



The Sixth Sunday after the Epiphany
Matthew 5:21-37
February 16, 2020
The Rev. Dr. Christian Brocato, Rector

+May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable to you, O God, our Strength and Redeemer. Amen.

One of the many active ministries at St. Mark's is the Strategic Plan Ministry. This dynamic and passionate team of volunteers examines and explores individual ministries and is working toward a plan for the entire Parish. I thought about the work of that ministry, the journey of the spiritual life, strategic planning and the Gospel of Jesus.

Many years ago while finishing my PhD at the University of Minnesota, I had very little sense of how my life would unfold after graduation. A time of discernment accompanied the last couple of years of finishing my doctorate while also working full-time as a church musician in a large Lutheran church. Then while working on a masters in systematic theology at the Aquinas Institute of Theology, I had very little sense of how my life would unfold once I was ordained.

Today, some of us are in the later stages of life. Others of us are in the early stages of adult life, and still others of us are somewhere in between. Life unfolds with or without a great deal of planning.

Strategic planning involves a strategy, an intentionality which includes reflection, assessment and a plan to move forward. For most people, the plan is often consistent with the past while examining the present and projecting into the future.

While strategic planning is a more contemporary method of planning, I had a thought last week about Jesus, his disciples and about strategic planning. Today's Gospel builds on the law and the prophets of the Hebrew Tradition. It is also a tool for teaching about how to live life. It is part of the Sermon on the Mount and follows the Beatitudes in Matthew's Gospel. You may remember them: Blessed are the poor in spirit. Blessed are the meek. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for justice... (See, Matthew 5:3-12) The Beatitudes offer a kind of roadmap for living. Today's passage builds on them and includes a recipe for conflict management, applicable then and now. (Matthew 5:21-27)

Last Tuesday night, ten of us from St. Mark's attended the Kaufman Interfaith Institute's Abrahamic Dinner at the At-Tawheed Islamic Center on East Paris. There, we had dinner along with some two hundred others from nearly every religious tradition imaginable.

We celebrated the lives of three refugees who escaped conflicts in three different countries. We listened to their journeys, how they got to the United States and about their lives today. We heard disturbing chronicles of the past while celebrating the now and their bright futures among us. The presenters had a strategy for moving forward and incredible determination to find life even if far away from home.

I fully believe that God intends for God's creatures to be happy in life. I believe that even in marriage when experiencing 'life' is no longer possible, then, a change is understandable, a position consistent with that of the Episcopal Church.

I wondered about Jesus and his determination to bring life to others, his immediate disciples and all those with whom he encountered. His plan, his strategy, relied heavily on his connection with God, the Father Creator. The Scriptures tell us that. They tell us that Jesus retreated in prayer to be one with the Father.

Beyond that aspect of the life of Jesus, I had an image of Jesus sitting around a table with the Twelve and mapping out a strategy. That plan relied heavily on prayer, reflection, discernment, wisdom, good counsel and the strength needed to move forward. Sounds like gifts of the Holy Spirit, right?

I believe Jesus knew all too well that he couldn't accomplish what he was called to do by himself. He needed the disciples and perhaps an entire entourage of others to bring his message of life into the marketplace of the First Century. He needed a community, a village!

The disciples of Jesus must surely have known the law and the prophets, as faithful Jews of the time. Jesus had to implant a passion for renewal as well as change in their hearts, so that they and others could experience new life, his way of life, his Way of Love.

Here, we find ourselves in the midst of this community of faith. I believe that we are here because deep inside we realize the need to be with others. We long to experience the life of Jesus in community with all its joys and at times, disappointments.

Here, we gather to hear God's Word, feast at the banquet table of life and experience the gifts of the Holy Spirit alive at St. Mark's. Here, we gather not apart from the tumult of the world in which we find ourselves but almost in spite of it. God's grace gives us courage, strength and hope.

So, Friends in Christ, what is your plan? What is your strategic plan for deepening your spiritual life with God in Jesus and with others at St. Mark's? Have you reflected on your spiritual life and the need to deepen it? If so, you might be ahead of the game. If not, then, God's invitation to do so is on the planning table of life.

Wherever we are in our spiritual journeys, we can be assured that God is with us. God calls us to walk alongside Jesus and to breathe the air of his life-giving Spirit.

The upcoming Season of Lent will give us special grace to walk with Jesus. Please, see and participate in the many of the opportunities we will offer for Lent. For now, a question might be "How do we cooperate with God's grace and experience God's love for us in life-giving ways?"

Some of us carry deep wounds in life. Some of us live with shattered dreams of a loving relationship no longer present. Some of us live with decisions we wish we had not made. Some of us live with loneliness much in need of fulfillment. Deepening one's spiritual life has the capacity to bring healing and new life.

The Church calls us to integrate spiritual life into all aspects of life. Jesus did that. His disciples did that. We are called to do that. Can we make a plan to more fully integrate our spiritual life into all aspects of life?

My prayer is that what we experience here we can and will take into other aspects of life. My prayer is for renewal, revival and refreshment for each and every one of us.

A Gospel Hymn reminds us: "Jesus calls us o'er the tumult of our life's wild, restless sea; day by day his sweet voice soundeth, saying, 'Christian, follow me.'" Here, we are invited to do just that and given the grace to make it happen. Thanks be to God!