

Adam's Reflections: April - May 2019

April 4

How much is too much? For the potentially harmful things in life this is an easy question. We have prescribed limits to how fast we drive, the quantity of beneficial drugs we can take, and most of us limit ourselves to how much desert we can have after a meal. There is such a thing as too much.

Our gospel lesson this week begs to differ. John 12: 1-8 sets the scene with Jesus, Mary, Martha, Lazarus and others gathered for a meal. Passover is coming, Jesus is moving towards Jerusalem and the cross the scene is set and Mary disrupts things by anointing Jesus. The value of the perfume must be enormous, seemingly too much. Judas mourns the wasting of it on Jesus and even if his complaint rings hollow due to his greed, it does little to make us forget the extravagance. Jesus, never being one missing the chance to teach, reminds them that his time is short and that appropriate gestures of love and adoration at the proper time are not too much.

We come to that season in the life of the church. Starting a Sunday from this coming one you will have ample opportunity to worship and attend to this most holy time of the year. Too much might be your cry as you look at five days of worship in a row. Is it though? We as a church will pause in all our planning and meeting and mission and outreach and focus on the moment. Jesus is present at the table, the rest can be attended to once this is finished. Jesus ask his disciples for their full attention as he prepares for the cross. How much more does he desire our full attention?

There will be things that require you attention through Holy Week. You might look at the schedule of worship and say "too much!" But it might also be wise to heed Jesus words and attend to what is really important in this moment. The rest will wait, during Holy Week we will attend to what sustains us. This will not be too much.

April 11

Our scripture for Sunday is the traditional Palm Sunday text, this year from Luke. At the end of the reading Jesus comments about the stones crying out. I have a long standing relationship with stones, or as I refer to them, rocks. I grew up on a pile of rocks, or at least that was how Dad often characterized our farm. He was not wrong in doing so. Most of the cleared land on our farm that had been cultivated at one time for grain or corn had an accompanying pile of rocks. Those piles were huge, 20ft long, 6ft high and wide. They were always a part of the landscape and you would think that all the rocks had been cleared. Not so. Every year after the gardens were plowed new rocks were overturned and a new pile was formed on the back of a hay wagon. Us three boys would spend some considerable time removing rocks from the garden and every year more were back. So when Jesus talks about stones shouting out if everything else remains silent I can only imagine the wealth of voices that will echo through the old home place.

The consistent work of removing rocks is also a good analogy of the work of the church. Some tasks are never done. No matter how many times we come to Holy Week, there will always be a need to remember and celebrate again in the coming year. No matter how many meals we fix for those who are unable to get out, there will always be another need to care for. No matter how many injustices we address and attempt to remedy there will always be another that needs our attention. When the rocks of the world rise to the surface we work at removing them. Shouting stones is not Jesus desire, his desire is for us to be

that voice of celebration. His desire is for us to be that energy and passion that cannot help but cry out in joy and knowledge of what is to come.

As we come to Palm Sunday and Holy Week find those places where you are called to shout for joy. Look for those rocks that need to be removed. As John Wesley said, attend to the ordinances of Christ. This coming week is the perfect time to do just that.

April 18

If you only go to Palm Sunday to Easter Sunday services you might miss something important. In fact, you could miss out on some of the most powerful scripture in our Bible, the stories that truly form who we are as Christians. Now I know that not everyone can come to every service, but if you want to catch the spirit of the week you could read the John narrative. Start at John 13 and read through John 19, and if you are really short on time you can skip John 14-17. That will take you through the story we will observe over the next three days. Jesus and his disciples at the Last Supper, the Passion of Christ and the silent waiting for Easter.

Why do we need that middle part? Why not just go from Hosana to Alleluia? Why not just avoid the lament and despair of Good Friday? After all, who wants the emotional tumult of this story. Jesus says good bye to friends who are confused, they betray or desert him, or go to sleep (see Luke's account). Jesus faces trial and torture and humiliation and death. All seems lost and once we are done with Friday we get an entire day of nothing. Just waiting quietly for what's next.

We observe this time in the Christian year in part because it reminds us of the reality of life. We will not always be allowed to pick and choose how we experience life. If we did, of course we would prefer the great days of celebration. Palm Sunday and Easter are amazing and we love being in worship celebrating on those days, just like we enjoy the high moments of life when everything in the world makes us smile. Days of birth and birthdays, graduations and vacations, weddings and baptisms. Days when the sun shines, the flowers bloom and the birds sing merrily. Not all of life is like that though. Sometimes it is dark and bleak and full of pain and sorrow. Sometimes we feel like nothing we do matters and that the light will never shine on us again. These three days remind us that Jesus experienced that bleakness as well. The church observes the totality of life lived together, not just the celebratory points. We come together in our grief and support each other just as much as we do in our joy. This reminder is important, maybe not the most important reason for Holy Week but it should be a part. No matter how high we get or how low life sinks that we do this together, with Christ, with God, with the Spirit.

Come observe the holiness of community, I promise it will make Easter look all the better come Sunday.

May 2

It is Easter! What a wonderful time in the life of the church. This year, more than in years past, I have felt such a feeling of change and movement in the life of the church. I cannot specifically name anything that has sparked this feeling but something is in the air besides pollen. Change is obviously a favorite topic of mine but it is often only a theoretical conversation. Easter reminds us that Jesus changed everything when the tomb was found empty on Easter morning and continued to reveal that change through appearing to his disciples. Their proclamation, often spurred by the witness of Mary and other women, continues to remind us that the old has passed away. We still see and feel in our world today the taint and burden of sin and death but because of Easter (resurrection) we know that the final course of our existence has a different end.

It is good for us to be reminded of this hope. If you look in the right places you can see some dire warnings of things not going well, but if you look in other places you can also see signs of the resurrection. Often these things exist side by side. In the new yesterday was a story of a shooting on the campus of UNC Charlotte. During the course of the event a 21 year old student, Riley Howell tackled the shooter and disarmed him, in the process he was fatally wounded and died. Authorities believe that his actions saved the lives of others. In the midst of great tragedy and death, we see an example of great love and sacrifice. We will never know if Riley was thinking about the meaning of Easter and the importance of that event when he choose to act but nevertheless his act is an example of living the true meaning of Easter. He cared enough for others to give all he had to assure their safety. Easter empowers each of us to do the same and we do not have to rush armed assailants to have an impact. Every time we reach out in love to those hurting we live the true meaning of Easter. Every time we support an outreach project at the church we live the true meaning of Easter. Every time we smile and welcome a new face at worship we live the true meaning of Easter. Easter changes us and begins the process of transforming us into who God intends us to be.

I challenge you this Easter season to find places where you are living out the meaning of Easter and to find examples of others doing the same.

May 10

I have been a student of history for a long time. Not always a good student, but always an interested one. I fell in love with history in High School and it was my major in college. Even though my professional life took me in a different direction I have never lost my general affection for things past. Over the recent years, the history of the Church has fascinated me and in particular the history of the congregations where I have served. Digging through history gives great insight to how things have changed over the course of the years. For example, I never knew that in the EUB polity the pastor conducted the board meetings. One note I discovered after the merger in 1968 was that Otterbein had to elect a administrative board chair person. I referenced Sunday School attendance last week during my sermon and over the years have found other data to suggest that it was not abnormal for Sunday School to have more in attendance than worship. Change is a fascinating topic.

We often assume that things have pretty much stayed the same but a closer examination shows that many details we take for granted have not always been that way. Even still, as we do look closer we also find some eternal truths that do not change. Our official Articles of Religion (Methodist) or Confession of Faith (EUB), are unchangeable by UMC rule, and have been passed down to us from generations past. Our use of the Apostles Creed, and the Lord's Prayer as foundational aspects of our worship have an even longer unchanged history. Details may change but we see similarities in how we act as people that unite us in ways that keep us grounded. We see the failings and the wonder of what we do as people and we see the Spirit that holds us as one. When we open up the Old Testament and question as to why we need to know all these stories it does not take long to understand that the people there relate to us, even if their context is starkly different than ours. Our common yearning for God and the struggles that get in our way or propel us forward are very similar. We continue to be shaped by those narratives because they are related to our story. I love the differences in the details and love exploring the context but the underlying truth remains constant. God.

On Sunday we are going to glance back at our past and see what it tells us, and maybe in that process we will find an example or two of how we are different but we will most likely also find ways we remain the same.

May 16

I am not the biggest movie or television fan. I on occasions do find it enjoyable and relaxing to take in a movie or TV show but it is not my primary form of entertainment. When I do it is purely a relaxing event. Very rarely will I speculate either internally or externally about what is going to happen. I simply allow the show/movie to unfold and allow myself to be surprised or bored by the outcome. I enjoy the unpredictable and non-formulaic while also being comforted by thing happening the way they are supposed to. All of this to simply say that I am fascinated by the nature of humans to know the future. There are segments of our financial system predicated on the prediction of what is going to happen. We all watch the weather forecast, another computed aided prediction of what is going to happen. Most of us have been around long enough to know that those predictions happen to be incorrect from time to time. We see and know the folly of trying to predict the future but yet are drawn to the practice nevertheless.

We ask the doctor how long we have to live after a serious diagnosis. We ask the mechanic how long until the engine goes. We ask our financial adviser if we have enough money to retire. We ask God when Jesus will return. And through all of those questions there are unknown variables that we do not or cannot see.

Would it change our lives if we did know? Would you want to know if that was possible? Great philosophical questions for a nice conversation when there is time to kill but we would be better served to do something different. I view the future not as something to know but as something to strive for. Our future hopes should be the realization of the Kingdom of God, a goal to work towards not a prediction of what should come. Our greatest dreams, peace, end of poverty, no more sickness, should be our future hopes. Unattainable you say? Maybe so but they should be still our purpose. We know that only Christ return will bring them about but in the meantime we should work diligently to make them more of a reality. My hope for the future is not good weekend weather or a secure retirement but instead a clearer vision of God's Kingdom for all creation.

May 23

Tomorrow is Aldersgate Day. In 1738 John Wesley attended a service where he afterwards describe that his "heart was strangely warmed". Wesley described this in his writing as an understanding or assurance of his salvation. Not a come to Jesus moment but an assurance that his knowledge of Christ love for him was not only a head thing but also a heart thing. John Wesley was already a priest in the Anglican church, he had served as a missionary in the Georgia colony with his brother Charles and yet this was the moment that spurred him to engage differently in his ministry.

Most of us can find places in our lives (if we pause and think a little) where things change for us. Where we understand our relationship with Christ in a new way. Places where our hearts are warmed and we know we are on the right path. Seminary made me do this work and it was beneficial to acknowledge the places where God was at work, to note those moments where I was moved to a deeper place in my spiritual journey.

It would be interesting to do this work as a church. Where has Otterbein grown and deepened in their faith journey? What signs of God's grace can we point to over the years where powerful things have happened? Can you think of any? If so drop me a line and let me know.

Happy Aldersgate Day, may your heart also be strangely warmed.

May 30

There is always an uncertainty to life, and I was reminded of that in a variety of ways this past week. From hospital visits, to chaplain calls, to sitting with fellow pastors, to attending meetings, all of these had some degree of uncertainty. Yesterday was Ascension day and while the scriptures all take a different tone we can assume with some confidence that facing a future without Jesus provided a level of uncertainty to the lives of the disciples. It had to be a long 10 days between Ascension and Pentecost for those waiting for Jesus to return and wondering what he meant by not leaving them alone meant when he ascended into the clouds. Worshipping in the temple is the answer that Luke gives and it reminds us that the basic comforts of life are often those we turn to in uncertain times.

When medical diagnosis are hidden, we turn to family, friends and God to help us wait in the unknown. When places are strange because we are no longer at home and have little prospect of returning, we bring things with us that remind us of who we are, pictures, a piece of furniture, or a favorite blanket. When crisis hits we turn to the church to provide comfort and assistance in times of need. These large uncertainties in life are natural calls to things that provide stability but we often fail to see the daily opportunities to turn in a likewise manner to the stable things in life. We think we can manage on our own, or have some special knowledge of the future that can keep us safe. We forget the comforts of family and church or get so self-absorbed we fail to be the comfort that others need.

Ascension should remind us that we are needed on a regular basis by others, by the church, by our community. It should also remind us that we need to be focused in our uncertainty on the things that provide surety. Church, friends, family, faith, worshipping God, helping others. So in this time between Ascension and Pentecost let us practice this and be reminded of what is truly important.