

In the name of God, who makes us, loves us, and keeps us. Amen

I have great empathy for the disciples of Jesus, those young men who, for the most part, had come from small-town Galilee, under-educated it seems, and yet eager to learn new things and do remarkable works. I say empathy because I like to try to put myself in their place and experience Christ through their eyes and ears, or at least imagine to. And what I often find when I do that is a puzzle. I can empathize with their confusion, their lack of understanding, even mis-understanding, and I wonder just how they did it all. They were confronted each day with major mysteries. Their intellect, I bet, was stretched to the limit by Jesus' cryptic teachings and parables and hyperbole. The crazy world in which they found themselves must have been relentlessly challenging, and even though they were daily in the company of a man who seemed more and more divine to them, it wasn't especially reassuring, was it?! Each time they thought they had finally understood the mysteries of life and death and faith, Jesus gave them even more to think about and be confused by. The gospel lesson from the ninth chapter of Mark which I just read for you is a typical example: if you, like they, find this teaching disorientating, then you have heard it correctly.

As we heard in this morning's reading from Mark, the disciples, always a little unsure of their own status, come across a stranger who is casting out demons in the name of Christ. And apparently he was doing it well. Try to picture this in your mind: They try to get him to stop, and when he ignores them, they go running home to Jesus and tattle on him. But Jesus does not feel threatened, and says in effect: 'Don't stop him, for heaven's sake! Don't throw a wet blanket on this stranger. Whoever is not against us is for us. Would that there were more like him.' That was not what the disciples expected to hear. They thought they should be on the lookout for charlatans and imitators, protecting the purity of Jesus' mission, a mission which is becoming their privilege as well. But over and over again their expectations, those things which they might just take for granted, turn out to be mistaken. How can they be so wrong so much of the time, especially if this teacher, this master, hopes to build any confidence in them?

Jesus teaches about a way of life which is other-worldly, unlike what we are used to, orientated differently, enough differently that we lose our bearings when trying to navigate into and through it. Up is down and down is up. The first are last and the last are first. The rich are deprived and the marginalized have riches they don't recognize. The powerful are really weak and the weak have strengths they need to discover. Life as it is known is really death, and death can turn out to bring true life. And the whole concept is meant to be good news, at least spiritually. And yet much of the message goes against the grain. Much of it is really puzzling. And all of it is a holy mystery. I empathize with those first disciples because it appears they were meant to become 'the Body of Christ' in the days of Jesus' necessary absence. They were to be the first ones. They were to carry on his mission and spread his teaching further and farther. And now we, in our own generation, are to think of ourselves that way. The concept of the Body of Christ, BTW, did not originate with Jesus himself, but with Paul and the leaders of the early church, and I sometimes wonder just what were they thinking?! It does sound good, doesn't it? We are the body of Christ. But how can that be? We cannot know the depth of the mysteries he knew. We cannot be authorities on eternal life and the infinite universe. At best, we can soldier on faithfully, trying to be our best selves trying not to stumble along the puzzling way.

So, that's the first part of the sermon I had written for today. But then Saturday happened. As many of you know, yesterday was a flurry of activity here: After some days of preparation and reflection, we held a memorial service for Suzanne Clarks's sister Virginia, who passed on ahead last winter. Then, shortly after, we celebrated the wedding of Steve and LeeAnne, Val Hill's sister. By the time I got home

yesterday afternoon, I was both exhausted and really puzzled. Funerals and weddings really cut to the chase, don't they?! They both deal with those mysteries of eternity and relationships and promises and dreams, and where we all fit in to the meaning of life. As I read through what I had prepared for today, the sermon I intended to give, clever as it was, it no longer felt adequate. I scrapped the rest. So, if my next few words seem less polished and less well-arranged, I apologize, but I want to share some of my reaction to what happened.

Funeral/ memorial services are full of speculation about the afterlife. Some of those guesses are informed by scripture and are based on what has been revealed to us and feel true in our hearts. Some are predictions based on tradition and good metaphors. And some of the popular images of the afterlife are just plain silly. Yet all are meant to prompt hope and reassurance over fearful dread. But the mystery is profound. And beyond our realistic understanding. Without telling you his name, I will tell you that one gentleman came up to me after the memorial service to tell me that in these latter elderly and infirm years he has narrowly escaped the call of death several times, and has come to the conclusion that God is keeping him alive for some specific reason. But he can't for the life of him figure out what that reason is, and could I please help him to discern just what that might be. It's mysterious and puzzling. And then there is that strange line in the traditional wedding vows, which always sticks in my throat when I am asking the bride and groom to repeat it after me: 'until death do us part.' What is that all about, and why should that thought punctuate an otherwise joyful celebration? I didn't bring it up with them, but I swear I saw a brief shadow pass by on Steve and LeeAnne's faces just then.

I know that Art Hill's death was on the mind of many of the family members at the wedding yesterday. We all wished he had been there, wearing a boutonniere, to escort LeeAnne up the aisle, and, in fact, I heard Val say that she knew he really was there in spirit. And I was told that they had hoped for some sign of his presence...nothing superstitious, you understand, but some expression and gift of blessing. And this is what happened: After I got home, I reviewed my clever sermon and, thinking I might re-write a bit, I looked back at sermons I had composed about the same readings we had for today. And I found, to my surprise that 3 years ago, shortly after my shoulder surgery I wrote this: "For my convalescence from surgery, Anne Hill gave me a gift. She gave me a jigsaw puzzle to work on, and I did, in fact complete it! The picture is of a lone stag standing beside a sunlit creek at the edge of an autumn forest. But you wouldn't know that if you studied one individual piece, would you?! In fact, you wouldn't get the effect of the picture unless all the pieces were used. Likewise, I believe, we each have a piece of the Gospel puzzle, a unique perception and vision of God's kingdom, an experience of God which is especially our own, but which, when added and integrated with many others, reveals the larger picture."

That was 3 years ago, and I had forgotten about that puzzle, so I went looking for it in the basement, and here it is. Two years later, nearly a year ago now, Anne's beloved husband, whom I had come to regard as something of a mentor and an older brother in this parish, passed away. And some of you may know that when he died at home, attended by many of the same people who were at the wedding yesterday, Val retreated outdoors and saw a stag standing at the autumn tree-line, who looked intently at her and then purposefully and slowly walked away into the woods. The image was so striking and compelling that I used a graphic of a lone stag on the cover of Art's committal bulletin. But, having forgotten about the puzzle, I never made the connection until last night. I texted Val about it, and included a photo of the puzzle box. And the reaction from the family was that all this was a sign, a gift from God, that eternity can somehow touch us, that love continues past the grave and can indeed celebrate new life with us, that the celebration of weddings and births and new relationships and all the mysteries of life resound throughout the infinite universe as blessings. Empathize with the first disciples, who found their situation to be so puzzling and yet so extraordinary. Amen.