

Title: Gifts for the Middle Way

Date: 10/29/2023 (Proper 25, Year A)

Location: St. Alban's Episcopal Church

Service: 10am Holy Eucharist (Hybrid)

Readings: [Deuteronomy 34:1-12](#); [Psalm 90:1-6, 13-17](#); [1 Thessalonians 2:1-8](#); [Matthew 22:34-46](#)

Video Link: <https://youtu.be/AeJofCqDvY?t=1533>

Lord of the teasing riddle,
whose questions undo our certainty
and set us on a different path:
give us a heart of passion, a searching mind,
gentle strength of body and unseen depths of soul,
so that we might love you wholly
and our neighbour as ourselves;
through Jesus Christ, the law of grace.¹
Amen.

Every Sunday, we pray a collect of the day from the Book of Common Prayer. What I just prayed is the collect for this Sunday from Prayers for an Inclusive Church.

The classic collects have elements that are beautiful and timeless. Today we prayed for God to increase in us the gifts of faith, hope, and charity. There is no doubt that our days are better when there is more faith, hope, and charity in us and in our lives.

To be clear, this doesn't necessarily make things easier. This may actually lead us to discern that God is calling us to meet the difficult challenges that we'd rather avoid.

This week, at Clergy Conference, we heard from musician Daryl Davis.² He is a pianist who played with Chuck Berry and the Muddy Waters Band, and he is a Black man who has convinced more than 200 Klansmen to give up their robes.³ He told us stories about sitting in a room with not just members but leaders of the Ku Klux Klan, and going to Klan rallies. *I* felt tense just hearing him say that; I can't imagine actually being there.

But he went. And he also had one-on-one conversations with these men in such a way that they felt that he heard and respected them and treated them fairly. Eventually they lowered their walls and heard what *he* had to say about the statistics they used to back up their beliefs about Black people, statistics about test scores, incarceration, welfare and so on.

Because of the relationship he developed with them, they ended up doing their own research and came to see the truth behind his words. Every interaction they had chipped away at long-held beliefs that had been cemented in their hearts and minds.

Faith, hope and charity gave Daryl the strength to have these talks without being triggered-- He said the key is to stand firm in who you are and what you know so that other people can't tell you who you are-- and the strength to keep talking. His theory is, "When two enemies are talking, they're not fighting, and it's when the conversation ceases that the ground will become fertile for violence, so let's keep the conversation

going.”⁴ He gave us the charge, “Rather than get furious, get curious” and encouraged us to think about what it looks like for us to do similar work.

This may not look like sitting down with members of the Klan. After all, there are so many things people disagree about nowadays, Climate Change, Books, Gender, Guns, Reproductive Rights, and Sexuality, to name just a few. With family and friends we may disagree on the past- the details of a certain event, the causes of an estrangement- and we may disagree on the future- how we approach spending and saving, illness and healing, aging and dying.

How might these conversations be different when we are grounded in faith, hope, and charity? How might they feel different when we have them in the context of love for God and for our neighbors as ourselves?

There are also elements of classic collects that we struggle with. Today we also prayed for God to make us love what God commands so that we may obtain what God promises. Though human nature today is probably not that different from human nature in the days of Moses, the ways we understand ourselves and God and neighbor have changed, and our understanding of the words used to describe the relationships between us, God and neighbor have also changed.

Today, we probably wouldn’t write a prayer asking God to **make us** do something, much less to love God’s commands. It can be hard enough to follow the commandments, but to love them?

We also want to avoid the notion of making a deal with God. “God, we’ll love your commands, but **only** if you hold up your end of the bargain and fulfill your promises.” One of the consistent threads in the Old and New Testament is that God is faithful even when humans are not; God gives us love and grace before we even think to ask and when we have wandered off.

We also want to get away from the idea that we can earn our salvation or that we have to; it is already ours. The issue is not so much what God will give us. The issue is what we are willing to accept, with the understanding that what we receive will transform us and our lives.

Words like “make” and “command” and “obtain what you promise” can get in the way of prayer, and so it’s helpful to have another version of the Collect of the Day.

“Lord of the teasing riddle,
whose questions undo our certainty
and set us on a different path...”

The Episcopal Church comes out of the Anglican tradition. Last week, I mentioned the three-legged stool of Scripture, Tradition and Reason. In the early days of the Church of England there also emerged this notion of the Middle Way. At that time, theologians

were trying to figure out where the Church of England stood in relation to the Catholics and the Protestants, in terms of what they believed and how they worshipped.

Taking the Middle Way doesn't mean defining ourselves by what we're not. "We're not like them, so come to our side." It doesn't mean that we're compromised Catholics or lazy Protestants that do things by half measure.

Taking the Middle Way takes us beyond binaries. We're not Catholic OR Protestant. We take the best of both traditions, the devotion to liturgy and being formed by worship, and the devotion to the Word and being formed by studying and responding to Scripture in thought, word and deed.

The Middle Way helps us stay true to tradition as we respond to the changes and chances of the world. It invites us into deeper understanding.

Last week we launched our Stewardship Campaign, we sent emails and mailed out brochures and pledge cards. At the same time, there are those in the wider church who say we should be careful of the words "stewardship" and "campaign."

In an article titled "The Ten Biggest Mistakes Preachers Make in Stewardship Sermons," the Rev. Lisa Cressman points out that clarity around language is important because we don't want to confuse stewardship with fundraising. Fundraising is about meeting a certain goal at a certain time, and stewardship is a spiritual state of gratitude. It's about this cycle of receiving God's gifts, taking good care of them, and passing them on. That last bit is key. We don't hold on to those gifts; we give them away.⁵

She also points out that a campaign sounds like something we win or lose, when this is about exploring God's generosity and how lack of faith can keep us from giving generously. This is about exploring how giving generously can bring us a sense of freedom.⁶ I imagine a dragon in a cave sitting on a pile of gold as opposed to a dragon soaring across the sky.

There's a real tension in this. Part of me wants to push back because sometimes I think in spreadsheets. I believe it's important to set goals, and there's something exciting about coloring in a thermometer that shows us how close we are to that goal. And **I am** asking you for money. I have a personal stake in making sure we can pay our staff and all of our bills.

The other part of me believes wholeheartedly that the goal of church isn't to have church. We aren't trying to pay our staff and our bills and take care of these buildings just so we can have Holy Eucharist every Sunday on this hill until the end of time. That would be lovely, but that isn't my goal when I ask you to pray and consider how much you can commit to giving next year.

The collect I prayed at the beginning of this sermon also asked God to "give us a heart of passion, a searching mind, gentle strength of body and unseen depths of soul, so that we might love you wholly and our neighbour as ourselves."

Walking the Middle Way reminds us that whether we call this stewardship or fundraising, a campaign or a celebration of abundance, it's about sharing the best of us to bring out the best of the world.

It's about living as Moses did, recognizing that we may bear fruit that we will not see. We plant and we water, and God gives the growth (1 Cor 3:6), but not on our timeline. As the Psalmist cried, "You sweep us away like a dream; we fade away suddenly like the grass" (Ps 90:5). Most of us don't get to decide how and when life ends.

However, we do get to decide how to live the life we have, one day at a time, one thought, one word, one deed at a time. We get to care for one another, for those who are here, for those who are not here, and for those who may never set foot on this hill.

As Paul wrote to the Thessalonians, "So deeply do we care for you that we are determined to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves, because you have become very dear to us" (1 Thess 2:8). We get to decide how much of ourselves and what we have that we will give away.

We tell people the good news of the gospel, and we try to be that good news, to live as Jesus did. This year, we've gathered backpacks and school supplies, collected home goods for refugee families, and more. Tonight, we'll raise money to send first graders home for the summer with tote bags with their name embroidered on it and books from the Scholastic Book Fair.

We can continue to look outward and off the hill, building relationships and finding opportunities to give our whole selves, all that we have and all that we are, in the hope that God's will be done on earth, as it is in heaven.

The goals of church are many, and none of them are about keeping our doors open. That's not the end goal; that's in service of something bigger than us and fruits that we may never see.

It's about learning to be the body of Christ and sharing the good news we've found in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. It's about engaging in spiritual practices that help us grow and deepen in faith, hope and charity, so that we can have hard conversations and do hard things out of love for God and our neighbor. It's about bringing out the best in us, and the best in this world.

Amen.

¹ Proper 30, Prayers for an Inclusive Church by Steven Shakespeare, is ©Steven Shakespeare, 2008. Published by Canterbury Press. Used and adapted by permission. rights@hymnsam.co.uk

² <https://www.daryldavis.com/>

³ <https://www.npr.org/2017/08/20/544861933/how-one-man-convinced-200-ku-klux-klan-members-to-give-up-their-robos>

⁴ <https://richmondmagazine.com/news/news/an-impetus-for-change>

⁵ <https://genius.com/Michael-w-smith-give-it-away-lyrics>

⁶ [The Ten Biggest Mistakes Preachers Make in Stewardship Sermons — Backstory Preaching](#)