

Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 20, Year B – September 22, 2024

“Come, Holy Spirit, show us the way”

The Rev. Anne Hartley

ST. PAUL’S EPISCOPAL CHURCH

VERGENNES, VERMONT

Jeremiah 11:18-20 | Psalm 54 | James 3:13-4:3, 7-8a | Mark 9:30-37

It’s stewardship season, and that word makes a lot of people groan. But, it’s really more than a time to raise money for the church. It’s a time to celebrate the time, talent, and treasure that you all have poured into the church. Advent is the season that leads to Jesus’ birth, and Lent leads to Jesus’ death and resurrection. Stewardship season leads us straight to Thanksgiving, one of the days of the year we stop to take stock and give thanks for all that God has given us and all that you have given to this church and each other.

I’d like to take a minute to recognize the community members who have made it possible for us to worship here today. I’m not talking about past generations who gave their time, talent, and treasure to this church, though they deserve a great deal of credit. This church building, many of the things in it, like the jeweled cross, chalice, and candlesticks, and the endowments that help with maintenance and upkeep are their gifts to God and to us.

I’m talking about those of you who are here today and watching at home, especially those of you who assumed leadership roles in the church past and present, who sacrificed family time and self-care, who dug deeper to help the church meet expenses, and who continue to solve a seemingly endless list of problems—just since I have known you, a resident skunk had to be evicted from the sacristy, as did an unwelcoming swarm of stinging insects by the front door; grant-writing to repair an aging roof, hiring a new part-time priest and setting her up on payroll, installing lighting, answering calls for help that make the church a good landlord and neighbor, and the list goes on.

I'm talking, too, to the kids who are here because, well, you didn't have a choice (it's okay to admit that), but also because you love your parents, and when you love someone, you want to make them happy. St. Paul's is part of your community. You grew up here together. You belong here, and when you're ready to go off to college into the world, you'll be able to walk into any Episcopal Church near you and you will belong there, too. That's a gift your parents gave you. We are glad you're here because, even though it may sound weird, this whole community loves you. For me, having you here reminds me what our faith is about...that our parent God, our father and mother, loves us and has sacrificed for us, so we come to church out of love.

We are so grateful for all you have done collectively to lead this community through the pandemic and repeated clergy transitions. We have much to celebrate, and we also have a lot of work to do to secure funds to renovate the church and rectory, and to keep a half-time priest on staff. We don't know the details about how the church will pay for this, but today's Gospel teaches us how to look for the solution.

In today's Gospel according to Mark, Jesus tried a second time to tell his disciples that he would die and live again. He was trying to prepare them for the unthinkable, and they just didn't understand. It seems as though they didn't want to understand. The disciples' deep attachment to Jesus kept them from even imagining that Jesus' death would ultimately be their gain. They were stuck on the thought of losing him. Jesus' teaching was more than a prophesy, more than a heads up for the disciples that he was about to leave them. It was the key they needed to unlock the meaning of events to come, but their fear kept them from understanding.

The disciples were also self-centered, obsessed with their own wishes and desires. When Peter tried to rewrite the ending to Jesus' story, Jesus rebuked him. Later, when Jesus

asked the disciples what they had been arguing about, they were silent, because they'd been arguing about which one of them was the greatest. As long as the disciples were focused on their own egos, their own ambitions, writing their own endings to Jesus' story, they would not be prepared. Not only was the end inevitable, it was coming sooner than the disciples expected.

Today's Gospel encourages us not to focus on our own self-interests or allow fear to overtake us. If we want to hear and even begin to understand what is going to come, we will need to be open to Jesus' teachings and open to the Holy Spirit working in and through us. Fr. Mychal Judge was chaplain to the NY Fire Department who died on 9/11. He prayed

“Lord, take me where You want me to go
Let me meet who You want me to meet
Tell me say what You want me to say and
Keep me out of your way.”

That sounds easy, but it's hard to release control. The Catholic church refers to this as “dying to self.” We have to lose your life to save it. It's also the way that understand my role as a priest—as a conduit for God's love. Before the eucharistic prayer begins, I pray silently: “God, let your love flow through me into your people.” In other words, God, get me the heck out of the way.

Jesus asked the disciples to become like children, who have no power. The Greek word *paidion*, usually translated as “little child,” has two meanings, “immediate offspring” and “slave.” Jesus taught his disciples to serve, not to take control because they had special knowledge and experience. In the very next chapter, Jesus taught the disciples to be like little children again, by being open and receptive to the kingdom of God.

After we turn the fate of St. Paul's over to God, who gave her to us in the first place, we'll need to remain open to the Holy Spirit moving through unexpected people and places.

This includes all of us, not just the vestry. We don't have to rely on ourselves alone to build this church, but we do need everyone to be praying and discerning the path forward.

Anne Lamott says there are three kinds of prayers: Help, Thanks, and Wow. This prayer has all three, with an emphasis on the help. Let us pray:

Almighty God, we thank you and praise you for all of the gifts you have given us, this beautiful building, the parish hall, the rectory, and for years and years of wonderful memories of love in this community.

Help us to be faithful stewards of everything that you have entrusted to us. Watch over St. Paul's people, its finances, buildings and grounds, and its many ministries.

We pray for courage to keep giving, even when we feel we have little or nothing left to give. Please, God, don't let the distractions of the world or our own fears hold us back.

Help us to be open to the Holy Spirit moving in and through the world. We pray that what we have now will meet the needs of someone else in our community.

Help us to keep our challenges in perspective, remembering that others struggle and suffer greatly.

Help us to remember that our building exists only so we have a place to praise and worship you, so we may be strengthened and renewed by table fellowship, so we may go into the world to do the work you have given us to do: to serve the hungry, the poor, visiting the sick and imprisoned.

Through you all things are possible. We trust you to lead us into the future.
Amen.