

ST. JOHN'S AT DIOCESAN CENTER IGLESIA EPISCOPAL DE SAN JUAN

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WHAT GOD CARES ABOUT

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Text of a Sermon preached the 17th Sunday after Pentecost

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JEREMIAH 11:18-20 | PSALM 54-
JAMES 3:13-4:3, 7-8A | MARK 9:30-37

Dear disciple of Jesus, you are here this morning, listening to this famous story about Jesus dressing down his disciples by putting a child on his lap, because you are a bit different from everybody else.

You are here because you are both amused, but also curious, as to why the disciples even had their conversation, arguing about who was the greatest behind Jesus' back. Crazy! you say. But you need to know why. You are a disciple. No matter that Jesus tells you things from time to time that you don't understand, you hang in there.

Apparently, you are also willing to listen to the apostle James criticize you at length: “Those conflicts and disputes among you, where do they come from? Do they not come from your cravings that are at war within you? You want something and do not have it; so you commit murder. And you covet something and cannot obtain it; so you engage in disputes and conflicts. You do not have, because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, in order to spend what you get on your pleasures.”

So, the doctor asks, what brought you in today? Are you in the middle of some debate, some dispute, some need to get control of something in your life, to get free from a destructive desire? Or are you curious about the big picture? Do you wonder if you, given just the right circumstance, might just think that you are more important than anyone else in your family, in your community, in the kingdom of God?

You are different, because you are here, asking questions. A very astonishing new survey from the Pew Trust was published this week, that revealed that so called ‘white evangelicals’ grew in the past four years, directly proportional to the growth in support of one political party. But the most astonishing fact is that none of these people who now understand themselves as ‘evangelicals’ go to church.

Which raises the question, is it possible to be an ‘evangelical’, to be a Christian, and not go to church? That’s a tough one. And I think you know what the answer is. You’ve got to be where you can hear Jesus’ voice, where you can draw near and listen, and lay down your life.

Every Christian new and old, has to learn daily to come within earshot of Jesus. And this is difficult when he is telling you things you don’t want to hear. He has called you. You have left other pursuits, other loves, and now he is telling you that he must suffer, be rejected by the chief priests and the elders, the religious and political establishment, and you wonder, well, what’s the future in that? What is going to happen to me? To us?

Every disciple of Jesus has to stay long enough in his presence to hear him also reply, ‘You don’t understand? Here, take a look at this child. Don’t you worry about all that. Come, follow me.’

James tells us, to be people of peace, we need to make peace. That means we can't just think ourselves out of our conflicts, we have to physically cross the distance, extend our hand, let others know they matter, that even if they don't like us or need us, we care about them. There are a whole lot of so called white evangelicals who need to walk into a church and sit down and listen to Jesus' voice. Just like we do.

This is a crazy world, where one minute we find ourselves thinking we will faithfully do our part, and in the next minute we are claiming that we are more important than others in the kingdom of God. We do such crazy things when we lose our bearings, when we lose hope. Hope is the most important thing. If we ask what pleases God, he will release the power of healing and forgiveness in our midst. If we ask what God cares about, we will find out way.

There is a new memoir out called "Into the Woods" about how a small Jewish community in Poland, just days before Hitler's army would round up their village and take their neighbors to a concentration camp, fled into the woods to live three years, hiding, barely surviving, in the most harshest conditions imaginable. Many of these survivors would eventually come to this country and tell their story, except for the one part that was the most difficult.

In those days, when they would live on one potato for a week, dug into the ground frozen in the dead of winter, there was one thing they could not do. They could not care for any child born among them. And so reluctantly, tragically, they would leave those children out in the woods to die, so that the rest could maybe live.

What we often forget, is that the holocaust of the Jews in 1942 was just one of the many holocausts in this century. What we often forget is that in Jesus' day, a child was literally worth nothing to anyone, because a child, the child that Jesus reached out for, and placed on his lap, had not yet proved his worth. It was commonplace in Roman society to walk along the road and see a child abandoned there. It was usual to walk right past. There would have to be an extraordinary reason to stop and pick up that responsibility. And more often than not, before Christians came along, no one stopped. Eventually, this, and the care for the sick stranger, was one thing that came to separate Christians from others in Roman society.

You are different disciple of Jesus, because Jesus has reached out to you and put you on his lap. He has claimed you. He has said you are of infinite worth. So leave behind the war within and think afresh today about what God cares about. As you do, as you walk past and embrace the care of creation, the care of your community, the care of the least and the lost, you will learn who is important to God, and how to be great - that is useful - in the Kingdom of God. Today, let us welcome one another in Christ's name.