

Proper 14, Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost, Year B – August 11, 2024

“Whoever Believes in Me”

The Rev. Anne Hartley

ST. PAUL’S EPISCOPAL CHURCH

VERGENNES, VERMONT

1 Kings 19:4-8 | Psalm 34:1-8 | Ephesians 4:25-5:2 | John 6:35, 41-51

I am so excited and grateful to be with you today. Last week at All Saints, I shared the story of my call to the priesthood, a long and winding road through a first career in environmental research and education to ministry, ending in a call to lead and serve in two very special Vermont parishes. St. Paul’s and All Saints have gifted lay leaders who have worked tremendously hard to keep the church going through a pandemic and turnover in leadership. This experience has brought you closer together in community. You are smaller than many parishes, and you are stronger and more resilient than many.

Since I arrived, several people have told me that Vermont is one of the most unchurched state in the nation. There is a lot of concern about the national decline in church attendance, too, which leads me to wonder, what are people drawn to now?

Instagram has figured out I’m religious, so the algorithms keep sending a series of religious-themed ads to my feed. The first ad for a 75-minute virtual wine-tasting experience is entitled “Sunday School.” It shows two hands toasting with wine glasses with the subtitle: “Transform your living room into a tasting room.” Another “Sunday School”-titled ad shows friends sitting at a lake-side table, enjoying the beautiful weather, sipping wine. A third features a couple toasting in a vineyard who “Drink with a Purpose.” That purpose is a “greener more ethical world,” achieved by buying sustainably produced wines. A final ad reveals the goal: “Access granted...to the best of wine country,” to wine heaven. It’s all within easy reach. All we have to do to gain access is to click and subscribe.

Whatever it is that keeps people from coming to church on Sunday...the need to sleep in after an exhausting work week, sports commitments, a preference for a different kind of communion like virtual wine-tasting, all of the above or something else entirely, our challenge as a church is to offer something more. The wine company's goal is to teach people how to "drink better." That's a worthwhile earthly goal. The goal of our church life is to believe in God through Christ, and by believing to "love better."

This week, Paul's letter to the Ephesians offers guidelines for living together that are useful today. We're called to make sure that everything we say builds up the community. We should never complain or be deceitful or mean-spirited, because we belong to each other. It's okay to be angry, but don't stay angry for long. We're called to set aside feelings that keep us from loving each other—bitterness, anger, rage... The letter lists them, and to make sure there are no loopholes, the author asks us to set aside "every other kind of malice," that is, badness. Put it all away and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving, as God in Christ has forgiven us. Paul urged his congregations in Ephesus "to live in a manner worthy of the call you have received, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another through love, striving to preserve the unity of the spirit through the bond of peace..."

If we commit to that way of living, our churches will thrive. Our great challenge is to make our faith community a microcosm or model of what we want the whole world to become. This is a grand, unreplicated experiment in which God will guide us. Watch for signs, then think about what they teach us about God's relationship to us.

In last week's Gospel, the people who searched for Jesus after he fed thousands finally understood that he was more than a supplier of wine and fish. Jesus offered something more. In the end, they said, "Sir, give us this bread always." They weren't asking

for loaves of bread. They wanted the bread of life. The story continues in this week's Gospel, with people in Jesus' hometown refusing to believe Jesus was anything more than Mary and Joseph's boy. The townspeople were so immersed in the material world that they struggled to see and accept the spiritual world. Jesus understood that people are physical beings, who hunger and thirst for food and drink. He also knew our spiritual side. Our spirits are hungry for love and kindness, grace and mercy, and peace and joy. Jesus promised: "Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty." Jesus said, "come to me...believe in me..." We only need to believe to be saved.

Like the first days of vacation when we are trying to downshift and stop thinking about work, when we arrive at church, we are often still focused on the problems of the world. It takes a little time to shift our focus and open ourselves to divine love and mercy.

Because running a church is hard work, we need to remember to play, too. One church in Illinois plays a game where parishioners pair up and hold up one of two pictures—C.S. Lewis or Taylor Swift, depending on who they think said a quote. C.S. Lewis was an English Christian author who lived during World War II, and well, Taylor Swift is Taylor Swift. We can play the whole game sometime, but let's try a few lines. Get ready to raise your hand when I ask who said the quote. Ready? Here the first quote:

You ask whether I have ever been in love: fool as I am, I am not such a fool as that. (C.S.L.)

I've been sleeping so long in a twenty-year dark night and now I see daylight. (T.S.)

Love anything and your heart will be wrung and possibly broken. (C.S.L.)

Why love if losing hurts so much? We love to know that we are not alone. (C.S.L.)

It might have just been you passing by unbeknownst to me. (T.S.)

If you love deeply you're going to get hurt badly, but it's still so worth it. (C.S.L.)

At its best, the church is a unified community of people who believe in a loving God and are open to living in love and peace. This is my vision and prayer for St. Paul's and All Saints. This is the work God has given us to do. There are more than two stars in this constellation. Each one of you is a star, reflecting the light of God's love. May God bless our parishes, and may we be beacons of hope in our community and in the world.