: “the death penalty is inadmissible because it attacks the inviolability and dignity of the person.” Frankly, many people were surprised that this was not already the teaching of the Catholic Church, and indeed the moral teaching has been developing in this direction for some time over recent papacies. But it was not always so. For centuries, the Catholic Church taught that capital punishment should be used sparingly, but was occasionally justified, as a curb to greater evil. The Biblical rationale for this “rare but occasionally permitted” view was found in a number of places, for example Genesis 9:6 (“whoever sheds the blood of a human, by a human shall that person’s blood be shed”) and Romans 13:4 (“if you do what is wrong,
you should be afraid, for it is not without reason that [the authorities] bear the sword. Indeed, they are God’s servants to administer punishment to anyone who does wrong”).

When Pope Francis seemingly closed off the moral justification for the death penalty entirely, it was not without controversy. Not all Christians agreed. For example, Southern Baptist pastor Robert Jeffress, who sits on the President's evangelical advisory board, said that on this issue Pope Francis was “dead wrong.” Some Catholics have said that Pope Francis has altered Church teaching too abruptly and unilaterally in simply changing the Catechism by “fiat.” The Episcopal Church on this particular issue is on the side of the Pope, having been against the death penalty consistently and repeatedly since 1958, as articulated by the resolutions of our General Convention. However, as with almost any issue, there are faithful Episcopalians on both sides of the death penalty debate. Where two or three Episcopalians are gathered, there are likely to be two or three opinions in the midst of them!

Given that Scripture on this matter is not unanimous, Christians are likely to continue to differ (though the clear majority of denominations hold the Pope Francis view). My point is not to say what anyone should believe on this controversial topic, but simply to note how refreshing it is to see a serious issue being discussed and debated in the public square from a moral point of view, with human dignity at the center, instead of being based solely on politics and gut feelings. We could use more of that.

Notes

You may recall that we collected backpacks, Bibles, and other supplies earlier this summer for children of prisoners who were going to a special camp at Chapel Rock, our diocesan camp and conference center in Prescott. I am happy to report that 21 campers attended Camp Genesis in this, its inaugural year. If you want to experience a story that will warm your heart, read about the camp here and look at the slideshow:

http://www.azdiocese.org/dfc/newsdetail_2/3193770

Blessings,
Poulson+
August 2, 2018 Why We Want Children and Youth in Church (It’s Not Why You Might Think)

There’s palpable excitement growing around our ministries for and with children and youth at All Saints’ these days. Last week, Pastor Finn wrote about our reimagined and re-energized youth ministry, the result of conversations she has been having with youth and their families over the past months. This week, members of our community chorister program have been at choir camp at All Saints’, led by our Director and Associate Director of Music. Beginning in mid-September, these choristers will be singing every other Sunday at the 9am service. Other students will be able to learn how to play musical instruments as our All Saints’ Music School expands, and will share their talents in church, as well. And our Christian education program for young children will have some new developments and a new curriculum when it resumes the Sunday after Labor Day.

Ministry with children and youth is perhaps as challenging as it has ever been. Most family schedules are beyond hectic, and expectations of religious practice are shifting rapidly in the culture. There are no longer “best practices” in churches for how to run a successful children and youth ministry, or standard curricula that work well everywhere. Every church is scrambling to determine what approach fits best in its own context. Some churches around the country are even giving up on "Sunday school" for children and youth entirely, discouraged by low and inconsistent attendance. Not so at All Saints’: we are strategizing anew about how to offer our young people opportunities to pray, learn, serve, and connect that are so compelling, useful, life-giving and fun that they will move other commitments to sing, acolyte, learn, play, and put their faith into action with us. And we seek to grow our intergenerational connections also, with our young people getting to know wise mentors, side by side with a wide range of role models.

But why do we want children and youth in church? Not because we need them to keep Christianity afloat in the years to come. The Christian Church is God’s, not ours, and will never die (though it has, throughout history, sometimes seemed to die, only to be resurrected). If we value our young people only as means to an end (full churches and future pledges) we are missing the point. No, we want children and youth in church not for what they will do as adults, but for who they are now. The Body of Christ, in all its wondrous diversity, includes young people, and they are not optional, but essential, as Jesus himself recognized (“Let the little children come to me, do not hinder them, for it is to such as these that the kingdom of heaven belongs” Matthew 19:14). To have a range of people in our faith community: young and old, rich and poor, gay and straight, of different
races and experiences and views, sinners and saints united in following Jesus, is to be the Body of Christ in all its fullness.

But it is not enough simply to have children and youth around. As adults, our responsibility is to model and pass down a true, challenging, and lively faith, not something watered down. Our young people deserve not only fun and connection, but also access to the rich heritage of our tradition: learning how to pray and understand the Bible, and how to use our faith as a steady compass amidst the confusion of life. If you are a family with children, let us know how we can support you in teaching the faith to your kids and to you (since the most important teachers of faith are parents and grandparents), and invest your valuable time, as you are able, in our faith community this year. And if you do not have children at home, please support our children and youth ministries financially in the month of August, and most importantly with your prayers and presence.

Notes

• Speaking of our choristers, Elizabeth, one of our singers, represented us the week of July 23rd at the Girls Course at Saint Thomas, Fifth Avenue in New York. To be accepted into this course was a great honor for Elizabeth, and for our choir program here at All Saints’. To hear the girls’ magnificent singing, go to the Saint Thomas webcast page (which is a wonderful resource for those who love to listen to choral evensong, and worthy of bookmarking): https://www.saintthomaschurch.org/webcasts

• I’m putting together the schedule of adult Christian education for the new program year. If you have a topic you would like for us to explore on Sunday mornings, please let me know in an email.

Blessings,
Poulson+
June 28, 2018  Free and Responsible Beings, United in Love

At our foundation, we were a society with strong covenantal attachments — to family, community, creed and faith. Then on top of them we built democracy and capitalism that celebrated liberty and individual rights. The deep covenantal institutions gave people the capacity to use their freedom well. (David Brooks “Our Elites Still Don’t Get It”)

In a 2017 New York Times column from which the above quote is taken, David Brooks makes the argument that, at our best, our nation has balanced individual liberty with a strong sense of community. But in recent years, the trend has been towards greater liberty but weaker community, as the major institutions of commitment (like marriage, religion, community organizations, and government) have declined in influence and credibility. Brooks says that often, when alternate forms of community arise to replace those that have been abandoned, the results are unhealthy, with a kind of tribalism (us vs. them politics, racism, internet mobs and so on). Those who find no sense of community at all, healthy or unhealthy, sometimes fall into extreme individualism and isolation, with symptoms like addiction, malaise, video game obsession, or paranoia.

This week before Independence Day is a good time to reflect on the blessing of liberty, which, as Benjamin Franklin said, is “not a gift bestowed upon us by other men, but a right that belongs to us by the laws of God and nature.” Our constitutionally protected freedoms strengthen our democracy, and serve as a bulwark against tyranny at home, and an inspiration to the rest of the world, even (perhaps especially) in this challenging period in our national life. When we use our liberty to choose freely to bond with others for justice and the common good, that is perhaps the highest expression of our national values and our founders’ intent.

This is one area in which our faith and our national life converge: in both, there is this theme of free people choosing to commit to one another for a purpose greater than themselves. Our collect this weekend has a marvelous image of the Church as community: we are a holy and living temple, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Jesus Christ himself as the chief cornerstone. This temple of God is never coercive, like the great pyramids of Egypt constructed by forced labor. God always gives us the choice, first to be joined with one another and with Christ in baptism, and second, to live out our baptism through a genuine love of God and our neighbor.

We give heartfelt thanks for the liberties we enjoy as Americans, and for the opportunity to gather freely in churches, families, and community organizations to work for the common
good. May we fight the temptation either to be too individualistic and isolated, or to affiliate with groups or ideologies (real and virtual) that are hateful, selfish, and intolerant. And we live in hope, for the Bible gives us a vision, at the end of all things, of a perfect balance between liberty and community. As the theologian John Macquarrie so beautifully puts it: “the end, we have seen reason to believe, would be a commonwealth of free, responsible beings united in love.” May it be so, on earth as it is in heaven.

Notes

• Summer is a time when we see a lot of guests, both those visiting family and friends from out of town, and those who are looking for a church home. For this reason, it is an excellent time to wear our name tags, as a sign of our hospitality. Really, we ought to wear them every week, all year round, because in a church our size, it is impossible to know everyone by name. But many of us have been getting out of the habit. Church name tags can be left on the metal kiosk after worship, and since they are magnetic, they don’t damage clothes. If you don’t have a name tag, please fill out a form in the narthex, and we will be glad to provide one for you.

• Did you know that 104 members of our church have been involved with our Prison Ministry this year? Many other members of the wider community have been involved, as well. That means that, over the past year, our Prison Ministry has become one of our largest ministries at All Saints’. Well done, and thanks be to God!

Blessings,
Poulson+
June 21, 2018 How to Apply the Bible to Contemporary Issues: Some Basics, and the Crisis on our Border

Since the writing of this reflection, there have been major developments in the story, but many of the essential themes remain relevant.

So, anyone who thinks he has understood the divine scriptures or any part of them, but cannot by his understanding build up this double love of God and neighbor, has not yet succeeded in understanding them. Saint Augustine (*On Christian Teaching*)

All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work. Saint Paul (*2 Tim 3:16-17*)

Applying scriptural lessons to contemporary issues and events ought to be done with a great deal of humility, even caution, for there are relatively few matters on which the Bible is totally clear. Much of the time when the Bible is invoked in the public square, certain verses are cherry picked to support a political position, which does little to clarify things, but usually obscures them, inflaming rather than informing the situation. We ought to remember that the Devil used scripture when he tempted Jesus in the wilderness. When Jesus resisted the temptation, he used scripture, too, but did so with a deeper understanding of the spiritual themes and core meaning beneath.

This does not mean that we should give up on trying to see contemporary issues through the lens of faith. Indeed, we are called to do so, and as Saint Paul teaches us in the quote above, the scriptures are meant to be used to shed light on matters individual and communal, personal and political. The scriptures are *practical* tools; they are “useful,” for “training,” helping us to be “proficient” and “equipped.” But, like many tools, the scriptures are not easy to use, and proficiency with them takes serious commitment and practice.

Still, amidst the complexities of the Bible and our interpretation of it, there are major, underlying themes in its pages. As we seek to navigate choppy waters and foggy skies in these tumultuous times in our national life, the Bible is our map, and our compass is the core of Jesus’ teaching: the love of God and our neighbor. As Saint Augustine said, if our understanding of Scripture does not build up our love of God and our neighbor, we have not truly understood. Put to another test: does our Biblical argument produce the fruits of
the spirit in ourselves and others: “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control”? (Galatians 5: 22-23).

There are countless wise teachings in the Bible, and “all scripture is inspired by God,” but not all teachings are of equal urgency. So, for example, the Bible teaches that those “who do not work should not eat,” (2 Thess 3:10), but if someone is about to starve to death, we are called to feed them. A human life is more important than learning a lesson about shared labor. Mercy always takes priority. When we think about the love of our neighbor, the Bible is as clear as it is on anything that we are to start with protecting the most vulnerable. The vulnerable come first and sorting out the rest comes after.

Therefore, when it comes to any issue, including how to treat children brought by their parents into this country illegally, or seeking asylum, we can assert with confidence, from a Biblical point of view, that we are to treat those vulnerable children with genuine compassion. To me, that clearly means keeping families together as much as is possible, in safe and humane conditions. Care for and welcome of the vulnerable is our most important mandate, for they are our neighbors, made in God’s image. I find it dismaying that not all Christians seem to agree.

At the same time, can we be honest, and admit that most issues that have not yet been solved are incredibly complex, including what to do about our broken immigration system? While less important than the protection of the vulnerable and welcoming the stranger, it is also true that the Bible urges us to obey civil laws and authorities. Well-regulated and secure borders are necessary and keep people safe. We have not yet begun to ask, let alone answer the truly difficult questions on this topic.

Would we prefer to keep these immigrant families of uncertain or transitional status together, but in some kind of government facility? If we release people for later hearing dates, how do we make it likely that they will show up for those hearings? How do we discourage human trafficking and the cruel and unfair manipulation of the system? And, more deeply, what kind of country have we been, and who do we want to be? How do we, as a society, evaluate fairly and with compassion those who come to us seeking greater opportunity and safety, while recognizing reasonable limits on and priorities in immigration? After this immediate humanitarian crisis is resolved, and I pray that happens quickly, I hope some in government and in the media will be willing to explore the genuine complexity of this web of issues, beyond the internet memes and indignant talking points.
What frustrates me most is that there are common sense solutions to the challenges we face in our national life, and I dearly wish there were more people committed to working together and finding them, instead of stoking outrage and sowing division. But until that time when reason prevails, we in the Church ought to focus on the Biblical essentials, especially the well-being and dignity of every human being, with charity for diverse views beyond these Biblical first principles.

Notes
• Ever feel like your weekly experience of the Eucharist is unfocused and a bit stale? This Sunday at our summer education time at 9am, I will share some practical tips on how to be more fully present in the Eucharist, allowing it to nourish us more deeply.

• This Monday is the start of our annual version of vacation Bible school, All Saints’ Kids for the Community. Please keep our young people and their mentors in your prayers as they serve those in need in our area, as an expression of their faith.

Blessings,
Poulson+
June 14, 2018 Jesus Never Took a Vacation

“And so, we take a holiday, a vacation, to gain release from this bondage for a space, to stand back from the rush of things and breathe again. But a holiday is a respite, not a cure. The more we need holidays, the more certain it is that the disease has conquered us, and not we it. More and more holidays just to get away from it all is a sure sign of a decaying civilization; it was one of the most obvious marks of the breakdown of the Roman empire. It is a symptom that we haven’t learned how to live so as to recreate ourselves in our work instead of being sapped by it.”

--Evelyn Underhill (1875-1941)

Evelyn Underhill, the great Anglican spiritual writer whose feast day falls every year on June 15, wrote brilliantly on many topics. Don’t take my word for it - we have several of her books available for check-out from our parish library. Her work on Christian mysticism, for example, is some of the most insightful commentary on that topic (she believed that all of us are mystics at heart, capable of profound experiences of the living God). But I was particularly taken, as I was reading some Underhill this week, with her quote above, on the topic of vacation.

So many of us live under such stress and anxiety that, when we find time for vacation, we are like gasping fish, stranded on the shore, that have been plopped by a merciful hand back into life-giving water. Underhill would surely not say, nor would I, that vacations are unnecessary. We all need the sabbath rest and refreshment that comes with time away from our usual responsibilities (even if it is a “staycation” in our own homes). Vacation is a blessing, and I hope all of us are finding sometime this summer away from our usual routines (and from the heat!). Don’t forget, if you are out of town on a Sunday, how rewarding it is to worship in another church, whether Episcopal or not (I love to see bulletins from other churches, if you think to bring one back).

Yes, vacation is helpful, enjoyable, and good. But it is perhaps more important to live daily lives that are themselves rewarding, with pockets of renewal within and around them. A week of vacation is no substitute for a well-balanced existence, grounded in healthy relationships with God, our family and friends, co-workers, and ourselves. Does your daily life include “sabbath” times each day and each week, when you can rest, reflect, and reconnect? If you are seeking to add a spiritual time of refreshment, remember that All Saints’ offers many opportunities for prayer outside of our weekend Eucharists, opportunities that continue in the summer, including two Wednesday morning Eucharists,
Evening Prayer now Monday through Thursday, Centering Prayer on Saturday mornings, and Rosary Prayer on Sunday mornings. A spiritual practice is one way to seek more balance and reprioritize amidst a hectic life.

Underhill went on to say, on the topic of vacation, that Jesus never took one! Her rather humorous point was that Jesus, who was busier and more stressed than anyone, never seemed overwhelmed. As she writes, Jesus “knew exactly when the moment had come for doing something, and when it had not.” All of us fall short of Jesus’ example, but in this, as in all things, he is an aspirational model for us: are we using our time wisely and healthily, for our good and the good of those around us, or are we controlled and exhausted by our schedule and our task list? Jesus was busy, but never lost sight of the things that were most important. Something for fathers, and for all of us to think about.

Notes
• The church staff held our annual staff retreat and planning session this past week. For our retreat day, we met at the Franciscan Renewal Center, and, amidst our hard work enjoyed a tour of their new church building, which is beautiful. We are blessed to have such a dedicated and talented staff at All Saints’, and the 2018-19 program year that begins in September is going to be remarkable. Stay tuned!

Blessings,
Poulson+
Jesus looked up and saw rich people putting their gifts into the treasury; he also saw a poor widow put in two small copper coins. He said, “Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all of them; for all of them have contributed out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty has put in all she had to live on.” (Luke 21:1-4)

Last week, we received a wonderful donation. It wasn’t large - just $15 - but was an act of extraordinary generosity. It came from an inmate at Perryville Prison (I will not use her real name, but will call her “Susan”), issued as an official check from the Arizona State Department of Corrections. Susan wrote a note that was included: “Enclosed is a check for 15 dollars. Thank you for all the cards and prayer throughout the year. Susan. God Bless You.”

Inmates at Perryville make about 20 cents an hour for their work, and, as I understand it, use what they earn to buy from the prison shop the little things that make their environment more humane: gum, snacks and the like. And so $15 represents about 75 hours of work by Susan, a precious resource she chose to donate to All Saints’ in thanksgiving for our ministry there. If ever there was a modern version of the story of the Widow’s Mite, this is it, for Susan gave generously out of her poverty. We prepared a nice thank you letter, with a beautiful image from our Saint John’s Bible, and sent it to her, with our deepest appreciation.

There are a lot of days in ministry that are fairly average, and a few that are discouraging, but there are some that make your heart sing, and the day we received that check was one of those. We are making a difference, a real difference in the lives of the inmates at Perryville: with our card ministry, our Christmas gifts for their children, our recent visits, and the art display by inmates coming to All Saints’ in September. And this past Sunday morning, the backpacks we were preparing for the children of the incarcerated who are going to Chapel Rock for camp this July were snatched up before all the pews were even empty. Something about this ministry at Perryville has touched a chord with All Saints’, and it is joyful to see it. God is blessing us through this ministry every bit as much as God is using us to bless the prisoners there.

The churches that struggle, in my experience, often have watered down faith, low expectations for members, lots of comfort with little that is spiritually challenging, and a
constant focus on keeping attendees content. Churches that are strong and healthy are just the opposite: they preach and teach the challenging faith given to us by Jesus, they invite members into deeper faith and involvement, coach the spiritual practices that improve spiritual fitness, and are committed to serving and advocating for the most vulnerable.

When I see the number of our members who have committed to lead Evening Prayer, the terrific group who are showing up on Sunday mornings to learn how to pray the Daily Office on their own, and the passion we have for our ministry with prisoners (who are some of the loneliest and most vulnerable people in our world), it gives me confidence that God will continue to bless All Saints’ for God’s reconciling mission in the world.

Notes
- Come and see the Saint John’s illuminated Bible on display in our church library. It is available for viewing most of the time the church offices are open (call ahead to be sure). Each week a volume of the Bible will be open to one of the amazing works of art within it, to enjoy and/or pray with (we have resources available on how to pray with the images, a practice called *visio divina*).

Blessings,
Poulson+
May 31, 2018 How Dusty Is Your Prayer Book?

To the seventeenth - or indeed nineteenth-century lay [person] the Prayer Book was not a shiny volume to be borrowed from a church shelf on entering and carefully replaced on leaving. It was a beloved and battered personal possession, a life-long companion and guide, to be carried from the church to kitchen, to parlor, to bedside table; equally adaptable for liturgy, personal devotion, and family prayer: the symbol of a domestic spirituality. Martin Thornton "The Anglican Spiritual Tradition"

I still have my first Prayer Book, by which I mean the first Book of Common Prayer that actually belonged to me (not just in the pews). I received it, like so many Episcopalians, as a Confirmation gift as a teenager. I dutifully moved it, with my other books, from place to place in my young adult years. But as my inherited, rather tentative childhood faith grew into a committed adult faith, in my mid-twenties, I pulled it off the shelf and began to use it: first, for personal prayer, then the daily prayers of the Church (the Daily Office of Morning and Evening Prayer).

And when, during my training for priesthood, I served a year as a full-time hospital chaplain in Connecticut, that Prayer Book became my constant companion. I realized, that year working in the hospital, that there were times for spontaneous prayers, and there were times when the finely honed, poetically resonant, handed down prayers of the tradition were more comforting for some people. I carried that beaten-up Book of Common Prayer from my Confirmation everywhere I went in the hospital, and came to use it, more and more. It wasn’t just the prayers for the sick and dying that I turned to. I learned, for example, that the night prayers of Compline were just right when keeping vigil with someone in their last hours, or even just the psalms, read simply in succession.

This June, starting this Sunday at 9am, we are offering three classes on how to pray Morning and Evening Prayer from our Prayer Book. I wish our Daily Office were more intuitive (perhaps a future Prayer Book will be). But, in my experience, it takes an hour or two to get really comfortable with it. These will be very practical classes for beginners: not much history, but mostly how to pray the Offices on one’s own. It’s ok if you have to miss one of the classes: come as you are able. Bring a Prayer Book from home, or grab one out of the church (please put it back after class!). Once you know how to pray the full version of the Offices, you can scale it back, as you wish. We’ll also discuss the many electronic versions available.

In a couple of weeks, we will begin our new Evening Prayer schedule, offering it twice as often as before: Monday through Thursday evenings at 5:30 in the chapel, led by teams of volunteers. I hope that the combination of more regular public Offices and regular training for individual Morning and Evening Prayer will lead to a higher percentage of our people
making use of this wonderful resource, which is one of the basic practices of Christian discipleship in our Anglican tradition (think of it as the “pushup” of spiritual fitness).

My very first Prayer Book is indeed, as Thornton describes, a “beloved and battered possession, a life-long companion and guide.” In fact, it’s really too worn and tattered now to be used regularly anymore, and was long ago replaced with a handsome, larger one (with ribbon bookmarks!). I hope our renewed emphasis at All Saints’ on actually using the Prayer Book will lead many to pull our dusty books off the shelf, or buy one (churchpublishing.org), and carry it around for prayer on our own and with our families, public worship, and instruction in the faith. Like those in ages past, it can be, for us, the very symbol of a “domestic” (by which Thornton means “everyday” and, above all, practical) spirituality.

Notes

• Please help us spread the word about our summer “Living Room Conversations.” For those of us who mourn the loss in the public sphere of civil discourse and respect for those who differ from us politically, these small group conversations will be refreshing reminders of what once was, and, God willing, can be again.

• While we certainly miss our choir in the summers (though many of them are in the pews), it is exciting to hear a number of our wonderful singers and instrumentalists sharing their talents as solo performers. For example, come this Sunday at 10am and you’ll get to hear Erin Ripka, the wife of our Director of Music, playing the violin. Erin is a talented and highly trained musician, acclaimed both as a performer, and as a music teacher. We have been blessed to hear her a couple of times this year, including playing a stunning descant to “Silent Night” on Christmas Eve.

Blessings,
Poulson+
May 24, 2018 What Is the Curry Moment About, Anyway?

What a whirlwind week it has been for The Episcopal Church. It was clear in the days before the royal wedding that Presiding Bishop Michael Curry’s sermon was going to get some media attention. But I doubt anyone suspected that, in the days following the wedding, Bishop Curry would continue to be a national story, appearing on the Today show, Good Morning America, the View, and even being parodied on Saturday Night Live (a sure sign of viral celebrity!). But what will be the lasting effect of Bishop Curry’s brush with fame for The Episcopal Church?

Opinions range from “none at all” to “game changing,” and a lot is being written this week about how best to use this cultural momentum for the growth of the Church (some of which, frankly, has the sense of desperation, as if Curry’s sermon is, like a Hail Mary pass, going to transform our denomination’s fortunes in a glorious instant). At All Saints’, we have boosted our Facebook and website presence in an effort to reach out to and be prepared for any spiritually curious folks who may be inspired to check out a local Episcopal church. As I mentioned on Sunday, I hope all of us will look out for appropriate opportunities to share our enthusiasm for The Episcopal Church and All Saints’ in particular.

My hunch is that we may see a modest uptick of summer visitors, as a result of our denomination’s positive moment in the public eye. We’ll see. Hopefully we are always ready to welcome guests warmly to All Saints’, and hopefully they find in us a community committed to following Jesus by loving God and our neighbor. If more people become curious about what God is doing in and through us, all the better.

To me, though, part of what this “Curry moment” speaks to is the deep hunger for authentic spirituality that I believe lives within every human heart. “Our hearts are restless until they rest in you,” Saint Augustine famously said. Bishop Curry’s preaching style is not everyone’s cup of tea, but there is no question that, in his joyful and deeply felt preaching, he communicates a genuine and winsome faith. God works in mysterious ways. Some with no religious affiliation who tuned into the wedding ceremony out of casual interest in celebrity culture may have found themselves moved by the Holy Spirit in ways they did not expect.

There is also something powerful specifically about Curry’s theme of love. In a less gifted preacher, it could easily have come across as saccharine and sentimental. But in moving far beyond the love of Harry and Meghan, to the love of God that is the root of all human loves, a love that is expressed in prayer and justice, and most of all in Jesus Christ’s life, death, and resurrection, Curry was tapping into a deep theological spring that flows through the Bible and through human history by way of the saints. The essence of love, in any healthy form (romantic, friendly, familial, or divine) is our concern for another. It is
loving the other as much as we love ourselves. And that kind of sacrificial love is all too absent in our world of hatred, selfishness, greed, deceit, and isolation.

Real love is humble, and it is unfailingly generous. It is indeed powerful, because it is of God. Our loving others begins in our realization that we are profoundly loved, by the One who is Love itself.

Blessings,
Poulson+
May 17, 2018 The Royal Wedding: an Episcopal Opportunity?

Did you hear the big news? For their wedding on Saturday, Prince Harry and Meghan Markle invited to be the preacher the Presiding Bishop of The Episcopal Church, the Most Reverend Michael Curry. No doubt part of the rationale is that Ms. Markle is an American, as is Bishop Curry, but I suspect the invitation is mostly a reflection of Bishop Curry’s well-deserved reputation as a dynamic and joyful preacher.

I have always felt that weddings and funerals in The Episcopal Church are golden opportunities to show our tradition at its best, especially if our clergy, musicians, and volunteers give these pastoral moments our full attention, with genuine Good News enthusiastically preached, played and sung, and hospitality warmly given. It is hard to beat the Book of Common Prayer for elegant solemnity at weddings, and sure and certain comfort at funerals, if we don’t water it down, chop it up, rush through it, or try carelessly to “improve” upon it. I’ve known quite a few people who have joined The Episcopal Church because the Holy Spirit touched them deeply through these prayerful liturgies at important transition times in their lives.

I am delighted that our Presiding Bishop will be preaching at such a high profile event, and, in addition to being a blessing to the happy couple, I hope his sermon will make more people aware of what The Episcopal Church has to offer. Bishop Curry is a uniquely gifted speaker, but his continual focus on Jesus and his joyful demeanor in his enthusiasm for the gospel and for God’s justice are not unique to him, but can be found, expressed in a variety of ways, throughout much of our Church. We are, as Bishop Curry says often, “the Episcopal branch of the Jesus movement,” and perhaps in the days and weeks after this special wedding, God may inspire the spiritually curious to explore The Episcopal Church online and in person.

We can all help encourage this exploration, by respectfully sharing, when the opportunity presents itself in conversation, that we too, like Bishop Curry, are proud and joyful Episcopalians, and members of the Anglican Communion. We want neither to miss, nor to crassly overplay The Episcopal Church’s moment in the public eye. But in the end, as with all evangelism, the opportunity is not chiefly ours, but God’s. We can share enthusiastically our love for our own branch of the Jesus movement in all its tradition and big-tent, inclusive variety. And we ought to do so. But the movement of the Holy Spirit in the human heart is mysterious and unexpected, as we see in the Pentecost story. It enlightens and connects us to God and each other in the most unlikely of ways. Often, we are merely witnesses to what God is doing. Come, Holy Spirit!

Notes
• As our program year comes to a close, I am so grateful for the ministries of all our staff and volunteers, especially our marvelous music staff and many choirs, and our dedicated
Christian education teachers and mentors. Thank you, and enjoy some well-earned rest and refreshment this summer!

• I was pleased to hear last Sunday that our Women’s Breakfast group, a relatively new ministry, is growing, with nine women at the most recent meeting. In a big church like ours, finding ways to connect in smaller groups is so important, and many of these ministries “bubble up” from our lay volunteers, rather than from staff.

• Speaking of new ministries taking off, one of the great successes of this year has been our prison ministry. I was honored to preach and celebrate the Eucharist at Perryville Prison this past Saturday, and spent time with women who have been impacted by our ministry there. I'll be talking about this in my sermon this Sunday at 11am.

Happy Pentecost!
Poulson+
May 10, 2018 My Favorite Mother’s Day Poem

This poem, by the 20th century Australian poet Judith Wright, is a wonderful and witty critique of gender roles and expectations in the guise of a Mother’s Day poem.

It’s far from your usual greeting card sentimentality: a mother, seeing her son in mortal danger, but being too far away to help him, chooses, of all things, to capture the scene with art. It’s a surprising decision. We expect her to make some helping gesture, however futile: at least a panicked yell or cry of distress. But, as it turns out, her choice is inspired. For there was nothing she could do, except trust her daughter to save the boy (which she does, with an alpenstock - a long pole with a hook, used by Swiss shepherds to herd wayward sheep). What the mother can do, she does: she sketches the scene, preserving the legendary story for generations to come, including for her great great granddaughter, the poet, a strong-willed artist in her own right.

Thank you, mothers and mother figures, for your maternal love and care. And thank you, also, for your many other God-given gifts that make you unique and precious in God’s eyes and in our own, including your strength to make the best of even the most challenging situations. May God bless you and keep you in all that you do.

Request To A Year (By Judith Wright)

If the year is meditating a suitable gift,
I should like it to be the attitude
of my great- great- grandmother,
legendary devotee of the arts,

who having eight children
and little opportunity for painting pictures,
sat one day on a high rock
beside a river in Switzerland

and from a difficult distance viewed
her second son, balanced on a small ice flow,
drift down the current toward a waterfall
that struck rock bottom eighty feet below,

while her second daughter, impeded,
no doubt, by the petticoats of the day,
stretched out a last-hope alpenstock
(which luckily later caught him on his way).
Nothing, it was evident, could be done;
And with the artist's isolating eye
My great-great-grandmother hastily sketched the scene.
The sketch survives to prove the story by.

Year, if you have no Mother's day present planned,
Reach back and bring me the firmness of her hand.

Notes
• We welcome with joy and appreciation Bishop Smith and his wife, Laura, this Sunday. He will be with us one last time before his retirement - he will be here for All Saints' Sunday, our feast of title, in November. But this is his last confirmation visit. We thank him for his years of faithful service to the diocese of Arizona, and we thank Laura for her own important ministry and presence, as well.

• This Sunday also marks the second performance by our new community choristers, at the 9am service. They have been working hard at their Friday night rehearsals. What a blessing it is to see this program growing, as a new ministry of the church.

Blessings,
Poulson+
May 3, 2018 A Book Recommendation: “Walk in Love”

Not long after I arrived at All Saints’ almost nine years ago, I decided I wanted to teach most of the adult confirmation class myself, something I have continued to do (with help from a wonderful and wise lay person as co-leader, and with one class taught by one of my fellow priests when I was out of town). This week, the most recent cohort, about a dozen in all, finished their eight-week process, in anticipation of Bishop Smith’s visit with us on May 13th. I really enjoy teaching the faith, and all the more so to a group that commits their valuable time to learning together and forming a sense of community (most of us shared a simple meal before each class to get to know each other better). Over the years, those adults who have enrolled in the confirmation class (whether to be confirmed or received or renewed) have often become some of our most dedicated volunteers. This year’s marvelous group will, I suspect, follow that trend. Of all of the different things I do as Rector, I believe teaching is one of the most important. For if we do not understand our faith, we will be able neither to practice it, nor to pass it down.

The adult confirmation class this time around has been reading a new book, published in February, which I heartily recommend for anyone. “Walk in Love: Episcopal Beliefs and Practices” (Forward Movement) by Scott Gunn and Melody Wilson Shobe is a fairly long paperback (over 300 pages), but a relatively quick read. It is the most thorough and yet accessible resource on Episcopal faith and practice that I know of. For our adult confirmands, I felt confident that, if they read the book cover to cover, they would gain a solid understanding of what it means to be an Episcopalian. I would strongly endorse the book both for those new to The Episcopal Church, and for those looking for a refresher. Many Episcopalians have a vague feeling that they don’t know as much as they wish they did about our faith tradition. This likely reflects the reality that many of us were confirmed as youth, and have perhaps not prioritized spiritual learning as adults. “Walk in Love” is an excellent way to get caught up on the essentials of The Episcopal Church. While it’s not exactly “beach reading,” I think most people will find it not only informative but enjoyable.

Notes
• I am thrilled that 18 people so far have signed up to learn how to pray Evening Prayer and lead it on weekdays at All Saints’. There are only two spots remaining. This is a core spiritual practice that, like a pattern of exercise, is going to transform the spiritual lives of the participants gradually, over time. Look for more news in the weeks to come about our new schedule of Evening Prayer.

Blessings,
Poulson+
April 26, 2018 The Resurrection Only Moves Forward

"If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation; everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new." (2 Corinthians 5:17)

It was heartwarming to see, this past week, the outpouring of affection for the Bush family as our nation mourned Barbara Bush. Barbara Bush was admired by many, if not most people across the political spectrum. A devoted wife, mother, grandmother and great grandmother, she served as First Lady with humor and humility, and was a dedicated volunteer in the communities in which she lived. And she had a particular love for children. One of her most impactful and iconic moments was when she tenderly held a baby with AIDS in 1989, sending a powerful message of compassion at a time when AIDS was greatly feared and poorly understood by the public. A woman of strong and evident faith, Barbara Bush’s funeral was at Saint Martin’s Episcopal Church in Houston. The service showed our Episcopal tradition at its best, and as our liturgy does so well, struck a comforting balance between prayer and remembrance.

As many commentators have noted, some of the depth of our national mourning for Barbara Bush comes from our mourning for a more civil time in our national and political life that many fear is gone forever. We should not be naive: politics was tough in the 1980’s and 1990’s, and divisions deep. But it does feel as if that toughness has hardened in recent years, and the divisions deepened, inflamed by the toxic influence of social media. More and more, we see those with whom we disagree politically as enemies, not as friends and fellow citizens whom we respect but with whom we occasionally differ. Many people ask: can we just go back to the way things were twenty or thirty years ago? Of course, we can’t, and it probably wouldn’t be healthy even if we could. We can’t turn back the clock, and for all the things we lament about our current times, there is much that has improved. Overall, poverty, crime, and disease have decreased over the past decades, our understanding of difference has broadened, and technology (for all its ills) has opened up much new opportunity and progress.

Even when it comes to our political divisions, I find several reasons to be hopeful. First, groups of people tend to swing toward cultural and political tendencies and back like a pendulum. I wouldn’t be surprised to see a political trend, across party lines, towards more technocratic, solutions-oriented, common sense, centrist, and even rather bland leaders and approaches to issues. Second, I have confidence that communities like All Saints', which foster friendships and conversations across differences, will be sought out by more and more people who seek the common good. And third, but most importantly, I have hope because I am a person of faith. The Easter story of resurrection is about something new being created out of something old: not returning to what was, but transforming into a different and better kind of reality. The resurrection isn’t resuscitation; it doesn’t go back, it only moves forward to what will be. And so, even in times of
challenge, we believe that something new and potentially better may arise, by God’s grace.

Notes
As I write this on Thursday, many public school teachers are beginning a walkout, as they seek more funding for education in our state, which is ranked near the bottom nationally in this category. I have heard a variety of different perspectives from our All Saints’ membership on this topic, and we should all respond as our conscience and faith guide us, but I suspect most of us can agree on some central, nonpartisan points:

• we want our schools and teachers to have what they need in order to teach our children effectively.

• school funding is important for our economic development, but chiefly important for our children, who are our most precious resource.

• we hope and pray that all sides will come together quickly for a fair and reasonable solution that gets everyone back in school as soon as possible.

• we need to do what we can to support vulnerable children and families while schools are closed. We can do this in several ways. We can help spread the word about the options available for families who are seeking activities and/or care for their children. There are many such resources online, like this one: https://www.azcentral.com/story/entertainment/kids/2018/04/20/teacher-walkout-phoenix-arizona-camps-kids/536418002/. We should also consider tangible efforts to help these families, such as donations to St. Mary’s Food Bank, one of our closest mission partners. They are collecting extra food to help feed families who depend on the school lunch programs: http://www.azfamily.com/story/38024887/st-marys-food-bank-helping-families-during-teacher-walkout.

May a just, reasonable, and sustainable solution come quickly.

Blessings,
Poulson+
You may have heard the old story: two people were laying bricks to build a church. Someone asked them, “what are you doing?” The first said, “I’m laying bricks.” The second said, “I’m building God’s house.” The first had a job; the second had a calling.

Human beings are happier and more productive when we feel a sense of calling, of purpose. When we understand why we are doing something, its deeper meaning, and how our work fits with that of others, we are participating in something greater than ourself, and not just a task. Most of our “ministry” is out in the world, in our families, workplaces, and wherever we may be. We can have purpose - to be God’s light in dark moments - anywhere.

There are also ministries of purpose at and through the Church, which deepen our faith. This is true of our children and youth, as much as for adults. When it comes to Sundays, a child or youth sitting in worship may be bored. Ask them to help in a ministry, like acolyting, reading, or greeting as a family, and they are likely to be more engaged. Explain to them WHY their ministry is so important, and they will often light up with enthusiasm.

And so, I was filled to overflowing with joy at the debut of our young choristers from the community at our 9am service last Sunday. These singers have been practicing hard for weeks on Friday nights, and now they were not only singing, but leading our praise of God in song, alongside our adult singers. Our music leaders, Joseph and Ilona, are to be commended for the remarkable progress from recruiting to training more than 35 young singers. They will sing next on May 13th, and the plan is for the choristers to sing much more often, beginning in the fall. We will continue to hear from our day school choristers, from time to time, as well, on special Sundays throughout the year, such as Day School Sunday.

This Sunday, at our education time at 10:10am, we will hear from some of the young people and adults where were part of our Haiti team this year, another example of purpose in action. They will update us on the latest on our partnership with Saint Paul’s church and school in Haiti, a ministry now more than 8 years old.

Looking for more happiness? Find opportunities to use your gifts with others for something greater than yourself in your world, and in the Church.

Notes
• This week, our prayers have been with the Bush family following the death of Barbara Bush, who lived a full life of meaningful purpose in her family, and in her
civic engagement, leadership, and volunteer commitments. She was a wonderful example, and also a faithful Episcopalian. She and her husband, President George H.W. Bush, are members of Saint Martin’s Episcopal Church in Houston.
• Last week, I extended an invitation to join a team of Evening Prayer leaders. I am pleased that we have 9 commitments so far, almost half the goal of 20. Let me know of your interest, or with questions.

Blessings,
Poulson+
April 12, 2018 Daily Prayer: Some History and an Invitation from the Rector

"Tradition is not the worship of ashes, but the preservation of fire." --Gustav Mahler.

When Thomas Cranmer composed the first Book of Common Prayer in 1549, one of many brilliant things he did was to condense the usual seven services of daily prayer into just two: morning and evening prayer. Cranmer did this to make it possible for lay people (not just monks and clergy) to pray daily in a distinctly Anglican form. He imagined that ordinary people might stop by their parish church on their way to work in fields or shops for brief prayers, and do so again on the way home. Cranmer's pattern for daily morning and evening prayer (called the Daily Office) was designed to function with great efficiency: it included basic prayers (mostly drawn from the Bible itself), and daily readings that would cover all 150 psalms every month, and the whole Bible in a year.

Even in Cranmer's day, not everyone attended morning and evening prayer at their church every day. But many did, and have, down the ages, and their spiritual lives have been deepened greatly by this combination of daily prayer and Scripture reading, culminating in Sunday's Holy Communion. Cranmer's pattern continues in our current Book of Common Prayer. Nearly two-thirds of our prayer book is devoted to the Holy Eucharist (our common Sunday worship), and the Daily Office of Morning and Evening Prayer, along with the materials that go along with them, like the lectionary and the psalms. Our Daily Office readings are shorter than Cranmer's, but we still work through almost all of the Bible in two years (not one), and all of the psalms in a month.

One of the great failures of the modern Church, in my view, is that we have so neglected teaching our members how to pray the Daily Office. We have become a denomination in which most Episcopalians have no form of daily prayer at all, and leave their entire prayer life for Sundays only (if that). It's the equivalent of working out only one arm at the gym - it's better than nothing, but far from a healthy discipline. This is mostly the fault of the clergy, for we have not diligently taught our members either the importance of the Daily Office, or how to pray it. Indeed, many clergy don't even pray it themselves! The Daily Office remains the single best way to keep a practice of daily prayer that includes a comprehensive encounter with the Bible. Along with the Holy Eucharist, it is at the heart of how we pray and worship in our tradition. This does not mean that other forms of prayer are not also helpful, but they fall into the category of what our traditional calls "private devotions," making up the third part of our Anglican/Episcopal prayer triangle (Eucharist/Daily Office/Private devotions).

Keeping the Daily Office is easier than one might think. Praying the full form, with the full readings, takes about 25 minutes each in the morning and evening, and can be taught in about three classes. And the Daily Office does not have to be prayed publicly - it can be prayed alone or with a prayer partner anywhere, at any time, and it can be simplified, as
needed. When we pray it alone, our prayers join with the prayers offered by other Episcopalians and Anglicans across the world. And technology makes it even easier. Forward Movement (http://prayer.forwardmovement.org) has the Daily Office online and an app for smartphones that plug the right readings in automatically. Mission St. Clare (http://www.missionstclare.com/english/) is another good option. For those who prefer a real book, I recommend the Contemporary Office Book (https://www.churchpublishing.org/products/contemporaryofficebook). It’s expensive ($165) but handsome, will last a lifetime, and contains the prayers, psalms, and all of the office readings - everything you need for daily prayer.

None of this is a matter of guilt or of “we should.” Many of us are incredibly busy. It is just a recognition: that we have available to us in our Prayer Book a wonderful way to pray that will, over time, draw us closer to God and to our neighbor. Some days, I find the Daily Office enjoyable, and, quite honestly, other days it feels like work. But I am never sorry that I did it, and I believe it is good for me, not only as a priest but as a human being. I think of the Daily Office as my spiritual multivitamin.

Here is the invitation: I’m looking for 20 volunteers to work with me to establish Evening Prayer at All Saints’ Monday through Friday evenings at 5:30pm, beginning in June. Please email me if you are interested or have questions. We have had Evening Prayer on Tuesdays and Thursdays already for some years, led faithfully by Kim Sterling and Grant Washburn, but this would expand to all the weekdays. Each night would have a team of four responsible for their one day each week, and would rotate weekly in the roles (prayer leader, reader one, reader two, set up). A team of four would make it possible to cover on the occasions when one or even two of the team would be unavailable. Each service would last about 25-30 minutes, and I would train everyone, so that the pattern of prayer is the same each night. I hope each team would bond as friends in prayer (perhaps even a beer or coffee afterwards on occasion?) and I imagine some might like to attend on days that are not their “own.” From time to time, beginning in the fall, our young choristers would lead us in a simple, abbreviated Evensong on special feast days, in lieu of spoken Evening Prayer.

In scheduling Evening Prayer as a priority, we will be sending an important message about what we value as All Saints’ Church, adding to our already active schedule of worship and prayer. This is not about how many people attend, but about keeping the flame of prayer burning. Of course, the number of people who can join us for public Evening Prayer at 5:30pm on weekdays is rather limited, though I hope more will make it part of their prayer pattern even a day or two a week. So I will also be offering this year regular trainings on how to pray the Daily Office on one’s own. None of this is exactly “flashy” but it is the sort of spiritual practice that, over time, makes a huge difference in the life and health of ourselves and our church. If we put ourselves in these traditional pathways of grace, we open ourselves up for God’s blessing in unexpected ways.
The season of Easter (Eastertide) is fifty days long, extending all the way to Pentecost (May 20th this year). It is a season chiefly characterized by hope. But, one might say, is not Eastertide mainly a season of joy? And so it is. But it is a joy that becomes hope as it is applied and extended to other aspects of the human experience.

For the raising of Jesus Christ from the dead, that is the initial and recurring melody of Eastertide, means that God has the power and the intention to raise us to new life as well. And if, in the risen Christ, who is the first fruit of the resurrection, we are promised our own resurrection of the body at the end of all things when he comes again, then we may boldly believe that the whole of our fallen world will be raised to new life as the “new heavens” and “new earth” described in the Book of Revelation. Resurrection is not just corporeal (of the body) and contained, but corporate (of everything) and comprehensive.

In other words, the resurrection is not just about Jesus, nor even just about the resurrection of our own individual selves, our souls and bodies, but about the new life that God eventually brings to everything that is dead, decayed, or dying. And so, this Easter season especially, we live with joy because of the risen Christ, and with hope in the resurrection to eternal life of ourselves, our loved ones, and everything that is, has been, and will be.

That is why the saints of our tradition, including Martin Luther King Jr. (who died 50 years ago this week) are always buoyant with hope. Whatever their struggles, however hopeless the cause of faith and justice might seem to the saints, they remain hopeful. And that hope is not naive, but grounded in what they believe and know of God’s resurrection life. For nothing that is evil, or selfish, or deadly, or hateful, or corrupted will be able, in the end, to withstand God’s goodness, generosity, new life, love, and renewal. Justice will come, not only fitfully from our human efforts, but finally from God’s.

But a word of caution: let us not be overconfident that we know precisely what justice God intends, though the Scriptures give us indications. Even with signs on the road, it is easy to get lost. We do our best, in the here and now, to discern and work for the priorities of the kingdom of God. We are called to do so, in our baptism, though we will not always agree what those priorities are, or how best to achieve them. Like the risen Christ, God’s eventual justice may be stranger and harder to understand than we imagine. It will not line up perfectly with political ideologies. But it will be real, and permanent, and thoroughly good, when it comes. And we wait in hope for it.
Notes

- Allow me to extend, as I did last week, my sincere thanks to our talented and hardworking staff and to all of our many amazing volunteers for your devotion and dedication during Holy Week and Easter Day. The liturgies and hospitality were extraordinary, and were vehicles for God’s love in so many ways. Happy Easter!

Blessings,
Poulson+
March 28, 2018 Holy Week and Easter Day: A Few Final Thoughts

As we come now to the heart of the Christian year, the great three days of Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, and the Easter Vigil (known as the Triduum), followed by the exuberant joy of Easter day, allow me to share just a few brief thoughts.

• I still remember the first time, some 23 years ago, that I experienced the ancient liturgies of the Triduum. It is not an exaggeration to say that they changed my life. I was blown away by their holy strangeness, and the way I felt as if time and space no longer separated us from Jesus in his last week. These evening liturgies (really one liturgy in three parts) have familiar elements, but also many parts that are unique to Holy Week. I hope to see many of us there.

• Please do spread the word about our choral devotional on Good Friday afternoon at 12:30pm (after Stations of the Cross at noon). Stainer’s “Crucifixion” is a moving and quite accessible piece, and one of the classics of our Anglican tradition. For those we know who are music lovers but are not sure about worship, they should feel free to come at 12:30pm. Admission is free (though a free will offering will be collected).

• On Easter Day, our grandest celebration of the faith, let’s be mindful of our many guests. Studies show that guests decide if they have had a positive experience of a church within the first 10 minutes. Let’s keep our eyes out to be helpful, and our smiles warm. We do this not so much to convince our Easter guests to come back for a “regular” Sunday, but because we never know how God will work through us to touch the lives of those who celebrate Jesus’ resurrection on that day. We do always hope some will return, and we have in our Easter bulletin lots of upcoming opportunities to connect with us, but our warm welcome of our guests is unconditional, for it is grounded in God’s unconditional love for all of us.

• I also want to thank the hundreds of volunteers, who, along with our staff, make these incredible worship experiences possible this week. It is amazing, every year, to see the wonderful devotion of our All Saints’ community to our Lord Jesus Christ, who died and was raised for us.

A blessed rest of Holy Week, and a happy Easter to all of us!
Poulson+
March 22, 2018 Holy Week: Putting One Foot in Front of the Other

In her poem about Palm Sunday, *The Poet Thinks About the Donkey*, Mary Oliver writes:

> On the outskirts of Jerusalem  
> the donkey waited.  
> Not especially brave, or filled with understanding,  
> he stood and waited.

> How horses, turned out into the meadow,  
> leap with delight!  
> How doves, released from cages,  
> clatter away, splashed with sunlight!

But the donkey, tied to a tree as usual, waited.  
Then he let himself be led away.  
Then he let the stranger mount.  
Never had he seen such crowds!

And I wonder if he at all imagined what was to happen.  
Still, he was what he had always been: small, dark, obedient.  
I hope, finally, he felt brave.

> I hope, finally, he loved the man who rode so lightly upon him,  
> as he lifted one dusty foot and stepped, as he had to, forward.

As we enter into Holy Week, we may be like the donkey: not especially filled with understanding, or strong in faith, or ready for what is to come. Lent has come and almost gone for each of us, and it was meaningful or not, shaped by spiritual practices or not, kept with devotion or lost in a flood of good intentions and the hectic swirl of life. What’s done is done. And now we enter the holiest week of the Christian year, prepared or unprepared. But it doesn’t matter. Not really. Now, starting this Sunday, we come to the heart of it all, of our faith and our life. We can walk again with Jesus on the sacred path of his suffering, death, and resurrection, if we so choose.

This is not a matter of guilt, of what we “should” do. There is only the gracious invitation: to walk with our savior as much as we are able, through the daily liturgies of Holy Week. There are no guarantees of heavens opened or special insights received. But these holy liturgies, especially the solemn worship in three parts over three nights (Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, and Holy Saturday), have often been pathways of grace down the ages for those who seek them out, who put one foot in front of the other, forward.
Notes

• In general, in the life of the Church in Holy Week we try to put almost everything aside other than our most important Christian duty: to keep the week with as much intention and devotion as we can. But I don’t want to put off sharing some good news. Since mid-November, we have been blessed by the ministry of the Rev. Emilie Finn as our interim associate priest. In the months since, she has shown herself to be a gifted preacher, prayerful celebrant, kind pastor, dedicated teacher for all ages (including at the day school), and a positive and joyful presence. Having had extensive conversation with staff, lay leaders, and with Emilie herself, especially over the last month, I am pleased to announce that I am removing the “interim” part of her title, and Emilie will continue to serve among us permanently beyond the end of this program year (when her interim position was to conclude). Like all of our three full-time priests, Emilie is a generalist, which means she shares in leading worship, preaching, teaching, and pastoral care. In addition, she has particular oversight for our faith-in-action and our youth ministry, areas she will seek to grow, along with our volunteers, in the coming year. She will also continue to assist on a very part-time basis with the church plant in Surprise called Emmaus, as part of All Saints’ tangible support for evangelism and mission within our diocese. With Emilie’s appointment, our staff is now at full strength, with all our positions filled. I couldn’t be more happy with this splendid team of faithful, talented, and enthusiastic staff, working alongside our wonderful volunteers in the vital ministries to which God calls us.

Blessings,
Poulson+
This is an important and dramatic season, and I'm not just talking about Lent, with Holy Week right around the corner. I'm also thinking of March Madness, especially because my alma mater, the University of Virginia, is a #1 seed for the men's bracket of the NCAA tournament.

I am not a fair-weather fan: I've rooted for Virginia basketball since I was a kid, through the ups (coach Terry Holland, and players like Jeff Lamp, Ralph Sampson, Ricky Stokes, and Rick Carlisle) and many downs (1990-2009). But I am particularly invested emotionally in this year's team not only because they are unusually good (30-2, and ACC regular season and tournament champs), but because they win the right way. It all starts with their coach, Tony Bennett (not the singer!). UVA basketball doesn't generally recruit the blue chip athletes, the high school all-Americans. Coach Bennett recruits mid-level talents with grit, who commit to school for four years and buy into his unique system of defense.

Virginia's defense, not its offense, wins games. It uses an exhausting, team-oriented defensive scheme (the pack line) that demands that each player cover for their teammates. Very few true freshmen play many minutes for Coach Bennett, because it often takes them a year to learn the defense and play it to his satisfaction. Some have called UVA's style of play boring, but Virginia's fans have come to appreciate the slow but effective style of smothering defense and rebounding, combined with a methodical offense of crisp passing, shared scoring, and limited turnovers. This year's squad is the very epitome of selfless, team play. It may be a little boring, but it works.

But it almost didn't happen. Tony Bennett was named UVA's men's basketball coach in 2009 (ironically, the same year I started as rector here!), and it was a rough start at first. Four of his first six recruits transferred out, frustrated with the slow style of play and emphasis on defense. Bennett won only half of his games in his first two years, and fan and player frustrations were building. But Bennett, a strong Christian, had a vision for the program that he called the Five Pillars: humility, passion, unity, servanthood, and thankfulness. Those Biblical virtues could be the solid foundation for a successful team, if only he could convince his players (and the administration) to accept them. Over time, they did, none more so than this year's team, which has no real stars, but plays together with those Five Pillars at the heart of their efforts.

Of course, part of the fun and agony of March Madness is that you never know what is going to happen. UVA has just lost one of its best players to a broken wrist this week, and the road to the Final Four is a challenging one (I understand there are a couple of pretty good Arizona teams, as well). But win or lose in the NCAA tournament, Virginia men's
basketball has been a joy to watch this year. Led by their coach, an exceptional and humble leader, they have done things the right way, with high character student-athletes who watch out for each other on the court and off.

In any organization, including business, government, schools, and the Church, there are lessons to be learned from this Virginia team. Find the right people to be leaders: not always the most talented or exciting ones, but those of high character who buy into the vision and shared values. Look out for one another, in good times and bad. Work hard. Do things the right way, even if it takes longer. And it’s difficult to beat those Five Pillars in any organization, and in our family lives: humility, passion, unity, servanthood, and thankfulness. Lessons, perhaps, for all of us from my favorite team.

Blessings,
Poulson+
March 8, 2018 The Fairest One of All

When I attended an Episcopal school, growing up, we often sang the hymn “Fairest Lord Jesus” (#383). As a child, I used to think the hymn was saying that Jesus was the fairest, in the sense of the most just or equitable. But later I realized that the hymn was using “fairest” in the old sense of the word (it was translated from a German text in the 1870’s) meaning the most beautiful or attractive. In its rather antiquated usage of “fairest,” it is similar to the famous quote from Snow White: “Mirror, mirror on the wall, who’s the fairest of them all?”.

The hymn’s theme is that Jesus is more beautiful or compelling than anything else in creation (in fact, in some other traditions, the hymn is known as “Beautiful Savior”). So, for example, the last verse proclaims:
*Fair is the sunshine, fairer still the moonlight, and all the twinkling, starry host:  Jesus shines brighter, Jesus shines purer, than all the angels heaven can boast.*

Now, when the hymn is describing Jesus as fair or beautiful, it is not, of course, speaking of his handsomeness, the appeal of his physical appearance. It is speaking of the way the presence of Christ in the Bible and in the Holy Sacrament holds our attention. We are drawn to him, just as his first disciples were, not because of his outer nature, his humanity, but because of the divine light within him. There is nothing more beautiful, more captivating, or more inspiring than the light of God in our savior, shining brighter and purer "than all the angels heaven can boast."

What, then, are we to make of other forms of beauty that we encounter in our human life? The analogy is to love. God is love, the source of all love, and so all our human loves (romantic, familial, and among friends) at their healthiest and most self-giving are like harmonies of the melody of divine love. So, too, with beauty, all earthly beauty, at its best, is a reflection of the divine beauty that is the light of God. When our senses are drawn to something beautiful (a sublime work of art or piece of music, a sunset on the mountains, a field of spring wildflowers, moonlight, or a person we love deeply), our soul is really being drawn to God, the source of all beauty. So, too, when we encounter beauty, we often experience a range of reactions that are also present when we encounter manifestations of the divine: focused attention, joy, connection, longing, and inspiration.

This Sunday, we are celebrating a particular form of beauty that is near and dear to us: our illuminated Saint John’s Bible (one of only 299 sets in the world). In a rare treat, all seven volumes of this extraordinary Bible will be on display in front of our altar on Sunday to enjoy up close. And we will hear classes in the morning from Sue Kapp of our library team, and at a special time in the early evening (5:30pm) just before Evensong from guest Larry Fraher, a scholar of the Saint John’s Bible. Come experience the marvelous beauty of the Saint John’s Bible, now a permanent part of our life at All Saints’ thanks to
generous donors, and share this opportunity with others by inviting them. As we are moved by the beauty of this sacred art, may we be drawn to the source of all beauty, almighty God, and to God’s son, first and fairest of all.

**Notes**

- Last Sunday’s visit by the Very Reverend Tracey Lind was meaningful in numerous ways. I was delighted that so many people came to hear not only her excellent sermons, but also her informative and moving talk on her experience of dementia. Tracey loved her visit with us, and appreciated our warm welcome.

- Our new music school is up and running, beginning with a community choristers program. It is off to a great start with some 30 young people attending weekly rehearsals. Congratulations to Joseph and Ilona for the success! Speaking of our musicians, we send Joseph off this weekend to play an organ recital at the Episcopal Cathedral of Saint John the Divine in New York City, one of the largest churches in the world. Both Joseph and Ilona are in demand as recitalists, and it reflects well not only on them but on All Saints’ when they represent us in our community and beyond. We are blessed to have such talent on our staff (including Trevor Carolan, who can substitute beautifully when either of our other musicians is away).

- Our reception after Evensong will feature special wine in honor of Saint John’s Bible Sunday. Our wine expert and gracious Evensong reception host, Kim Hartleroad, has ordered bottles from Madonna Estates in the Napa Valley, formerly Mont St. John.

Blessings,
Poulson+
March 1, 2018  Welcoming the Very Reverend Tracey Lind

It is a blessing to welcome the Very Reverend Tracey Lind as our special guest this Sunday. I’ve known Tracey for 5 years - we met as members of a group of rectors and deans of large and complex parishes from around the country. She has been a dynamic and influential leader in The Episcopal Church for decades, most recently for 17 years as Dean of Trinity Cathedral in Cleveland, one of the largest, most diverse, and most innovative Episcopal churches in the country. In early 2017 she retired, following a diagnosis of Frontotemporal Degeneration (FTD), a form of early onset dementia. But she has remained as active as ever in retirement, traveling across the world, sharing her personal experience of dementia, and her theological reflections on it.

One of the things I love about The Episcopal Church is the way it brings different people together in friendship. We are, at our best, a wonderful big tent, filled with all kinds of people trying our best to follow Jesus. Tracey and I don’t agree perfectly on everything (she has been one of the most outspoken progressives in the Church, while I’m more of a centrist), but that has never stopped us from being friends, and agreeing on most things. She is a person of deep and genuine faith, committed to social justice, with an engaging warmth of personality, and I have been enormously moved to see how she has turned her medical challenge into a fruitful blessing for so many across the wider Church. One cruel thing about FTD is that it affects the portion of the brain responsible for communication. Tracey, always a gifted communicator, has found, by God’s grace, different but equally powerful tools to share her story as it continues to unfold.

Dementia has touched many of us, in profound ways. In some respects, it is the most devastating of diseases, in that it takes away so much of what makes someone themselves.

And yet, I’ve noticed with my own family members, friends, and parishioners with dementia, that there is something essential, under the surface, that remains. Parishioners even with severe dementia will recite the Lord’s Prayer when we visit with them, or brighten up at hearing a familiar hymn. We are all beloved children of God, and nothing can ever take that away. There is a God-given light within us that never goes out.

Come hear Tracey: priest, outspoken pioneer, and beloved child of God, as she shares her experience, her wisdom, and her faith. To learn more about her, to read her blog, see some of her photographs, or order her book, visit her website: traceylind.com.

Blessings,
Poulson+
February 22, 2018 Be Still

“Be still, and know that I am God.” (Psalm 46:10)

There is an interesting paradox in our culture these days: we suffer from loneliness, and also from a lack of silence. As I spoke about in my State of the Parish sermon, there is an unprecedented crisis of isolation, and the Church is called to help people connect with each other and with God. I am convinced that social isolation is at the root of much of the bitterness, addiction, anger, and violence that plague our nation.

But it is also true that many of us live in an almost constant state of noise and activity (though without genuine connection). Our world is cluttered with sound pollution; noise is everywhere, draining us in unexpected ways. The analogy I would make is sleep deprivation: new parents go through many nights of interrupted sleep with a newborn, never sinking into deep, restful sleep. Without true, deep silence, it is impossible to rest fully in God’s presence.

The mystic John of the Cross said that “God’s first language is silence.” And so, if we have no silence in our lives, we are missing out on one of the most important languages God uses to speak to us (and we to God). For this reason, this Lent, as part of our Lenten practice of prayer, fasting, and acts of mercy, we are encouraging at least 10 minutes of silence each day in whatever way works for you.

Find a consistent time and place, when you will not be interrupted, and sit or walk in silence, with no agenda other than to be open to God’s presence. See what happens. Pay attention to your breathing. Try to put aside your thoughts. To go with this simple practice, we are offering a Thursday evening series on Centering Prayer, an ancient form of Christian meditation that is a practice for maximizing the use of silence. Come join us and bring a friend.

Silence is not a substitute for weekly Eucharist or the daily prayers of the Church from our Prayer Book, but it is a wonderful addition to them. Silence is not a substitute for connecting with others, but it can deepen those connections. Let us be still, then, and know God.

Blessings,
Poulson+
On Ash Wednesday, we heard the following words from our Book of Common Prayer (p 265):

I invite you, therefore, in the name of the Church, to the observance of a holy Lent, by self-examination and repentance; by prayer, fasting, and self-denial; and by reading and meditating on God's holy Word.

But how, specifically, do we do these things in our Episcopal tradition?

**Self-examination and Repentance**

Our Prayer Book gives us two forms for this, called “The Reconciliation of a Penitent,” otherwise known as confession (pp. 447-52). To make a confession, get in touch with one of our priests and we will schedule a time and walk you through the process. One helpful way to think about the sins we need to confess is to consider the seven deadly sins (pride, greed, lust, envy, gluttony, wrath, and sloth). All confessions are strictly confidential and are a wonderful opportunity for spiritual conversation with one of your priests.

If confession isn’t something you wish to do, you could talk candidly with a close friend or partner about those bad habits that prevent you from being the person God calls you to be as yourself and with others. And then we strive to replace those unhelpful habits with more holy and life-giving ones.

**Prayer**

We are offering four sessions on how to practice Centering Prayer, a form of silent prayer related to meditation. Come join us on Thursday evenings, and add at least 10 minutes of silence to your day. See what a difference it makes.

More broadly speaking, our Prayer Book is based on the traditional, Anglican 3-fold pattern of prayer: weekly Eucharist on Sundays, daily Morning and Evening Prayer (the Daily Office) in some form, and a third practice of private devotion that is flexible and up to the individual (like centering prayer, the rosary, walking prayer, journaling and so on). Lent is a great time to learn how to pray Morning and Evening Prayer. You might start by attending Evening Prayer on a Tuesday or Thursday to get a sense of how it is done, or finding it online through Forward Movement or on their smartphone app. We also have a daily prayer link on the homepage of our website ([allsaintsoncentral.org](https://allsaintsoncentral.org)).
Fasting and Self-Denial

It is a traditional Lenten practice to abstain from meat (other than fish) on Fridays in Lent. You might also consider fasting from something that gets in the way of your relationship with God and other people. This might mean some kinds of food or alcohol. For some people, this might mean a fast from social media, or gossip in our workplace, or grumbling. This is not just a self-improvement exercise; as we deny ourselves, our suffering (however small) reminds us of the suffering of Christ.

Reading and Meditating on God's Holy Word

Again, our Episcopal system of the Eucharist and Daily Office gives us a disciplined way to read and meditate on Scripture. But if you are not yet ready to add the Daily Office, begin by reading one of the four gospels slowly this Lent, seeing how it speaks to you.

Almsgiving

Another important Lenten practice is almsgiving, or works of mercy. When we help those in need, for example by bringing in food for ICM, we are sharing from what we have for the sake of others.

Whatever you decide to do to make the season of Lent a meaningful preparation for Easter, I urge you to write it down, and if possible, to join with someone else in a practice you share. The accountability is useful. And remember that Sundays, as feasts of the resurrection, are days off from any Lenten fast.

Blessings,
Poulson+
February 1, 2018 What is February 2nd?

Probably most of us answered: Groundhog Day. But long before there was Groundhog Day, February 2nd was the Christian feast day called Candlemas, which dates back to at least the fourth century.

Candlemas, or the Feast of the Presentation, commemorates the presentation of Jesus at the Temple (Luke 2:22-40). In that story, Jesus is dedicated to God and Mary is purified according to the law of Moses 40 days after the child’s birth. There, in Jerusalem, they encounter Simeon, who had been promised by God that he would not die until he had seen the Savior. His achingly beautiful words at this moment of realization are memorialized as the Nunc Dimittis, the Song of Simeon (BCP p 120), which we say or sing at Evening Prayer and Evensong.

And what is the connection to Groundhog Day? In many parts of Europe, on Candlemas, there were traditions that were meant to discern whether winter would be long or short (it occurs roughly at the half way point between the winter solstice and spring equinox). For example, there was a rhyme that said “For as the sun shines on Candlemas Day, So far will the snow swirl until the May.” The Germans in particular associated this Candlemas tradition with the hedgehog seeing its shadow or not, and when they came to Pennsylvania, the groundhog took the hedgehog's place. And the rest is history.

Groundhog Day is a fun tradition (though it takes on different meaning in Phoenix, where we want our “winter” to last longer, not shorter!). But let’s not forget Candlemas. Its name comes from the tradition of lighting candles, which reminds us of the light of the world, Jesus. May that light shine so brightly in our lives that it illumines the path for others.

Notes

• I was thrilled to receive this week the wonderful pictures from parishioner Kate Forbes, through whom the light of Christ shines, especially in her work with the Red Cross for more than 30 years. Congratulations, Kate!

• If you haven’t had a chance to see the video of the State of the Parish, and read the Annual Report, please do so. They give a sense of where we have been in 2017, which was an important year for us, and where we are going in this new year as a church.

Blessings,
Poulson+
January 18, 2017 15 Years of Priesthood

January 18th, 2003, on the Feast of the Confession of Saint Peter, I was ordained to the priesthood at Saint John’s Cathedral in Denver, where I had been serving as a transitional (rather than a permanent) deacon for six months prior. Following the ancient tradition, it was the case then, and still is, that those who are to be ordained as priests are ordained deacons first, ministering in that role for at least half a year.

Why? Among many reasons, because if one is not grounded in the humble, serving, compassionate, and outward-facing ministry of the deacon, one has no business being a priest. For that foundation of servant ministry, of Jesus-shaped ministry, is at the core both of Christian discipleship and of priestly leadership.

I remember thinking at the time, 15 years ago, that my experience of being a deacon, rather than feeling like a cumbersome delay to my “real” vocation as a priest, instead felt too short. But I reminded myself then, and still do, that being ordained a priest does not mean that one is no longer a deacon, or a baptized Christian for that matter. One is all three, with the baptismal identity, not either ordination, as the most important layer, at the heart of it all.

I have been enormously blessed by God in these 15 years of priestly ministry, serving for more than 7 years in three different roles (curate, canon, and sub-dean) at Saint John’s Cathedral, Denver, and now for 8 and half years as the Rector of All Saints’. I couldn’t be more grateful to be doing what I was called to do in this place, with this remarkable group of clergy, staff, and lay people.

Being a priest isn’t quite what I expected. Just before I was called to Denver, I imagined that my ministry might be as a small church vicar, or perhaps a school chaplain and teacher on an idyllic campus somewhere. Little did I know I would end up, much to my surprise, in large parishes. There have been many moments when, like Moses, I’ve said to God: “Are you sure I’m the one you want?”

In a large and complex system like All Saints’, I spend more time in meetings, on email, problem solving, and trying to think strategically than I do writing sermons, making pastoral visits, leading liturgies, and preparing classes. It comes with the job, and I’ve actually come to see the leading and managing as integral parts of the Gospel. The better we function as organization, the more able we are to reach more people with greater effectiveness in all that we do. But I always make some time for the essentials of priestly ministry: the sacraments, teaching, preaching, pastoral care, personal prayer and study.

In my 15 years, I’ve seen the best and worst of people, the sorrows and joys, wonderful surprises and bitter disappointments. We are, all of us, made in God’s image, but sin-sick. But God is always unfailingly faithful, good, merciful, and loving. If we can, like Saint
Peter, confess Jesus as our Savior and Lord, and put our whole trust in him, God will be with us to the end.

Blessings,
Poulson+
January 11, 2018 Eli: Not the Parent of Year

Our Old Testament reading this Sunday, from 1 Samuel, tells the story of God calling Samuel while young Samuel is serving under Eli’s supervision at a holy place of worship. In the brief and rather amusing story, Eli seems like a wise mentor, instructing Samuel to ask for God’s guidance when God calls.

Sadly, in other parts of the book, we learn that Eli, while at times a wise role model for Samuel, is not always a good father to his own children. Eli fails to discipline his two wicked sons, who violate God’s law egregiously and prey on the vulnerable. Eventually, the sons lose their lives because of their sins, and Eli does, as well.

Parenting is not easy. It was not easy for Eli, who let his love for sons curdle into permissiveness. It is not easy for those of us who are doing our best to parent effectively today, in our complex world. What helps enormously is to have mature, grounded adults to walk with us, and with our children on the way. It is a cliché, but a true one: it takes a village to raise a child.

One such “village” for which I am grateful is our day school. All Saints’ Episcopal Day School is a fantastic environment not only for encouraging the academic potential of our students, but also for its nurturing of their moral formation through chapel, religion class, service to those in need, and the Episcopal ethos of our school community. The school’s indexed tuition program makes All Saints’ School far more affordable than many parents realize, and I hope more of our church families will consider our school as they make their educational decisions. For more information, visit aseds.org.

A new “village” that is beginning soon is our choir program for children and youth. This will offer wonderful musical education, but will also be a wholesome environment nurturing the character of our participants, whether they are Episcopalians or not. In my own experience, I benefited greatly from the choirs of my childhood and youth. Indeed, it is through choirs that I remained connected to the Church, even when I was unsure about my faith. Please help us spread the word about this exciting new program that will benefit students and their families.

Blessings,
Poulson+

Notes

• At long last, our new sound system has arrived. Please bear with us as we adjust its levels and get used to it over the coming weeks. I am grateful to the many donors over many years who made it possible. Our old system dated back to the 1980’s, so this will be
an improvement. But it is useful to remember that our church building is designed for glorious music, with lots of warm echo, which makes the clarity of the spoken word a challenge. Hopefully our new system will improve spoken clarity considerably as it gets calibrated.

• In our current lectionary year (B) we have many readings from Mark’s gospel, which is the earliest, most concise, and strangest of the four gospels. My class on Sunday will give an introduction to this fascinating book.

• I commend our Walking the Mourner’s Path group to those who are seeking a faith-based process for moving healthily through grief. It is an excellent program.
January 4, 2018 The New Year and a God of Second Chances

Does God care about our New Year’s resolutions? I imagine God looking down on me as I make mine, every year, and chuckling. For at this time of year, I am usually optimistic beyond reason that I can change this habit or that one, for real this time! I’ve read the articles on how to make a habit stick, and am sure every time that this will be the year!

What I know about myself is that usually my New Year’s resolution falls apart in about three weeks. If it is something spiritual, it often becomes my Lenten goal about a month later. It’s almost like my New Year’s resolutions are a dress rehearsal for my Lenten discipline. Interestingly, I do much better keeping Lenten goals than New Year’s resolutions, perhaps because I see a Lenten practice as part of my faith commitment.

But I imagine God laughing and not shaking God’s head in judgment at my little failures because our God is a God of second chances. In our journey this year through “The Path,” the great stories of the Bible, we have just finished the Old Testament. One of the striking themes to me in reading the Bible this way has been God’s infinite patience and mercy towards humanity.

Over and over and over again, in the Bible stories, the people make mistakes: worshipping other Gods, neglecting the poor and needy, seeking power and money and pleasure, forgetting to worship or give God thanks. And over and over, God sends another prophet with yet another invitation to return to the path of blessing, wholeness, generosity, and right relationship.

As “The Path” moves into the New Testament, we will see God’s ultimate offer of love and a better way in God’s own son, Jesus Christ. This fits perfectly with our liturgical calendar. As we enter the season of Epiphany on January 6, we celebrate how that amazing offer, the light of Christ, was extended to the whole world.

And so, whether or not you have a New Year’s resolution, and however it goes, remember that God loves you just the same. If you do choose to have one, it is perhaps best to keep it modest, and to keep the focus on God’s will for us. This year, one thing I am trying to do is read the Bible slowly, one little bit at a time, in the style of Lectio Divina (this has the added advantage of being harder to fail at!).

In the famous words of the great spiritual writer Thomas Merton, we recall our hopeful belief that God is pleased even with our halting, insufficient, and unsuccessful efforts, if they come from a genuine desire to please God:

*My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end. Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I*
think that I am following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so. But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you. And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing. I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire. And I know that if I do this you will lead me by the right road, though I may know nothing about it.

Blessings,

Poulson+