

St. Thomas Episcopal Church in Medina, WA

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Church Year C

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Season: The Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Philemon 1-21; Luke 13:10-17

Prayer and Pilgrimage

Some of you might know this, but I did not grow up in the Episcopal Church. I am a relatively new Episcopalian. I first attended an Episcopal church in 2008 – it was the Episcopal Cathedral of St. John the Evangelist on Spokane’s South Hill. My then girlfriend, and now wife, and I drove past the church – a beautiful gothic style cathedral one day. Being drawn to church architecture, we decided to visit the following Sunday in order to see the inside of the church.

Knowing nothing about the church and very little about Episcopal services and liturgies, we ended up at the 8 am Rite I liturgy that Sunday. Having grown up in churches with more contemporary and emotionally driven worship styles, what we encountered was dramatically different than what I was used to. The Elizabethan language of Rite-I, the order of the service, and the shift of focus from preaching to the sacraments were immensely foreign to me...yet somehow strangely familiar. It was as if I had come home to a place I didn’t know existed.

The prayers expressed in beautiful language the things I had been trying my whole life to articulate but could not find the words. The communal focus, as opposed to the focus on individuality, reminded me that faith is not something I need to or ought to carry alone. That first Sunday we visited St. John’s was All Saints Sunday, which I do not consider an accident. I was, perhaps for the first time, aware of being connected to something larger than myself – something more expansive than my own attempts to pray something meaningful and true – and a greater sense of history and mystery than I had ever imagined.

I hope you recognize how beautiful our prayers and liturgy are. They contain words passed down to us from our Eastern Orthodox and Catholic sisters and brothers before there was ever an Anglican or Episcopal Church, and prayers that have been written by our own in the 16th-21st centuries.

Our written prayers and liturgy are a gift to us all. *But* our written prayers are not the *only* way to pray. They are not the end. Sometimes, it is hard for us Episcopalians to simply pray from our hearts and using our own words...especially when we pray out loud with others.

Some of you might remember our work with an organization called Youth Ministry Architects, or YMA, four years ago. YMA works with churches around the country to help them be more thoughtful and intentional in the ways they engage in faith formation – primarily with youth, but also extending to ministry with children and adults. As part of our work with YMA, a group of about 40 people from St. Thomas gathered for a day-long retreat to discern a plan for Christian formation – using an exercise called “Know, Feel, Do.” If we were to imagine a graduating 12th grader from St. Thomas who has been a part of our church since birth, what do we hope they would “Know, Feel, and Do” in relationship to their faith?

The list we discerned included things like:

Know

- Episcopal Liturgy, Tradition, and Identity
- Bible Stories
- Their Gifts
- How to put their faith into action

Feel

- Loved, safe, and secure
- Compassion and empathy
- Curiosity

Do

- Advocate for themselves and others
- Participate in a community of faith
- Seek healthy relationships
- Pray

This list gave a lens through which to look at all of our faith formation offerings for children and youth, and be intentional with how they all fit and work together. In other words, what “know, feel, do” items does our ministry to children touch upon, and how can our ministry to our youth build upon those?

I hope you caught that we hope our children and youth “pray.” Within our tradition, that item can be ambiguous. Is that happening when our children and youth participate in our liturgy? Certainly! But we also hope they develop a practice of communicating with God by sharing their deepest desires, thoughts, and attitudes from their own hearts and with their own words

Three weeks ago, a group of seven of our high school students left for what we called a “Pilgrimage.” This group of youth has participated in an intentional program of faith formation called *Journey to Adulthood* for the past two years. *Journey to Adulthood* is a curriculum that came out of an Episcopal Church in North Carolina and is built upon the idea that “adulthood” has less to do with age and biological fact than it does with understanding and living into a role in community that needs to be taught, modeled, and practiced,

Prior to the Industrial Revolution, there was clear training about what it meant to be an adult in a community and clear rites of passages to move from childhood to adulthood. Adolescence – the liminal place of being neither child nor adult – is a relatively new social invention. As adolescents journey from the constant, protective care of their parents to the independence of adulthood, they are searching for their own unique personality, abilities, character, and place within society. This stage of development brings with it the testing of boundaries and previously held values, commitments, and understandings of life.

The work that we are doing at St. Thomas in terms of Christian formation with our youth recognizes the physical and social development of adolescents...and it seeks to frame it in terms of Christian discipleship. We confront the question of what it means and what it costs to follow Jesus Christ.

Simply put in our Episcopal tradition, this means taking seriously and living into our Baptismal Covenant – the promises made on our behalf at our baptism and the promises we reaffirm and own for ourselves in Confirmation. We are hoping to recover the intentional training and modeling that leads persons into adulthood, and practice rites of passage that let those on the journey know they are moving into new roles in community

Our lectionary texts today – although addressing particular contexts and situations – are all related to the idea of discipleship: What does it mean to be formed as the people of God, and what does it look like to follow Jesus Christ in one’s own life? In our 21st century context, we often think of discipleship in purely individualistic terms: what does it mean for *me* to follow Jesus Christ? While the personal is important, our reading from Jeremiah reminds us that we are necessarily formed *as a community*.

Luke’s Gospel prompts us to estimate the cost of following Jesus Christ – even if it means sacrificing familial ties that pull us away from following Jesus. Discipleship might cost us what we imagined our lives would look like or how they would play out. God might call us into uncomfortable places and costly circumstances. Following Jesus Christ might cost us friends as we recognize that our social group is holding us back from truly following where God is leading us.

Our work of intentionally preparing our youth for adulthood – particularly preparing them to be adults in a community of faith – is a process of communal discipleship. We are forming *Christians* in

our community by telling them the story of our faith and helping them to discern how their faith will be lived out to serve God and others. We hope to provide a space for them to discern what it means to follow Jesus Christ before all else.

The youth that embarked on a pilgrimage three weeks ago left St. Thomas as youth...but they returned as young adults. These young adults have engaged in intentional conversations about life, faith, and discipleship each Sunday morning for the past several years, and have been led by three remarkable mentors who have modeled for them what it means to be an adult in a community of faith. They have been taught how to steward the rights, privileges, and responsibilities of adulthood. The pilgrimage was a final rite of passage into adulthood.

Over the seven days they were gone, the group backpacked through the Cascade Mountains: covering 28 miles, ascending 8,000 feet, and experiencing – within a week in the mountains – something analogous to the journey of life. They were confronted with their own physical, emotional, relational, and spiritual limits. They were forced to rely on God and one another for strength and encouragement. And they engaged in very intentional conversation about what it means to be an adult in our community, including discerning their vocation – or the ways God is calling them to use their gifts to serve God and serve others.

Each evening during the pilgrimage, all of our pilgrims – including our adult leaders – had the opportunity to share their stories: focusing on the people, the places, and the experiences that have made us who we are today. This was an exercise in looking backwards before looking forward into adulthood. Recognizing that we often have more difficulty seeing our gifts than we do our shortcomings, after each person shared their story, we spent as much time as it took to affirm the person who had just shared – calling out the gifts we saw in that person. Hearing their gifts affirmed by others hopefully allowed them to understand their vocation with more clarity. After each person had shared their gifts had been affirmed, we asked somebody to pray for that person.

That brings me back to what I said earlier about hoping that our children and youth engage in prayer as a part of their faith. Something very surprising and encouraging happened as we asked our pilgrims to pray for one another: they readily volunteered and expressed their thoughts and desires for one another to God. After I shared my own story, something remarkable happened...several pilgrims wanted to pray for me. Rather than only one person praying, they decided to all take turns. I was a snotty mess of tears after they concluded and said, “Amen.” I pray regularly for all of our youth by name, for the difficulties and concerns I know they face – but I have never experienced the joy of our youth praying for me. The next day, I turned to Greg Murray, who was a part of our pilgrimage and our relatively new Chief Operating Officer at St. Thomas, and said, “we can check off that our youth pray from our ‘Know, Feel, Do’ list.” Yes, they and we pray in our liturgy and this is important. They pray during Compline and Morning Prayer – which we do together on retreats, mission trips, and pilgrimages. But they took the initiative to speak to God from their own hearts and with their own words on behalf of another and it was a joy and privilege to be a part of that – not because they prayed for me, but because I saw the fruits of all the formation we’ve engaged in for the past several years.

Our pilgrimage was difficult. The first two days were hard, but manageable. We spent our second evening in one of the most beautiful locations I have ever seen – a place called Chain Lakes about 12 miles South East of Stevens Pass. Our journey to Chain Lakes had included an elevation gain of 3,000 feet. We were tired, yet comfortable there.

The following day, we had the hardest day of hiking I have ever experienced...including 4 miles of unmaintained trail – straight-up bushwhacking and scrambling down a creek bed of greater than 45 degrees on boulders. After 10 hours, we didn’t even reach our intended destination that day, but rather found a new campsite at which to rest and recuperate.

A part of me wished that we had stayed at Chain Lakes – a beautiful setting from which we could have embarked on day hikes and gone back the way we came. But life doesn’t work like that. We can never stay put and we can’t go back the way we came.

On our second to last day, we ended up at a pass at 6800 feet that gave us a 270-degree view none of us could have imagined. The journey to get there had been hard, but it was worth it. As we took in the beauty and the hardship of our journey, one of our youth said, “I feel like we should pray.” So they took turns thanking God for the journey, acknowledging God’s presence, naming their blessings, and asking God to be present as the journey of life continues.

At our final peak on our last day we spent some time talking about what it means to come back down the mountain. Our journeys of faith sometimes include what we might call “mountain-top” experiences – times when we feel particularly close to God and those we have shared a journey with. We can never remain in these places. We have to move forward and come down the mountain.

And so, at that final pass before we descended from the mountains, we remembered the ways God had carried us to that point and, recognizing that moving forward into a new stage of life always means leaving something behind, we built an altar. As our pilgrims built an altar from stones they found at that pass, they named what part of their lives they were leaving behind as they entered into adulthood. Some things they left behind were: what others think about me, perfection, not asking for help, fear about the future.

The Apostle Paul wrote to Philemon, “When I remember you in my prayers, I always thank God because I hear of your love for all the saints and your love toward the Lord Jesus.” I could say or write a very similar prayer for the youth and young adults of St. Thomas.

And they said similar prayers for me, for the other adults on our pilgrimage, and for one another. These are prayers about discipleship – prayers acknowledging the fruits of faith we see in others, and asking God to continue growing faith in others and ourselves.

Who are you praying for? How are you praying for your own discipleship and for the discipleship of those around you? Being a disciple of Jesus Christ is costly...it requires us to choose and be formed in a different way of life. Jesus reminds us in Luke’s gospel that the way of discipleship should be intentional – that we ought to weigh the cost.

What will it mean for you, and for us as a community, to be thoughtful and intentional in the ways we are following Jesus Christ and encouraging others to do the same? If you need some living examples of discipleship, or need prayer on your journey, I can introduce you to some young adults who can pray for you and help show you the way.

Amen.