

The Rev. Emily Dunevant

January 29, 2023
The Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany

Matthew 5:1-12
Psalm 15
Micah 6:1-8

As many of you know, this past weekend I had the good fortune of preaching at my home church in Seneca, SC for their 70th anniversary. It was a tremendous blessing to thank so many of the people who helped me grow in my faith. Going back also gave me an opportunity to consider how important church was for me then and how important it is for us now.

I am often in conversations with other clergy where we talk about the shift that seems to have happened in society...where church isn't the central focus of our lives anymore. That we have too many commitments pulling us in all kinds of directions. That it was easier "back then" because life was simpler. How many of you have found yourself saying those exact words? In some ways, that is true. Times have changed and how we prioritize church has changed. But we would be wrong to assume that the need for church as also changed.

In fact, the need for church is just as present today as it was back in the good ole days. And so, as I visited my home church...the church that so beautifully met my needs in my early years, I spent time reflecting on how the church can better meet the needs of who we are today. I want us to spend some time on what that means for us this morning.

Here is a simple fact...We have the opportunity here at Grace to shape future generations in profound ways, to live fully into God's love, to open our doors, to welcome others, to make an impact in this community.

And, as you already know...Goochland is growing. More and more people are coming to our community to call this place home. More people are walking through our doors. They are coming here to connect with God and with all of you. To find their own "home" church where they can feel love and accepted, where they can grow and learn, where they can raise their children.

I want each and every one of you to look at this place and know that God is active here. That God is shaping our lives in powerful ways that can be a transformative agent in our neighborhoods and in the world.

With all that in mind, it is more important than ever that we prioritize building the body of Christ together. That it's not just something that happened back in the good ole days but that it's something happening here, today. So...what does that look like? Well, it looks like 3 things. 3 things you are going to hear a lot about this year. **Worship, Learn, and Care.** I want to break those down for you this morning and suggest that they are our building blocks for our future health as individuals and as a congregation.

Let's start with Worship.

Let me begin by encouraging you to come to church more often. Don't let your Sundays fall victim to schedules and stress. Make time to worship God regularly. Since COVID restrictions have been lifted we have seen more and more people come to Grace. Most weeks over half of this congregation are new to our church family. I believe we are experiencing a rise in attendance because during COVID we had time to truly reflect on what matters most and as a result, we are prioritizing God in more tangible ways.

We have responded to the growing needs of this community with new worship opportunities while keeping the feel of the small, intergenerational family church that has come to be one of the strongest parts of our identity. We created the Service of Hope and Healing during Advent and revamped the Service of Lessons and Carols to be more engaging for all ages. We began a new, monthly Children's Chapel followed by special activities for our youth. We are planning to start a Children's Choir and have encouraged more folks to get involved in leading worship.

While we will continue our 10 am service and our online worship, we also want to create an additional Sunday in-person opportunity. During Lent, we will offer Morning Prayer at 9am on the Sundays we do not have Children's Chapel. We hope this will provide an accessible worship option for folks who prefer a shorter service or who cannot make it on any given week to the 10am service.

As we grow, we will strive to stay flexible and adapt to the changing needs of our congregation. Since we welcome all ages in worship, we also welcome a wide range of interests and needs for those in attendance. Some weeks, that means worship may be a little noisy or, with our growing attendance communion may take a little longer. But, let us continue to love one another in the true spirit of Christ. Help the parent with the crying baby. Offer a seat on your pew to a visitor. Guide someone who is unfamiliar with our liturgy. Introduce yourself!

Worship is absolutely about praising God but it is also about coming together as a community. Let us be a blessing to one another. Let us worship together.

Next...I want you to Learn.

Growing in your faith and committing to a spiritual discipline is critical in growing your walk with Christ. It doesn't matter if you participate in Bible studies here at Grace, read a book that enlivens your heart, or take part in an online course about the Bible. Learning does not have to be daily or weekly. The important thing is to just get involved. Start small. Ask a friend to learn with you.

At Grace, we have continued a wide range of learning opportunities for our congregation and wider community. From Lenten and Advent Luncheons, to our study of the liturgy both during worship with Brian and in a small group with me which included a special Instructed Eucharist.

We are starting a book club led by Donna Cottingham and Jamie Baker. We are joining with other churches in our area for our Lenten Lunch series this year. I want to thank Elaine Taylor for not only introducing me to the pastor at Providence Presbyterian but suggesting the book that will guide our Lenten journey. The Men's Group is back up and running thanks to the faithful work of Martin Rodgers.

Here's an important thing to notice about what it means to learn together. Learning is a group effort. What did you notice about the opportunities I just mentioned? I hope you noticed a lot of names of folks within this congregation. That's important. Because, we can all participate. Some of us will be called to teach or lead. Some of us are called to invite friends to join or welcome newcomers. Learning is always richer when done in community. So get involved! And...if you have an idea for a future learning opportunity, please share it with me or Brian. Let's dream about the future together. Let's learn together.

Finally, I encourage you to Care.

Care in this context is two-fold. When I use the word "Care" I want you to think about how we care for our Grace Community and also how we care for our greater community. Another word for care is outreach. It's one of our hallmarks at Grace. Outreach has always been at the center of who we are.

COVID may have slowed us down a bit and changed how we were able to help one another but the ethos of outreach is still just as important today as it was pre-COVID. And we are in the process of reestablishing this core value of our church.

Grace Cares, our pastoral care ministry is back in action taking meals to those in need, making calls to check in with folks, and seeking out ways we can serve in a greater capacity out in the county.

We will restart our work with Goochland Cares in February. Not only will we be taking up a monthly food donation, we will be stocking the shelves at the food pantry once a month and helping in the Clothes Closet.

We will be participating in Relay for Life this year. We will also be creating opportunities for all ages to help with outreach from creating care packages for the Women's prison, to making cards for folks in long term care facilities, to game afternoons for senior adults.

So as you prioritize worship and learning, I also want you to prioritize Care. Choose something to get involved in so that you are putting your faith into direct action of helping others. When we all participate it's amazing the difference we can make in other people's lives. So let us care together.

A Few Final Thoughts

When you prioritize these three things...worship, learn, and care...your spiritual life will grow in the most beautiful of ways. And...you don't have to do them all at once or even every week. But a healthy, vibrant church requires that we all participate in these aspects of church life. We are a community of faith but not only that, we are a community of faith that is making a difference here in Goochland.

As we look towards our 150th anniversary (which is 3 years away) I want us to consider how we build a faithful future for Grace Church and for everyone who comes to this place. You all are the heart of Grace and as God is surely in this place, God is surely in each and everyone of your hearts. Let the light of Christ continue to enliven your faith. Let it lead you to a more vibrant journey of knowing God and one another as you worship, learn, and care together.

What a blessing it is to be on this journey with you. Thanks be to God. Amen.