

Proper 15 C August 18, 2019
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From Generation to Generation
Church of the Good Shepherd, Athens, OH

There is an old song that begins with words that might help us see a little deeper into today's Gospel reading. These words are in the form of 4 questions. Four questions that are invitations to us listeners to consider something Jesus may have been referring to in today's Gospel: our connection to the world around us and our role in it. The 4 questions are:

Do you care what's happening around you? Do your senses know the changes when they come?

Can you see yourself reflected in the seasons? Can you understand the need to carry on?

At first glance, we might find it hard to see how these questions apply to today's gospel because of the mood Jesus seems to be in. Jesus doesn't seem to be calm, cool, collected. Nor was he emotionally disconnected. He sounds pretty frustrated and angry. Maybe he needs a vacation. Or a snack. Or maybe he's just too darn hot; that can make me short tempered. Scholars tell us the author of Luke's Gospel is showing us a Jesus who is getting closer to his crucifixion and is perhaps speaking out of whatever complex emotions he may have because of it. Other scholars say Jesus was probably voicing frustration that despite all the amazing things he did, and wonderful things said, people still did not recognize the Messiah in their midst.

Or like I said, maybe Jesus just needed one of his prayer breaks. Or a nap.

Scholars and commentators often try and sooth us modern followers of Jesus whenever we have to face Jesus behaving and speaking in the Gospels in ways that are contrary to how we might prefer. We might find the cool, emotionally detached Jesus much more palatable, easier to keep at arm's length. The Jesus who doesn't ask too much of us or challenge us. It can be disturbing when Jesus bursts out at his listeners like he did this morning with his talk of fire, division and a powerful sense of urgency. Perhaps because, there can be times when any of us whether we are modern listeners, or Jesus' original listeners, when we aren't paying attention to what was happening around us.

We all can get busy, too busy. We've got a new academic year to prepare for. We've got errands to run. Books to read, podcasts to listen to. Jobs to do. Medical issues to work through and doctors' visits. We've got gardens to weed. Meals to prepare. Meetings to attend. We might glance at the events of the day as they glide by on our newsfeeds. Others read the headlines before they turn the pages of

newspapers or news magazines. Or listen hastily as a friend or family member tells us about something going on in their lives. But that is not the same thing as paying attention. That's just seeing what is going on. And that seems to be what is upsetting Jesus in today's Gospel, and the wake up call he seems to be giving is for all of us to pay attention.

Paying attention is about what those 4 questions invite us into, and what Jesus may have been saying when he accused people of being able to tell what is going to happen with the weather, but not their lives or the lives of others. Paying attention begins with caring. Caring about the world and people around us and wanting good for all. Caring is what we do at Church of the Good Shepherd when volunteers join me on the front steps of the church on the first two days of class offering free coffee and donuts to whomever passes by. It's easy to misread that ministry as an attempt to bribe people to come to church, but as I said, that is not the intention. Our intention is to be present with the world around us in a way that is a blessing. We don't just give coffee and donuts. We give warm greetings. We give directions to the lost and unsure. We give encouragement. Sometimes we even give company to those who need a safe place to sit and talk a while or the non-traditional student who is going back to school after a long absence. We do this; we get up early and carry tables and coffee and sugar and creamer and napkins and cups and stir sticks and trash cans outside and stand in the weather to show that we care. And we are here, for our neighbors, even the ones that never darken our doors. We remember and understand those first few days of a new academic year can crackle with so much excitement and uncertainty and we care enough to put ourselves in the middle of it. We are paying attention to the season, the people, we care, - as a church and as individuals - and it shows.

Former bishop of Durham and scholar N. T. Wright writes that the early church interpreted today's Gospel to mean that each generation in the church is responsible to pay attention to the signs of the times they happen to be in: not just to things like a new academic year, but also things like movements of people or governments, nations or institutions, and respond appropriately. N.T. Wright reminds us that part of the role of the church of Christ is a prophetic one. Many people think prophets have a weird ability to tell the future, to predict what is going to happen and to scream at people to try and convince them the end is near. But that is not accurate. The prophets of the Old Testament were people whom God called to listen to God and to pay attention to the world and to communicate with God's people; mostly to tell them when they had gone astray from God's ways. Personally, I wonder if the negative stereotype of prophets comes from people not liking what the prophets said; so they wrote the prophets off as being angry, or out of touch, or some other way of dismissing them so

it would be easier to not take them seriously. Because prophets usually asked people to make a change and that caused discomfort.

That might be part of the reason for the division Jesus was talking about in the gospel. You know, where it looks like Jesus is a home wrecker pitting one generation against another. Jesus may have been saying something about how people of different generations respond to change. Perhaps inferring that the young are more receptive than the old. Which might be true in some cases, but not necessarily in all cases.

It could be very tempting to listen to Jesus words about generational divide as an opportunity to pass that negative stereotype on to either the old or the young. To lament that the young are not paying attention or care about institutions or the old are not paying attention or care about the world young people inhabit and the unique challenges they face. But I'm not sure that is where Jesus was going, and I am not sure generational divides are always helpful. When I first arrived in this diocese, I attended my very first clergy day, where all clergy from all over the diocese – young and old, seasoned and newly ordained, full time, part time, parish priests, campus ministers, cathedral deans and diocesan staff, - we all came together to worship together and hear a presentation about generations. The presenter had very carefully divided all people alive today into groups based on time periods when they were born and then proceeded to label these groups and talk about whether or not these groups were open to religion and attending church. It was all a ploy to help appeal to whatever generation you wanted to attract. But there was a lot of negative stuff said about the younger generations, most especially the one I was put in.

When the presenter asked for questions, one of the questions that was asked hit me hard. A priest rose and asked since people in my generation were so bad, should the church intentionally avoid inviting and including them. My immediate thought was I must have made a mistake in coming to this diocese. I was hated before I was known, just because of the generation someone who doesn't know me decided to put me in and in so doing created a narrative that couldn't have been farther from the truth and farther from the Gospel. I was grateful when another priest rose to counter the assumption. It wasn't until later that I wondered if the reason the generation I was put in was considered so bad by the presenter was he didn't like what people he classified as my generation had to say. So, he negatively stereotyped a whole group of people, much like the prophets of old.

Instead of being distracted by differences, generational or otherwise, and negatively stereotyping them or thinking they are the source of destruction, differences can help us pay attention. Things change. The world changes. Leaders change. Institutions change. Economies change. Just like the seasons change. Paying attention and caring for the world and our neighbors and means noticing the changes

as they are seen from our different perspectives, which can give us a bigger and more wholistic view of the world and our neighbors and help us find ways to respond that reflect the Love of God in Christ.

Paying attention and caring can be challenging, even exhausting. It can also make us feel – at least from time to time – that there is not much we can do about any of the struggles we currently face: whether it's the struggles with the changes in the environment, or economy, or the violence or the systemic racism or sexism or homophobia that still manage to rear their ugly heads and are far from being concerns of the past. That is where the last of the 4 questions comes in: do you understand the need to carry on by responding to what we notice when we pay attention as a church and individuals, as N.T. Wright so poetically said, "with a message from heaven."

If you read my reflection in the ENews the last two weeks, you would have seen how a good friend of mine who is also a parish priest found a way to respond to the horrible mass shootings in our country with a message from heaven. He shared a prayer with his community that helped him by posting it on the side of his church. He wasn't trying to make a political statement. He was responding with a prayer about the toll this violence and terrorism can have on all of us. And, it is helping him and his community. His response gives me hope and inspiration that there can be a narrative that is closer to the truth and the Gospel in the world.

Which is what can happen when we listen to Jesus call to pay attention, to care about what is happening around us, to see ourselves reflected in seasons and changes, and to help each other to carry on, as it says in the final line of the Eucharistic prayer, giving God our prayers and praise, through Jesus Christ our Great High Priest whom with God and the Holy Spirit the church gives glory from generation to generation.

Amen.