

Faith Matters

I'm quite sure you did not come to church today to hear about the head of John the Baptist being delivered on a platter. In fact, you may be wondering at this point why you *did* come to church. Recently I was talking with a local pastor who said that much of his job these days is trying to keep people connected to his church, convincing them that faith really matters in their lives. An increasing number of people today have no interest whatsoever in church. In the news they see Christianity as a religion that condemns others and provides justification for actions they feel are horrendous.

It is difficult for many of us here, myself included, to put ourselves in the shoes of those who have no church background whatsoever. For us, church speak like liturgy and Eucharist and grace and salvation are familiar terms. When we say together a psalm (oh, by the way, what's a psalm?) – we say “Lift up your heads, O gates, and the king of glory shall come in,” and music from Handel's *Messiah* may start playing in our heads. It's all so familiar and comfortable to us. We want people to come through our doors so that it will become comfortable and familiar for them as well. It will make *us* feel better if we are surrounded by more people.

Unfortunately, *our* comfort is not uppermost in the minds of those who are not here. And our comfort should not be uppermost in our own minds, as well. Think about that unpleasant story about John the baptizer that we just heard. It's a story of decadence, debauchery, and dissipation. It does not end well for John. The clear implication is that it will not end well for Jesus, either. As followers of Jesus, should we expect anything different from what he experienced? It would make a lot more sense for Christians to live lives of poverty and uncertainty. We don't, of course, because that's absolutely the opposite of the messages we hear every day in our culture. Most times the voice of our culture is much louder in our heads than the voice of Jesus.

Many of you are here because your parents or grandparents took you to church. You continue to come because faith has made a difference in your life. It has gotten you through hard times. A parishioner in the church I served in Burlington often said, “I go to church on Sunday because it makes the rest of the week better.” She said that to her friends, hoping they would come, too. She wasn't particularly successful. Her friends knew they would feel uncomfortable in a place where everyone was better dressed and better educated. Personally, I rather like the fact that Episcopalians tend to be well educated, but then I'm a former academic myself.

At its heart, church is fundamentally about relationship. After all, we worship a God who is fundamentally an eternal relationship of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. So the church should be, too. If you've been here a while, you know people and look forward to seeing them. If you're new, you are more likely to return if people show an interest in you as a person. That means people other than the clergy. After all, it's the clergy's job to show interest. Even if you come just for the service and leave as soon as we're done, you have experienced God in community and encountered Christ in the bread and wine. All of those options are open to you. My goal is to make you feel welcomed for whatever reason you are here.

But church is not just about Sunday morning. Nor is it all about us and our needs. Gathering and being fed are only the beginning. We are also sent. The dismissal at the end is a small part of the service but a large part of what we're about. I'm so glad that for three weeks we have been dismissed by a deacon. By next Sunday the deacon who has been doing it will be a priest, which will be wonderful for him and for us but also a diminishment. We need deacons to remind us that our primary encounter in faith is with the world. Deacons bring the needs of the world into our midst, and send us out again into the world. They save us from thinking that what we do here on a Sunday morning is all our faith has to offer.

Ultimately, that is what can bring people to church. What we do here on Sunday matters, and the relationships we form are life-giving. Our challenge is to take that life-giving faith out into the world. Faith does matter. It should change what we do and how we think, in a thousand different ways. We have to keep the life-giving voice of Jesus strong in our heads to counter the death-bringing voices so loud in our culture. The only way we can convince people that faith really matters is to live as though it does, not just through our wonderful outreach activities, but by every daily decision we make. I do hope being here today makes the rest of your week better. But even more than that, I hope that being here makes the rest of the world around you better.

[Pentecost 8: Psalm 24; Mark 6:14-29.]