

When I was on vacation earlier this month, one of my friends asked me who was covering for me on Sunday. I said, "Oh no! I knew I was forgetting something!" And she didn't think my feigned horror was as funny as I did. Which is ironic, because many years earlier, I was on my way to a different vacation, and I joked to my friend, "Wouldn't it be funny if I forgot the key to the cabin," and when that turned out to be a prophetic prologue to our misadventure, neither of us thought it was funny at all. But I can laugh about it now, because while I learned the hard way, I did learn the importance of staying focused on essential things when you're facing many distractions, like you always are when you're preparing for a trip.

On their trip to Jerusalem, Jesus saw the disciples beginning to get distracted, and he intervened with language they couldn't ignore or minimize because staying focused on essentials is just that important. When John, who seems so closely attuned to Jesus elsewhere in the New Testament, alerts Jesus that he and other disciples tried to stop a man casting out demons, he makes a very subtle error. Tellingly, he says they did so "because he was not following *us*."

While the Twelve Disciples are a well-known and well-defined group, they were not the only people following Jesus during his public ministry. Some of them might not even have considered themselves followers of Jesus, but the good fruits they bear reveal who they are at heart. John appears to be confusing affiliation with a specific group with following Jesus. What's important was not following the Twelve. They were only important because of their relationship with Jesus. He didn't want them to learn the hard way that following him is most important.

And while the Twelve learned the lesson, and dispersed to make as many disciples of Jesus as they could, the temptation to put our possessions, social standing, and group affiliations ahead of our relationship with Christ and his church has never been stronger. So many people put their political party affiliation ahead of their identity as a Christian, for example. And most people would deny that while they're sitting in church, but there sure seem to be a lot of people who call themselves Christians, but are much more eager to identify themselves by their political party, and determine the party of the person they're meeting, than they are to identify themselves as Christians and learn about the other person's spiritual journey. You know the tree by its fruits.

So if we are susceptible to the same distractions that the disciples faced, then Jesus's teaching matters to us, too. Jesus was famous for teaching in parables, some of which were quite entertaining, but today Jesus is using a different rhetorical device: hyperbole. He uses graphic images that are so over-the-top that we might laugh, if he weren't phrasing them as happening to us.

Or rather, he's saying that what he wants us to avoid is even worse than those images. And while elsewhere Jesus speaks against particular sins, here he's going to the limits of verbal communication to keep us focused on the most important thing: relationships. Right relationships. Holy relationships. Relationships with him and with

our fellow followers of him. While right relationships with Christ and his Church offer love, mercy, and grace, the world and human nature try to distract us and lead us astray with the shiny but flimsy substitutes of purity, partisanship, and tribalism.

This is so important because getting our relationships right makes the rest of our lives happier, holier, and more secure. Holy relationships make it less likely that we'll sin in the first place, and when we inevitably do miss the mark, these relationships make us likely to miss by less, and to repent and make amends swiftly and earnestly. Getting our relationships and our priorities right helps us live in peace.

Since peace is a gift from God, and Christ is the prince of peace, union with him will bring peace. It's true that conflict, sometimes painful and destructive conflict, can happen in Christian communities, but such conflict is always a consequence of losing faithfulness and focus, substituting human notions of purity, partisanship, and tribalism for God's gifts of love, mercy, and grace.

If anything, staying focused on the essentials is even more important in the more ordinary parts of our lives: they simply take up a far greater portion of our lives than our vacations do, and they are where we develop the habits and routines that define our experience and our identities, and that have consequences for other people. Giving in to the temptation to distraction can feel good for a moment, if we even notice, but sets us up to fail at what's most important, sets us on the road to unnecessary and devastating alienation and conflict. Habits that divide us from our neighbors or simply isolate us inevitably lead us to stumble, for they defy God's good plans for us, and the love with which God made us. And they aren't even enjoyable.

A new acquisition of property or social status might make us feel secure, until we grow anxious about how it could be damaged or lost, and we feel less secure than before. We might feel a momentary rush when our prejudices are reinforced, when we feel like "our side" is "winning" or the "other side" has been embarrassed (in our eyes, at least), but after the rush fades, we find ourselves unsatisfied, and anxious for the next rush. These bad habits aren't an identity, they're an addiction.

Jesus is leading us to a better way, a way of life that doesn't just promise eternal rewards, but is rewarding in itself, right now. By getting, and staying, in holy relationship with Jesus and each other, we find true peace in this life, peace which we might not expect or understand because it comes from beyond the world we know, peace that we need to be able to thrive as we were created to thrive. In God's peace, greed feels silly, for we have lost our fear of loss, and instead, we recognize the abundance God gives us and take true delight in generosity. In God's peace, polarization feels silly, because we recognize Christ in the other, and in ourselves, and rejoice that we share in his resurrection, which overcomes even the ultimate separation.

Today and for the next two Sundays, we'll be focused on a stewardship theme of "Renewing gratitude, celebrating resurrection." We'll be hearing from people whose lives have been transformed by God right here at Advent. We'll be reminded of how

richly God has blessed us, even in a challenging time of pandemic, and how essential our church is, both to ourselves and to those who are different from us. These stories will help us discern how God is calling all of us to support the mission and ministry of the church by pledging our financial support to Advent. Then on October 17, we'll celebrate our commitment to God's work in this place. Those who are physically present will return our pledge cards, we'll ask those who aren't to send them in, and I'll ask God's blessing on the generosity of all our members.

I've heard of churches developing slick, dazzling giving campaigns with professional designers and consultants, but I believe that simply hearing our friends' stories will do more to remind and focus us on how God's love operates in and through our parish. With God's help, we will avoid distractions and thrive in a holy focus on what is essential. With God's love, we will rejoice in all that God is doing for us, and through us. With God's surpassing grace, we will discover that no matter how distracted we might have been, we never lost the key to a good life, for the relationships that sustain and fulfill us are ever new in this holy place. Thanks be to God.