

Psalm 145: 8-18

⁸The Lord is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and rich in love. ⁹The Lord is good to all; God has compassion on all God has made. ¹⁰All your works praise you, Lord; your faithful people extol you. ¹¹They tell of the glory of your kingdom and speak of your might, ¹²so that all people may know of your mighty acts and the glorious splendor of your kingdom. ¹³Your kingdom is an everlasting kingdom, and your dominion endures through all generations.

The Lord is trustworthy in all God promises and faithful in all God does. ¹⁴The Lord upholds all who fall and lifts up all who are bowed down. ¹⁵The eyes of all look to you, and you give them their food at the proper time. ¹⁶You open your hand and satisfy the desires of every living thing.

¹⁷The Lord is righteous in all his ways and faithful in all she does. ¹⁸The Lord is near to all who call on him, to all who call on her in truth.

Ephesians 3:14-21. ¹⁴For this reason I kneel before the Father, ¹⁵from whom every family in heaven and on earth derives its name. ¹⁶I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, ¹⁷so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, ¹⁸may have power, together with all the Lord's holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, ¹⁹and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.²⁰ Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, ²¹to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever! Amen.

John 6:1-14 After this Jesus went to the other side of the Sea of Galilee, also called the Sea of Tiberias. A large crowd kept following him, because they saw the signs that he was doing for the sick. Jesus went up the mountain and sat down there with his disciples.

Now the Passover, the festival of the Jews, was near. When he looked up and saw a large crowd coming toward him, Jesus said to Philip, "Where are we to buy bread for these people to eat?"

He said this to test him, for he himself knew what he was going to do. Philip answered him, "Six months' wages would not buy enough bread for each of them to get a little." One of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, said to him, "There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish. But what are they among so many people?"

Jesus said, "Make the people sit down." Now there was a great deal of grass in the place; so they sat down, about five thousand in all.

Then Jesus took the loaves, and when he had given thanks, he distributed them to those who were seated; so also the fish, as much as they wanted.

When they were satisfied, he told his disciples, "Gather up the fragments left over, so that nothing may be lost."

So they gathered them up, and from the fragments of the five barley loaves, left by those who had eaten, they filled twelve baskets.

When the people saw the sign that he had done, they began to say, "This is indeed the prophet who is to come into the world."

“Christ in the Church; the Church in Christ”

The Rev. Lisa J. Durkee

July 25, 2021

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, Oh Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

You all might have a kind of adult equivalent to the expression “a kid in a candy store.” For me, it is probably more like a Lisa in a musical instrument store, or a camping gear store. You get the picture. Every week I have another, which is Lisa in a scripture passage store, called the Bible. I have to choose, unless we are to be bewildered by the volume of stories and poems. This week, in all the commentaries I read through, scholars were moved to respond to the familiar text of Jesus’ feeding the 5,000, or to the scandalous and disturbing story of David’s plot against Bathsheba’s husband, Uriah the Hittite. These are fantastic stories, whose eventual, strong messages of redemption and provision are important to our understanding of God’s power. In rereading them this week, I found myself stuck

with the degree to which they are so patently physical. They are about the lust of humanity and the strength of God; about the lack of imagination of people and the creative productivity of Jesus. What often strikes me as most profound about the gift of Jesus in our lives—a gift which we seem often to forget or to gloss over—is almost beyond description. That we grow closer to God; that we become better and capable of greater things because of Jesus' abiding in us is an extraordinary thing—extra-ordinary. There are aspects of our faith in Christ that belie description in familiar terms. They are that profound.

You may not know that one of my favorite things to do on vacation is to read mystery novels. I like the suspense, the wondering whodunit, and seeing if my wits match the wits of the main sleuth. I have favorite novelists, of course, both of classic literature and lately of murder mysteries, and P.D. James is a new favorite. I recently read a book of hers named *Death in Holy Orders*. For those of you who wish your pastor would always read more substantive or theological fare, you may be reassured to know that the setting for this mystery is a theological school, a seminary on England's coast, and its main characters are priests and ordinands. Some of the dialogue even felt familiar. So is some of the mystery, and I don't mean the question of the murderer's identity or whether it was done with a rope in the ballroom.

Much of theology, much of our talk about God and even about the Church has to do with mystery. As much as we spend time seeking ultimate truths and answerable questions, when it comes to the realities concerning God and our faith, much remains mystery which, in the words of Paul, is seen now only dimly. Only when we see God face to face will we know God in fullness and with clarity; with the mysteries solved. For now, then, we proceed as well as we can, trusting in the words of the Gospel to guide us in love and truth, and doing the best we can to respond faithfully to our understanding of God's purposes for our lives. Getting to know and to understand those purposes is why we read the Bible, and one of the reasons we come to church. Acting on those purposes is why we put the Bible down, and why we leave church building, and when we do, we can be thankful that since the very beginning of Church, of the Body of Christ in the wide world, the church's leaders have been praying for us.

And the Church needs prayers, doesn't it? I have had innumerable conversations in the past several months about the future of the church and how today's Christians can ensure its continuity. Imagine my surprise to discover while on vacation that P.D. James struggles with this question in her novel about murder at a monastic seminary. Or maybe we shouldn't be surprised by the mysterious ways that God has of getting into the thick of our lives at random turns in the path. An Archbishop arrives to a chilly welcome on the shores of the Atlantic, in the beautiful stone structure that has existed for ages. The welcome is chilly because the head of the seminary knows that the Archbishop wants to close the seminary, believing it to be a remnant of something whose purpose has passed.

I would like to read a passage from page 164 of P.D. James' *Death in Holy Orders*, as she muses about what must also be our questions moving forward in faith. "The theme of the homily was Christian discipleship in the modern world, and it was an attack on nearly everything for which St. Anselm's had stood for over a hundred years, and on everything Father Sebastian valued. The message was unambiguous. The Church could not survive to serve the needs of a violent, troubled and increasingly unbelieving century unless it returned to the fundamentals of the faith. Modern discipleship was not a matter of indulgence in archaic if beautiful language, in which words more often obscured than affirmed the reality of faith. There was a temptation to over-value intelligence and intellectual achievement so that theology became a philosophical exercise in justifying skepticism. Equally seductive was an over-emphasis on ceremony, vestments and disputed points of procedure, an obsession with competitive musical excellence, which too often transformed a church service into a public performance. The Church was not a social organization within which the comfortable middle class could satisfy its craving for beauty, order, nostalgia and the illusion of spirituality. Only by a return to the truth of the Gospel could the Church hope to meet the needs of the modern world."

Wow! "The Church was not a social organization within which the comfortable middle class could satisfy its craving for beauty, order, nostalgia and the illusion of spirituality." The "truths" of the Gospel are not only about the nuts and bolts of

our lives as we measure them in what we can touch and see. God, in whom we live and move and have our very being, is so very much bigger than we can imagine, and we limit what we allow God to do and to be in our lives and in our churches' lives when we believe that we have a clear understanding of the breadth of God's power. In so doing, we also limit the breadth of the churches' power. When we imagine that "church" means the business that we do here on a Sunday morning, comforted by the relative quiet and perhaps by the melodies of songs that are familiar or soothing; when we imagine that "church" means *anything* that we have made, and not what God is capable of through us, with Christ in us, then we limit God. We get Church wrong. How do we become hands that feed thousands, and feet that march with the same excitement with which Jesus' first disciples walked to the ends of the earth to share a message they knew to be utterly transformative? How do we come to believe with greatest certainty that Jesus, moving in us, can do far more than we have believed possible? What have we not yet tried, as individuals or as the Body of Christ united, in our dreaming into what church can be? Who are the neighbors we have not yet seen, or have not yet invited into our prayers and our purposes? What restlessness in the world or what frighteningly powerful destruction needs the greater power of God, moving and acting in us?

Paul prays that God's glory will be known through us, through Christ's disciples then and now. What breadth and depth of power do we even *want* to be part of as we strive to be Jesus' church in the world? What is the message we speak and live to glorify God? What great love, what good news of Christ's gospel of peace and love do we proclaim in our lives—in our words and our actions? How wide and far might we live this faith in action? Let us pray.

Dear Giver of our lives and Lord of our world, grant us the eyes to see you in everything and everyone around us. Grant us the openness to know your presence in us, and the power to live into the strength of good around which you would center our being. We ask our prayers in the name of Jesus Christ, whom we seek to follow as our brother and our Lord. Amen.