

SIGNS OF LIFE

why church matters



LIGHT • WATER • FOOD • SHELTER • COMMUNITY

Printable Reader

LIFELONG LEARNING AT VIRGINIA THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY
THE SOCIETY OF SAINT JOHN THE EVANGELIST

SIGNS OF LIFE SignsofLife.org

Worship engages our deepest human needs and has the power to transform our lives. Join the Brothers of SSJE in exploring the signs and symbols at the heart of Christian worship.

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About this reader

This reader is a collaboration between the Brothers of the Society of Saint John the Evangelist and members of the Virginia Theological Seminary community. It emerges from a week-long exploration of the signs and symbols of our common worship. It is designed as an invitation to explore *Signs of Life*, a five-week series to be released by SSJE and VTS.

During the week-long collaboration, the Rev. Becky Zartman introduced each topic with a short homily and a set of provocative questions that became the foundation for structured conversations with both individual Brothers and groups of Brothers. It is our hope that this reader will be a resource for your spiritual life and prepare you for participation in *Signs of Life*. Additional resources, intended for groups and individuals, can be found at **SignsofLife.org**.

WHY CHURCH MATTERS

DR. ELISABETH KIMBALL

Acts 8:26-40

The Spirit spoke, Philip ran, the eunuch asked, teaching began, water appeared, the chariot halted, baptism happened, lives were changed.

In my experience, conversion and discipleship are rarely this efficient, but the elements, the rhythm, the signs are familiar. I recognize the irreducible miracle of spiritual mentoring and good teaching because I have received it. Faithful people have come alongside my messy, ordinary life at just the right moment. When God shows up between a mentor and a seeker, the sum is infinitely greater than the parts, and everyone is changed forever. Who was your Philip? Who is your Philip today?

Is it any wonder that the account of the Ethiopian eunuch is a template for the ancient Christian discipleship process, the catechumenate? The word “catechumen” is from Biblical Greek, meaning “one who sounds out something.” The catechumenate is a supportive and encouraging environment in which an inquirer makes a series of informed decisions to journey through to Christian initiation. We see here, in this passage from Acts, the dynamic interaction between community, scripture, and sacrament in which transformation and growth occur.

For seekers to turn and bring their longings toward the Church, the Church must be intentionally showing and sharing the Gospel with the world. If the Church is to be a sign of life – a magnet for the God-given longing in all people to reconcile with God and with one another – then the Church must speak its abundant life in the terms of the times. As Anglicans, we are at our best when we engage the signs of our times with the signs of eternal life.

Every religious tradition has to balance the signs of its times with the signs of life; we must root the timeless in the timely, as at the first Pentecost, when all those gathered heard the good news of Jesus in their own languages. Indeed, my understanding of tradition is what brings life at any time and what defines life at any time. Yet, the work of that discernment and balance is hard, so hard that some cling to one pole or the other of a tradition. Those who want only to offer a fixed and timeless sign of life can fall into religious legalism, finding confidence behind the façade of calcified doctrine. Others zealously embrace or obey only the signs of our times, promoting the fake freedom of practices cut off from their roots or in service of self alone, fiercely guarding against any claims to universal truth or vulnerability exposed in community.

Recognizing the difference between authentic signs of eternal life and imposter or false-promise signs of our times is hard. This is why the eunuch asked Philip for help. We can assume that the adult eunuch had a life full of experiences of exclusion but perhaps also of joy. He was looking for what was real in his life and in the world. Like any seeker I have met, I imagine he was wondering what in his life was true, beautiful, meaningful, and connected to someone or something beyond himself. Like all people, he was seeking forms of community, shelter, food, water, and light for himself. But the seekers I meet are also looking for what their longings can teach them about others. We want our individual lives to be meaningful and purposeful. We want to be a part of something beyond our particular lives – to have a way of becoming more than we are right now.

There has been much research in the last decade on what sociologists and psychologists call the Loneliness Epidemic. This epidemic is something we all see across the generations of our friends, colleagues, and even within ourselves. In a society that allows us to post and pose more than ever, we find that the ability to self-make does not satisfy our longings to be fearfully and wonderfully made by and for love and relationship. We want – I want – a life with more beauty, purpose, and love than we can make for ourselves.

The Incarnation itself is an example of the eternal God entering into one particular body and showing us the destiny of humanity. The incarnate God is the timeless entering time, the abundant Triune life entering a single human being. Jesus is the perfect vision of balancing and blending eternal life in a singular time and body . . . his particular height, skin color, hair, and toenails. “True God from true God.” God on earth as God is in heaven is a miracle when God does it – no wonder it is so hard when we try! Too often we think of the Christian life as more of a game of Simon-Says: where Jesus does something, and we try to do it ourselves. Meanwhile our sacramental vision is that Christ in us is our hope of glory – that “it is no longer we who live but Christ who lives in us.” In our particular lives, just as in particular and common pieces of bread or chalices of wine, the eternal mingles with us by miracle, and we are one, as Christ and the Father are one. Christian discipleship is not acting like Christ, it is acting in Christ, in whom we “live and move and have our being.”

We are today living in times much more like the pre-Christian empire around Philip than any time in the 1500 years since Constantine, when Christians were the Empire. We in North America are in the midst of a distinctively post-Christian disenchanted realm. The empire, and its levers of political or purchasing power, is against the ethic and example of sacrificial love and social justice. Just read the news and see the signs of barbaric empire – babies in ‘tender age’ prisons or armed ICE raids promoted not to protect the society from criminals but to instill terror in entire ethnic groups. All these events echo the cruel Coliseum culture of dictatorship, hierarchical authority imposing ethnic supremacy, nationalism, enslavement through incarceration, and environmental degradation. There is an urgent need among those suffering beneath the dissolution and false promises of the signs of our times for hope, for spiritual mentors and teachers who point toward the signs of true life. The world longs for the peace of Christ, a peace the world cannot give.

We know what the signs of life are. Jesus says, “If you love me, keep my commandments . . . I will not leave you orphaned, I am coming to you.” I began by saying that the pace of the eunuch’s curiosity leading to conversion is swift but it does not surprise me. When we consider the depth of loneliness or even terror in so many hearts around us, would it be so odd for a person to leap toward a source of abundant life? I would leap. Indeed, I have leapt many times. Most recently I leapt into this pulpit. Augustine was right: God has made us for himself, and we are restless until we rest in God. The eunuch leapt into the rest he had longed for all his life. And so have I. And my gratefulness to have found abundant life and seen it teeming through me has caused me to go from a seeking eunuch to a teaching Philip. Where are you in that development of curiosity and vocation?

Jesus comes to us and is present each time we participate in the great sacraments of Baptism and Eucharist. We need to revive faith that perceives and receives the sacraments as the actual incarnations of God that they are. We are the bread and the wine, fruit of the earth made for communion with our creator. The sacramental elements just a few feet and a few minutes from us now are signs of God’s reign arriving on earth as it is in heaven. When we hear the water being poured into the font, or witness the new fire at the Easter Vigil, or experience solidarity and shelter among the assembly, or taste the bread of life, we are reoriented toward God’s eternity. We become one with the saints who have gone before us and those who will come. Time stands still, God moves, and we are changed.

It is our season to take up the mantle of Phillip, to run toward the inquirer, the oppressed, the forgotten, with open ears and rooted faith with a Gospel in the vernacular. We must live as if we actually believe we are loved and forgiven in Jesus Christ. We must risk everything to run alongside moving chariots, climb on board, listen deeply, and tell The Story from creation to eternity. We do not make the signs of life. If we remain in Christ, Christ remains in us, and apart from him we can do nothing. The world will know we are his followers by his love in us for one another.

The Spirit is speaking. People are running. Empires are failing. Eunuchs are asking. Who is teaching?

The chariots are halting. Baptism is waiting. Lives are at stake.

Where is the living water? We, the Church, are called to interpret the signs of life to those trapped in the signs of our times. We are called into the world as witnesses to God’s promise of eternal life. And, we’d better mean it. The Spirit is already moving and preparing the way. How will we respond when a stranger asks, “What is to prevent me from being baptized?”



LIGHT

THE REV. BECKY ZARTMAN

Matthew 5:13-16

The Golden Hour is the time right after sunrise, or just before sunset. The light from the sun refracts in the atmosphere, casting a warm, golden hue on the earth. The light is literally golden; because of the angle of the sun, only the warm yellow spectrum rays are visible. And the light is diffuse, everywhere; because of the angle, the light has to refract through more of the atmosphere than it does during any other time of day. What we experience is a warm glow that transforms everything we see. The paradox is that nothing has actually changed. Everything is as it was only a few minutes ago, and yet, our experience of the world differs radically. During the Golden Hour, the ordinary becomes breathtaking, the plain becomes beautiful, the mundane, heavenly.

Each year, on the evening before the first Sunday after the full moon following the spring equinox, we huddle together in the darkness and kindle a new flame. We proclaim this flame to be the light of Christ, a symbol of Christ overcoming sin and death, a symbol of the hope that burns within us. This golden light of hope transforms the world around us, because when we see with the light of Christ, we are invited to see the Real, the sacred underpinning of the universe, not just how the world seems to be, but the world as it truly is: God's, and God's alone.

When we see by the light of Christ, everything that is close to us, the manifestly everyday experience of living, things as simple and as vital as light and water and food and shelter and community – everything – is transformed into a vehicle of grace. These ordinary, existential, elemental pieces of life become imbued with the golden hue of love. The ordinary becomes sacred, even sacrament; the very stuff that sustains life is found to be nothing other than outward signs of inward grace, grace upon grace, the grace of God's presence within us. These signs and sacraments are a reminder that God is not far, but very, very near, as close as breath, as close as the warmth that kisses our skin, as close as the spark in our eyes.

A life lived in the light of Jesus is a life lived in the Golden Hour. When we live a life of faith, present to the presence of God, we begin to see the world from a new angle, with a new vastness, in a new light. Our world becomes illuminated by the light of Christ, and we are able to bask in the warm glow of God's love, to see the everyday for what it is: a gift from God. A gift that God called good.

But there's more to the light of Christ than living suffused with beauty in the Golden Hour. We are called to more than just basking in the glow of the light of Christ; we are called to bring that light to those around us. If we keep this good news to ourselves, we hide our light under a bushel basket; we walk through life with the very meaning of our life, our own interior light, hidden from the world. When we keep the light to ourselves, we walk through life as though we've got black-out curtains on our soul. Light can't get out, but light also can't get in. When we lift the curtains, when we throw open the windows, we let the light from light, that gracious light, the light of Christ shine through us. When we let the light in, when we let the light out, we ourselves are changed. And so is the world. We become another reflection, another refraction of light in the Golden Hour, helping others to see the world and those in it as they truly are: beautiful, sacred, and loved.

Questions for Meditation

The Rule of the Brothers of SSJE states, “Christ is already present in the life of everyone as the light of the world.” How do you recognize that light in yourself? In others?

Think about your day. When do you experience darkness and when do you experience light? What is illuminated when light enters? What do you see better when the light is dimmed?

At the beginning of the Great Easter Vigil, we literally share the Light of Christ, as we light one another's candles from the newly kindled flame. How do we live out this liturgical moment in our daily lives?

Our souls, like the sky, know times of darkness as well as light. Where is the light in your life?

ON LIGHT

FROM A CONVERSATION WITH BR. CURTIS ALMQUIST, SSJE

In the Genesis creation account, in the beginning, there is light. That's fascinating, because we understand God to be light before God creates light (the light of the sun). There's something incredibly reassuring in that God creates the light we can see, and separates it from darkness. God is orchestrating it all. And with infinite possibilities God decides to create a kind of cadence of life with light and darkness that fills each day. The soul needs this balance as much as the earth does. We can only bear so much light. If there's too much light coming at us, we risk being blinded. Light can be as blinding as darkness. God, who is Light, has orchestrated light in a way that we can take it in, but only in limited amounts and not all the time. If there is light on all the time, there is no opportunity to take what has been presented to us and to appropriate its meaning, to sift through it.

I love a recurring image in the scriptures: the light of God's countenance shining upon us. The countenance is reflected in the face of a person. It's more than just physiology; the countenance is the window of the soul, how the essence of a person is expressed, and accessed. Long before the psychologists had named “Seasonal Affective Disorder” (SAD) for those who suffer in the bleak mid-winter – when there's not enough light on our faces – the sages of old had figured this out by experience.

When Jesus is on the mountaintop with his disciples, he is visited by God's Spirit and Jesus becomes a changed man. His countenance is absolutely transfigured with light.

Receive the light of God's countenance looking on you tenderly, compassionately, hopefully, lovingly. If there is some part of you that seems quite dark, you need not be afraid of God's light. God is fully enlightened about who you are, and what you are, why you are as you are. Which is the point of Jesus, who comes to set us free from our very dark prisons. Let the light of Jesus' countenance shine upon you.

Then release the light. With “the eyes of your heart enlightened” (Saint Paul's phrase), allow God's light, and life, and love to teem from your own countenance as you face others in the course of the day. The light of your countenance can very powerfully bequeath dignity upon others who suffer from fear, loneliness, rejection, shame. The great wonder of light is that even the smallest amount of light overcomes darkness. Jesus says to us: “You are light.” Be light!

“The LORD bless you and keep you;
the LORD make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you;
the LORD lift up his countenance upon you,
and give you peace.”



WATER

THE REV. BECKY ZARTMAN

Romans 6:1-11

Do you remember learning how to float?

Learning to float is not easy. The great irony of learning is that the more you try to control the water, the less you will float. And the less you float, the more water will get in your eyes and nose, making you even more panicky, and even more likely to try to thrash about to stay on the surface, which means you'll inevitably go under the water. This is a vicious cycle. Fear and the need for control are the enemy of floating, and so the first, and most difficult part of learning to float is learning how to stay calm despite feeling out of control.

The only way to learn how to float is to make friends with the water. You need to trust that the water will hold you; that the nature of the water itself means that you can stay serenely on the surface, calmly breathing the air you need to survive, being cradled by the water. Once you have learned how to surrender to the water, to trust the water, floating becomes a joy. A joy that could one day save your life.

Baptism is learning how to float. Baptism is a sacrament of surrender, the sacramental act of letting go of fear and control, making friends with the unknown, and beginning to trust that God will sustain you, even in the midst of chaos and death.

Because most churches use a font that can sometimes resemble a dry bird bath, it may be hard to remember that baptism is actually a symbolic drowning. Some early Christian fonts were built into the ground and shaped like a cross, so you stripped yourself of your old clothes, descended down to a watery death, and ascended up into new life, where you were greeted with a new white robe. Baptism meant that your old self was dead, and that your new self was resurrected like Christ.

Listen to this part of the Thanksgiving over the Water from our baptismal rite: "We thank you, Father, for the water of Baptism. In it we are buried with Christ in his death. By it we share in his resurrection. Through it we are reborn by the Holy Spirit."

We are buried with Christ in his death. What this really means is that we've tried everything we knew how to try. We thrashed and splashed and panicked and cried, but somehow, deep down, we knew fear and the need for control weren't sustainable. We finally understood that fear and the need for control could only lead to death, and so, having no other choice, we surrendered to God, finally allowing God to support us, to cradle us in God's arms.

Baptism is learning how to float. When we surrender to the water of baptism, we share in the new life of God. When we surrender to the water of baptism, we share in Christ's resurrection, we start anew. When we surrender to the water of baptism, we are reborn by the Holy Spirit, given the courage discern, to will and persevere, to know and love God, and the gift of joy and wonder in God's works.

Perhaps we shouldn't be surprised; Jesus has been trying to tell us since the beginning. "For if you want to save your own life, you will lose it, but if you lose your life for my sake, you will save it." The irony of learning to float and the irony of the Christian life is one and the same: only by surrendering our life are we able to live. When we lose our life to God, we save it.

Questions for Meditation

The SSJE Rule links the Brothers' monastic vows to Baptism: "The grace to surrender our lives to God through our vows has been given to us in Baptism whereby we die with Christ and are raised with him." What grace has been given to you in your baptism?

Water is so commonplace, we might forget to notice it throughout the day. Let your senses come alive as you experience water at the sink, on your hands, in the shower, from a cup. What does water offer to you: refreshment, cleansing, comfort?

At the end of the service of Compline, one Brother sprinkles the gathered community with holy water, praying for "a peaceful night and a perfect end." This ritual reminds us of our mortality. How might you hand your own life back to God at the end of each day?

Surrendering to the water of baptism allows for us to be reborn by the Holy Spirit into the new life of God. How are you adrift? What keeps you afloat?

ON WATER

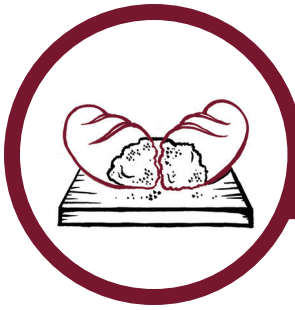
FROM A CONVERSATION WITH BR. LUCAS HALL, SSJE

On my first inquirer's visit to the monastery, when I was not at all sure that I wanted to do this, I asked each of the Brothers, "Why are you here?" One of the Brothers responded immediately that his vocation as a monk was closely linked to the fulfillment of his baptismal covenant. That was a very deep and important moment for me, the idea that a particular vocation like monastic life is simply an outgrowth of a larger vocation, the vocation of being a Christian which we receive at our baptism.

Being plunged into the water of baptism is a rich symbol of participation in the dying and rising of Christ. In ancient baptisms, the newly-baptized were clothed in a white robe, signifying their new life. At each stage of monastic life, the Brother is similarly clothed – first, with the habit when he becomes a novice; then, with the knotted cord when he takes his first vows; and finally, with a ring when he makes his life profession. In this way, we take on a new identity, as we did at our baptism; these signs signify that he is being 'clothed' in his vocation, one step at a time.

My baptism was not something that I chose, occurring within a week or two of my birth, and so claiming the new identity we are given in baptism has required a lot of reflection and personal engagement. When we're thrust into something we didn't actually have control over, there's the impetus to test it and to push the limits. I still find myself tested in that regard, wondering if the limits and boundaries of this new life are boundaries that have been imposed on me or boundaries that I have chosen myself. I think it's important to explore what we've inherited, rather than receive it unquestioningly.

Baptism offers us grace in a unique way, and yet we have to cooperate with it and participate in it in order for that grace to actually yield fruit. For me, one of the ways in which this participation is expressed takes place when I enter the chapel and dip my fingers in the holy water stoop and make the sign of the cross. It is an experience of going "through the veil," of re-entering the baptismal waters of death and re-birth. It requires me to let go of the preoccupations and worries and thoughts and feelings that might distract me, and to enter fully into the prayer and worship of the Christian community. Baptism binds us to this community, but we choose again and again to enter into its life and worship, dying to ourselves in order to discover a new life and a new identity in Christ.



FOOD

THE REV. BECKY ZARTMAN

John 6:25-35; 1 Corinthians 11:23-26

I thought that I knew what it was like to be hungry, until I hit the third trimester of my pregnancy. Every cell in my body was hungry. My hunger would wake me up in the middle of the night, rouse me out of bed, and lead me to the kitchen, where I would scarf down food until I could not eat another bite. The real trouble was that there was so much baby, there wasn't much room for food, so I experienced the very disorienting sensation of at once being overfull and also still very hungry. For the first time in my life, I had to be really strategic about what I ate and when. I gravitated toward calorie-laden foods that would also satisfy my bizarre cravings and at the same time not give me heartburn. (And this, my friends, is why pregnant women love ice cream.)

Never before had what I put in my mouth mattered so much. Food had become true nourishment, not only for me, but for the not-so-tiny life growing inside of me. Like the very hungry caterpillar, I ate and I ate and I ate for the sheer act of consuming calories. The food I put in my body was the energy that sustained my life, and the life of my daughter. In other words, I ate because I needed to be fed.

Humans eat for a surprising number of reasons. We eat for entertainment, we eat for special occasions, because of social expectations, or companionship. We eat because we're bored, or stressed, or lonely, or sad. We eat when we're tired and want a quick lift. The reasons we eat are myriad, and all these reasons obscure the central truth about food: we eat so that we may be fed. Food strengthens our bodies and sustains our life. Without food, we perish.

Because our primal reason for eating has become so occluded, it can be hard for us who have never experienced food insecurity, us who live in a world of maximized food choices and two dozen varieties of peanut butter, to remember that food is life. When we remember this, Scripture begins to break open and feed us anew. When we remember food is life, we gain a better understanding of what it means to ask God to give us our daily bread. When we remember food is life, we see manna from heaven as God giving life to God's people even in times of extremity. When we remember food is life, we see the feeding of the five thousand as a foretaste of the Kingdom of God. But most importantly, when we remember that food is life, we discover what it means when Jesus says, "I am the Bread of Life." Jesus is the food that will feed us. Jesus isn't entertainment or boredom or stress eating. Jesus is life.

As humans, we aren't just bodies who can live on bread alone. Nor are we merely souls, able to subsist on the food of angels. We need more. Jesus, who is God and person, offered himself to feed our souls and body, which is to say, our whole, undivided self. Only Jesus, fully God, fully human, can satisfy our existential hunger. And so at God's gracious invitation, we come to the table to eat the bread of life, and be fed.

Questions for Meditation

The SSJE Rule describes how a balance of feasting and fasting teaches us “to savor and appreciate what we eat and drink, in thankfulness to the Creator who gives them.” Are you in a season of feast or fast? Give thanks for food.

We eat for many reasons, both physical and emotional. Listen to your internal cues as you prepare food, as you eat it, and as you conclude eating.

Holy Communion serves not only as a memorial of our redemption, but also a chance to be united with Jesus, as we “feed on him in your hearts by faith with thanksgiving.” Being fed by Jesus, how might you feed others?

As Jesus said in his wilderness fast, “one does not live on bread alone.” We must feed our souls as well as our bodies. For what do you hunger?

ON FOOD

FROM A CONVERSATION WITH BR. JIM WOODRUM, SSJE

The Christian tradition speaks of icons as “windows into heaven.” For me, the Eucharist is an icon, a window into God. In the Eucharist Jesus is present to us in a mysterious way that we cannot describe or even fully comprehend. As we take into ourselves his body and blood, we receive him and are made one with him. We are encouraged to “feed on him in (our) hearts by faith with thanksgiving.”

I remember walking into an Episcopal church and participating in the Eucharist for the very first time, without any previous experience or frame of reference. It was such a powerful experience for me; it reminded me of the travelers to Emmaus who recognized Christ as he blessed and broke bread with them. I felt like my heart was “burning” within me. I don’t think I even knew the Emmaus story back then, but it illuminates so much for me now. When that bread is broken, Jesus becomes present to us. Heaven and earth come together, and we partake in that. It’s also why being in the presence of Christ in the Reserved Sacrament is so powerful for me. It is the presence of Jesus, with us here and now.

All of us want and need relationships; we hunger and thirst for meaningful connections with others. And yet, even with all our ways of communicating with each other, we often miss out on real connections. We see images on a screen and take in soundbites, but we’re not connecting with flesh and blood. Many people are hungry for that actual physical contact with others, real connections that allow us to give and receive wholeheartedly.

In the Eucharist, we come together, each with our individual needs and with our unique, personal relationship to God. No two of us are exactly alike. The Eucharist transcends those individual differences. We stand or kneel around the altar, extending our hands to receive the bread and the wine; each person receiving the same bread and the same wine as all the others. And yet in the Eucharist Christ also comes to each one of us, touches each of us, feeds and satisfies each of us, as we have need. Each of us will have our own experience, our own way of encountering Christ in these holy gifts, even as we are also joined as one in this sacrament. We become aware of ourselves as individual shards of differently colored glass that somehow fit together into a much larger picture of God. We learn to recognize God in each individual shard; each person known, accepted, and loved as part of the larger Body, which is the Church.

Encountering Christ in the Eucharist changes us. The founder of our community, Father Benson, taught that each Eucharist was like a brush stroke which added just a bit more to the likeness of Christ that was taking shape in us. Each time we receive him, we become more and more like him.



SHELTER

THE REV. BECKY ZARTMAN

Isaiah 25: 1-10

There are two distinct definitions of sanctuary. The first definition, and the original meaning, comes from Latin *sanctuarium*. An -arium is a container for something; *sanctus* means holy. Sanctuary simply means a place for the holy.

The second definition of sanctuary is a place that is safe. This definition only arose in the 1560s, and was a reflection of a legal practice. From the fourth to the seventeenth centuries in England, fugitives could find immunity within the sanctuary of a church. As long as the fugitive remained within the church, the fugitive remained beyond the reach of the law. Because of this legal practice, the word sanctuary began to mean any place of safety. Today we speak of bird or wildlife sanctuaries, places where wildlife is safe from human predation and destruction.

The idea of the place of holiness being the place of safety would seem strange to our biblical brothers and sisters. Moses would not call the God who manifests as thunder and lightning and flame on Mount Sinai safe. Job would not call the God who answers with anger out of the whirlwind safe. Isaiah would not call the God whose hem alone filled the throne room safe. Anyone who has encountered the extreme fierceness and otherness of our spiritual cousins, the angels, would not call holiness safe, because holiness is not safe. God is not safe, and to pretend otherwise is to domesticate the Creator of the Universe. We do not sign up for safety when we sign onto the grand project of the Kingdom of God.

And yet. Our sanctuaries, our places for the holy, are surely places of shelter and safety amid the wandering that is our life. We find our way to church in times of great change: when there is a birth, when a new family starts, when we profess our vocation, when we lose the people we love. So too we find our way to church in times of no change at all; that gentle humming of life as the world turns monotonously day by day, nothing much changing, everything seeming the same, when we wonder whether or not we've set out on the right path. We long for shelter from change, whether too much, or too little. But if we know where to look, we will find the shelter we need.

The companionship of fellow travelers on the journey shelters us, for when we can no longer find the words or the strength to pray, our companions hold us up and pray for us. When we lose our way in the thicket of life, our companions help us find our way forward. When we forget who we truly are, our companions remind us.

The liturgy itself shelters us, the same patterns unfolding, again and again, day by day, week by week, year by year. With the familiarity earned by time, scriptures and hymns and prayers become dear friends.

The buildings themselves shelter us, with their constancy and their well-worn kneelers and their pews baptized in tears, with the saints that look down on us in graciousness from their windows, with the resin from the smoke of our prayers, with the altars that have themselves taken on the act of remembrance and thanksgiving and sacrifice. Everything about and everything within these buildings we call churches is there to help us find God again and again.

We need sanctuaries as places of safety and holiness because we need a place to return. Because we are human, we will wander away from God, we always do. Some wander farther than others. But the people and the liturgy and the place – that is to say, the Church – is meant to be out there as an outpost in the wilderness, calling to us like a homing beacon, guiding us back to the presence of God, back to relationship, back to wholeness, back to shelter, back to our home, the sanctuary of God.

Questions for Meditation

The SSJE Rule notes that “God’s boundless welcome is something we already enjoy here and now in the Eucharist.” What parts of the liturgy feel to you like coming home?

Think about the pattern of your day: how you leave home and, especially, how you return. When you arrive home, how do you settle in? What do you set down or let go of?

God always welcomes us back. The Church – its liturgy and people – is an outpost in the wilderness, guiding us back to the presence of God, to relationship and to wholeness. How do you help welcome others to this refuge?

As humans, we need shelter to survive. Once our physical needs are met, we long for a different type of shelter. Where do you feel most at home?

ON SHELTER

FROM A CONVERSATION WITH BR. DAVID VRYHOF, SSJE

The theme of shelter invites us, first of all, to think about places that offer us safety and protection. We want our homes and schools and churches to be places of safety, places of welcome, where people feel that they can be themselves, where they are embraced and loved just as they are, and where they are encouraged to become the persons they are meant to be. We try to create that kind of space here in our monastery: a place where everyone feels welcomed, regardless of their appearance, or their beliefs, or anything else. We want them to know that we believe that they are precious in God’s eyes, that they are created in the image of God, and that they are reflections of God in the world.

But our discussion of shelter goes beyond physical spaces that offer safety and acceptance. We believe with the psalmist that “God is our refuge and our strength.” God is a being in whom we can take refuge, in whom we can find safety, and in whom we discover that we are unconditionally loved. In God we are accepted and loved, just as we are, and given the strength and opportunity to grow into what we can be. Having received this love ourselves, we can then offer it to others: “We love because God first loved us.”

God is our refuge and strength. God is a hiding place. The Scriptures speak of finding protection under the shadow of God’s wings. We all need this from time to time, because life can be difficult, and none of us is exempt from suffering. Life sometimes hurts us, and God says, “I can be that place of refuge for you. I want to welcome you in that way. I want to be a dwelling place where you go to be held and loved, healed and restored to life.” So it’s not only the Church that can be a place of refuge for us, but God, God’s self, can be this refuge.

God also says, “Not only can I be a refuge and a home for you, but I want to dwell in you. I want you to be my home. I want to live within you and make my home in you.” So God promises to dwell in us, to abide in us, just as we can abide in God. In this way, all of us are temples of the Living God. All of us are homes for God because God chooses to dwell in us.

There is, then, a dwelling place within me, a “hermitage within,” to which I can retire whenever I wish. It is a safe place where God is living and active and ready to receive me whenever I need to be there. I can retire to that safe place within myself, no matter what is going on around me. Peace comes from knowing I am safe, and that God is holding me in this very secure inner space.



COMMUNITY

THE REV. BECKY ZARTMAN

Matthew 18:15-22

It's easy to love the idea of a person. It's much harder to love an actual person.

We love the idea of a person all the time. We love someone because we think we understand them, or we love them because they are a mystery. We love them because we think they love us; we love them because of what or who they represent. We love them for who they could be, or who they should be, or who they might be.

But our task is to learn how to love them for who they are.

And this task is no easy thing. In fact, learning to love someone for who they really are may be the hardest thing you will ever do.

So in the Christian tradition, we do the impossible. We stand up, in front of God and a community of people, and make a promise that we are going to love someone for who they are, no matter what. Sometimes we promise to love a particular person, as in a marriage, or a particular group of people, as in a monastic order, or through a particular role, as in ordained ministry. This promise to love is called a vow. When we make a vow, we promise to do the impossible.

Vows are impossible because when we make vows, we have no idea what we're actually promising. We have a vague concept of what our promises mean, or could mean in the future, but we don't actually know. And the scary part is, we can't actually know what it is we're really promising until we start to live out our promises day by day. And it is in the mind-numbingly impossible day after day after day when the warm and gauzy daydream of the person you promised to love disintegrates into cold hard truth. The ideal turns into the real; pleasant fictions become unpleasant facts. And for the first time ever, you find yourself truly understanding why God put "Thou shalt not murder" into the Ten Commandments. Vows are impossible.

Love in community is heartbreaking work. Our hearts will be broken. We will hurt the people we have promised to love, and they will hurt us. Pain is inevitable. We will discover that those whom we promised to love are not who we thought they were, and even worse, we will discover that we are not who we thought we were. Being in loving relationship means that the truth of our very selves will be revealed. When we have chosen to love, no matter what, there is no place for us to hide from ourselves. We learn that not only do we need to love others for who they are, we need to love our selves for who we are. Vows are impossible.

But vows are also a very specific and very special type of language. A vow is something philosophers of language call a "performative utterance." A performative utterance is a speech act that changes the social reality the performative utterance is describing. When we make a vow, we will a new reality into being, we create a small pocket of the Kingdom of God, where love reigns supreme, no matter the cost to self. And if we persevere, what we discover is that by giving away our life, we are saving our life, because loving imbues our life with meaning. And when we make these promises in front of God, when we ask Jesus for help, when we petition the Holy Spirit to be among us, we don't will this new reality into existence all by ourselves. We discover, even as we declare the impossible to be true, that with God, all things are possible. Even love.

Questions for Meditation

The SSJE Rule describes how “in silence we honor the mystery present in the hearts of our brothers and sisters, strangers and enemies. Only God knows them as they truly are.” Do you leave room for the mystery of others? Take note of distance, friction, and closeness.

Life in community requires a commitment to being fully present with others. Consider your interactions: How well do you listen? What distractions interfere?

In the Eucharist, we are invited bring our gifts to the altar, but before we do, we are called to make right with our neighbors during the Peace. Is there someone with whom you need to make right?

God calls us to community for the sake of conversion: our own conversion, the conversion of others, and the transformation of our world. Who is your community, and how are you being transformed?

ON COMMUNITY

FROM A CONVERSATION WITH BR. JONATHAN MAURY, SSJE

Community is so important because it reflects the nature of God. Often, the image of God we inherit from the popular culture is of an old man seated on a throne, benevolent at times and angry at other times. But the Church expresses this mystery of God as a community of persons – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – who “are One in reciprocal self-giving and love.” We bear the image of this triune God. Because of this, as the SSJE Rule expresses it, “all of us are called by God to belong to communities of personal cooperation and interdependence which strive to nurture and use the gifts of each and to see that our basic needs are met.”

That’s the way we visualize our monastic community. We are called to be a community of love, whose life together can be likened to a circle dance in which each one defers to and accepts the others with gentleness and a spirit of self-offering. This is the love we see in God, expressed most completely in Jesus on the cross: God choosing to die rather than to live without us, and through this self-sacrificial act, drawing us into union with Godself, and with one another.

Community is God’s way of acting in us and through us. God draws us into community for our own well-being, because in community our rough edges begin to rub up against those of others, and we are gradually transformed. Community is the place where we come to understand more deeply our need for God – how much we need God and others – to become the persons that God dreamed us to be in the first place. We can’t do that alone; it’s always with others. And it comes through the friction, and the intimacy, that we experience in community.

I had a college chaplain who was fond of saying that there are no “solo” Christians – and he was absolutely right! As time went on, I realized how necessary a community of intention such as the one I belong to now was to my ongoing conversion and growth. I think I’ve only really discovered why God called me to this community since I became a member. I felt drawn to community life, but I also had a lot of resistance and fear which had to be overcome.

In community, there is a sense of submission, a willingness to let go of the dreams and plans I have for myself in order to realize a greater good; but there is also a sense of discovery, as I continue to explore my gifts and gradually become more and more the loving person I was created to be. Community is a place where I am known and accepted, and where I come to know and accept others. Together we grow.



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