

Sermon for December 1

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts, be acceptable in your sight, oh Lord, Our Creator and Redeemer

I recognized two themes in today's readings and gospel: The need for a Godly community and the need to be ready to meet our maker. Community and Mortality.

Humans, especially in contemporary society, don't like to think about, let alone talk about these issues. They certainly don't want to talk about them in a religious context. But I don't think there is another effective way to address them. People try drugs and psychiatry to ease existential angst, and sometimes those remedies are necessary, with clinical depression or other mental health issues, but I don't think they get to the root of our mutual fears.

We need community — today's readings Isaiah "Come let **us** go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob, that he may teach us his ways, and **we** may walk in his path." Paul speaks about Community in most of his letters to the Corinthians and the Thessalonians, Galatians and Colossians. Today in Romans, "let us live honorably, not in reveling and drunkenness."

Psalm 122 "Let us go to the house of the Lord. **Our** feet are standing within your gates O Jerusalem. Jerusalem built a city that is bound firmly together.

The Christian journey is not one that we take alone. Jesus spoke of community throughout the gospels – he didn't travel alone but with disciples.

Loneliness is epidemic in our society – not just in the US but other developed countries as well. Research published by BYU found that social isolation is more lethal than smoking 15 cigarettes a day, Loneliness increases the risk for heart disease and dementia. Some people try to numb their loneliness by abusing substances and other unhealthy behavior –like Paul warned us against in today's reading. Those behaviors inevitably lead to even greater isolation. The more advanced we become technologically and materially the less we rely on each other for survival and the more isolated we become. People used to need each other for physical survival. We don't anymore. But we still need each other for emotional

and psychological and spiritual survival. Some countries are addressing the problem through secular remedies. In England the government has established a Minister of Loneliness. They are doing things like establishing parks and benches and Where people can interact. Giving grants to gardening clubs, bird watching groups, encouraging the formation of dog walking clubs, any place way that people can meet together.

Since we live in a time where people are very reluctant to join churches, and I believe Christianity has brought some of that on itself by emphasizing rules, punishment and division rather than love and acceptance, when people do look for community they usually look outside the church. I had a conversation a while ago with my millennial generation niece and nephew. They believe you can find the same community in a yoga class or parents group that you can in a church. I think not. Although those communities certainly have their value they don't tackle the Big Questions. Why are we here? What happens after we're gone? And most importantly – How should we live? When I mention that church affords me a guide for living, they immediately thought I meant living by a set up rules. In a broad sense that's true. But I don't look at it that way. Guidelines aren't hard and fast rules that divide those who obey from those who fail. I see guidelines as helpful ways to show me how to live a joyful and meaningful life – not behaviors to avoid that get me punished should I engage in them.

It can be difficult to talk to friends and neighbors about a church community. Especially for us Episcopalians. At our recent convention, the keynote speaker, Mary Parmer, talked about ways we can overcome our reluctance and invite people into our Faith community. She believes people are looking for community, and she offers techniques to make connections with them.

As I walk this journey with my Christian brothers and sisters, today's readings remind me that I won't be here forever. Being ready for death is a subject that people are even more uncomfortable talking about than loneliness. I've been accused of being morbid if I even broach the subject. I admit I may think about mortality more than most people. I always have. I can think of a couple of friends who got very upset with me when I brought up this topic and they insisted that it

was not something one should ever think about. They both died fairly young within a year after our conversation.

Many of us here may have come to terms with our mortality simply because of age. But the great illusion for so many is that we have time. Today's gospel says – “but about the house and day no one knows, neither the angels in heaven nor the Son, but only the Father.

I may sound like someone on the street corner wearing a sandwich board that says “the end is near” but so be it. Starting from a very young age children are taught to deny death. I understand that we don't want to scare children, but I do think we should be more honest about the ephemerality of life.

When I hear about grief counselors available to children whom have lost classmates to gun violence or other sudden tragedies, I wonder what they tell them. Children must be more aware of the brevity of life now then we may think.

I've always loved a phrase in the movie Lonesome Dove. When a boy of about 12 swims across a river with his buddy and his buddy is attacked and killed by water moccasins. He asks his father why? His father says “Life is short son, for some it's shorter than others”

Matthew is warning us to be prepared. “Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming.” What does this mean to keep awake? To me it means living my life for a purpose greater than myself. To be grateful. Life is a gift, no matter how short or long, no matter how difficult or fraught with obstacles. We all have struggles, whether they be physical, emotional, financial or all of the above. Some of the most grateful and joyous people I know were the most severely handicapped. I've learned the best way not to focus on myself is to do for others. For me it's working for the diocese. For some it's working with the homeless, the hungry, the veterans, the mentally ill, animal rescue, environmental stewardship. There is no shortage of ways to serve. As long as it's something outside of ourselves that contributes to others. I believe that was Jesus' central message. Live in community and love your neighbor.

I can't think of a better example of living the way Christ taught us to live than President Jimmy Carter. Someone who has spent his life in public service and could certainly rest on his laurels but continues to give until the end. If anyone could justify having a large ego and resting on his accomplishments it would be Jimmy Carter. Not only because he served this country in its highest office, but going all the way backed to his naval career and his many accomplishments in between. Although he could have made a lot of money giving speeches and serving as a consultant, he chooses to help build houses for Habitat for Humanity. He maintains his sense of humility by serving God through helping his fellow humans. I look at him as an example of what God wants from us.

No matter our earthly accomplishments or lack thereof, Jesus' message over and over is to love each other and give of ourselves. This is not the message of the world, which is why a community of **faith** is so important.