

From today's Collect:

Grant us, Lord, not to be anxious about earthly things, but to love things heavenly; and even now, while we are placed among things that are passing away, to hold fast to those that shall endure; through Jesus Christ our Lord . . . Amen.

I have a soft spot for that Collect.

I once used it in a sermon years ago as a young priest just starting out.

It was my first day as Vicar (priest-in-charge) at Zion, North Branford.

I keep pretty good sermon files, so here it is --

just one little section that might bear repeating today:

Today's Collect seems custom-made for a new vicar with butterflies in her belly. When I first read it, I laughed outloud – nervous laughter, perhaps, but laughter just the same. "Grant us, Lord," it says, "not to be anxious about earthly things..." Not anxious? On your first Sunday in a new parish? I'm worried that I'll collide with an acolyte or process out the wrong door!

In case you're wondering, I did manage to process out the correct door that day.

Even so, even though I was going for a hint of humor,

those concerns seem hopelessly quaint from today's vantage point, don't they?

I doubt that even the youngest priest today

would have the luxury of such simple worries.

Today, going into a new parish would be more like –

Will it be a super-spreader event?

With everyone so scattered – and as politically divided as the country is --

how do we come together as a Christian community?

How traumatized are we by everything of the past eighteen months,

and will I be able to help guide us through it?

Those are some of the questions young Dee Anne would've asked herself down in North Branford today.

Those are some of the questions older Dee Anne sometimes asks herself here.

I contend that if you're not at least a bit "anxious," as the Collect says, you're not paying attention.

In today's Gospel it says that the disciples didn't ask Jesus any questions – not because they didn't have them, but because *they were afraid*.

How could they not be afraid, anxious, after what Jesus had just told them?

For the second time in as many chapters, Jesus tells them

that he'll be betrayed, killed, and rise again.
It's similar to what we heard last week,
as Jesus dashes their expectations of what it means to be the Messiah.
It turns out that Jesus is not some big brash Messiah
who swoops down to make it all better.
Jesus is the Messiah who will suffer and die and, yes, rise again.
Jesus is the Messiah who shows them how to lose their life in order to keep it,
how to die before rising again.

New and perplexing information, yes.
But what if they'd just admitted as much?
What if they'd told Jesus "they didn't understand what he was saying"?
What if they weren't afraid to ask questions?

Jesus never dodged tough questions.
He asked, and got them to admit that they'd been arguing about
which of them was the greatest.
Jesus then settles the matter by bringing a little child before them.
Not because children are cute and innocent,
but because they are vulnerable and powerless.

Children were among the very least in that society,
and that's why Jesus reaches out to them.
Just like he reached out to infirm Gentile women, lepers, demoniacs, the blind,
the lame, tax collectors and all manner of the ostracized and the outcast.
Children were perhaps the ultimate example of the vulnerable and powerless,
those whom the disciples were not only to welcome, but themselves *be*.
Because that's where Jesus hangs out.
That's where God in Christ is found.

*Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, says Jesus,
and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the One who sent me.*

The truth is, we're all going through some profoundly uncertain times.
We're all just making it up as we go along,
mostly doing the best we can in challenging circumstances.

I'm no longer that young priest standing before a new parish,
but I have no experience leading a parish through a prolonged period
of pandemic and upheaval. And neither does anyone I know.

None of us have ever before faced the fearsome reality that one of out 500 of our fellow Americans have died of a single disease since the beginning of last year.

No matter how fortunate we've been while riding this out, no matter how privileged a position we've occupied, it's all new and more than a little confounding.

Why not just admit it?

Why not embrace the fact that we're more vulnerable and less powerful than we like to admit -- even as we're called by Jesus to serve the most vulnerable and powerless.

Before God, we're all like that little child Jesus held in his arms. So were the first disciples – they were just too frightened to admit it. Too frightened, maybe too proud, to admit that they didn't understand where Jesus was leading them.

We have the benefit of their mistakes.

We don't need to posture and pretend that we have all the answers, as if we've magically figured out how to navigate this uncharted moment.

We need not be afraid to show our weakness, our weariness.

To ask for help. To look for opportunities to help others.

To rest before we crash.

To be bold enough to try something new, even if it doesn't always work.

To make amends when it all becomes too much and we lash out at others.

To reach out – to me, to others in this community. To pray without ceasing.

To see ourselves and everyone else as God sees us all – children, beloved children, held fast in the arms of Jesus.

*Grant us, Lord, not to be anxious about earthly things, but to love things heavenly; and even now while we are placed among things that are passing away, to hold fast to those that shall endure . . . **Amen.***

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