



Ministry Sunday 2018
Faith & Fellowship



A Sermon By
The Rev. Andrew W. Walter

September 9, 2018
The Sixteenth Sunday After Pentecost
Grace Episcopal Church
Silver Spring, Maryland

An audio version of this sermon may be found on the Grace Church website at
<http://graceepiscopalchurch.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/2018-09-09-AWW.mp3>.

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Yet he could not escape notice.
Mark 7:24

Like many of you, I did a lot of reading over the summer. I read at home, by the pool, under the umbrella at the beach, and I can't remember the last time I read so many different and wonderful books. There were church books, of course, and some really good fiction, not to mention a biography of the actor, John Wayne, whose westerns I used to love, as a kid.

Of all the books I read, though, the best one was probably: *Fifty Inventions that Shaped the Modern Economy*. It was a Malcolm Gladwell type book, interesting and informative, opening my eyes to the ideas and products that shaped the world in which we live.

As you might expect, some inventions identified in the book were pretty obvious, like computers, the internet, and cell phones, but others were very far from obvious, or at least they were for me, things like batteries and air-conditioning, elevators, plastic, even the Billy Bookcase from Ikea.

Making my way through the book, I was reminded that some of the most important things in our life, things that really affect us and touch us, often escape our notice. Even though they're right there in front of us, part of our life each and every day, we hardly notice them or pay attention to them. And, it's not just items like batteries and elevators, but other things, really important things, things that truly matter, like our own bed; a hot shower; dogs, cats, music; a starlit sky; each other; God.

God is always present and nearby, living, breathing, and moving through our lives, and yet, we don't always recognize it or acknowledge it. Some of the time, it's because we ignore God, not wanting to listen to what God has to say, or what God is calling us to do, and at other times, it's because we take God for granted. God has done so much for us, has given us so much, but, we don't always give back to God. We don't focus on God and pay attention to God. We don't always give God the time God deserves. God wants nothing more than to have a relationship with us, to be a part of our lives, to know us and have us know God, but God often escapes our notice.

It wasn't always like this. Back, when Jesus was alive, people couldn't help but pay attention to God, because God seemed so real and so present in Jesus.

Jesus began his ministry by proclaiming the Good News of God and saying, "The Kingdom of God has come near." And, everything Jesus did bore truth to that statement, his preaching, his teaching. Jesus could heal a woman's daughter with just a few words. He could restore a deaf man's hearing with the touch of his hand. In Jesus, the kingdom of God had come near, and because of that, people flocked to see him and hear him. Even when Jesus tried to get away, to escape the crowds for a little "alone time," it just never seemed to work. Wherever Jesus was, people always found him. It didn't matter how well he tried to hide, Jesus simply could not escape notice.

These days, life is much different. While many of us have experienced Christ's presence and power in our lives, just as those people in the Bible did, we struggle to find Jesus and connect with Jesus. It's not that we don't want to, because we do. That's why we're all here this morning – to connect with God. But still, it's hard to find the time. We have so many other things going on, other tasks, other priorities, other

things demanding our attention, all of which take time, and energy, and focus. When we do have a few minutes, when we finally have a break from everything swirling around us, all we want to do is sit back and catch our breath, maybe read a book under the umbrella at the beach. So, we don't always take notice of God, like we should or we could. We don't get to know or let God know us. We don't mean for it to be that way, don't even want it to be that way, but it happens. I just happens, to all of us.

I remember a September Sunday many years ago. It was Homecoming Sunday at our church, and my wife, Susan, and I wanted to take our three boys, all of whom were pretty little at the time.

As we walked up toward the church, our Rector was standing out front. The boys loved our Rector, and when they saw him, they went running up: "Rev. Elsberry! Rev. Elsberry!"

The Rector greeted our boys and asked what they did all summer. "We went to camp and played by the pool. What did you do Rev. Elsberry?"

"I was here all summer," he replied.

You could see this puzzled look on the boys' faces, like they didn't know what to make that, and after taking only a second or two to process it, our eldest son, Thomas, said: "But, Rev. Elsberry, Mom told us church was closed during the summer."

We come to church, of course, to be part of a faith community. Ever since Jesus called his first disciples, the Christian faith has been based in community, in relationships with other people. All of us together the body of Christ, the ones who should be carrying out Jesus' work and ministry, bearing witness to God's love in the world, and therefore, it is with each other and through each other that we ought to glimpse the kingdom of God. In other words, by getting to know one another, our hopes, our dreams, our struggles, our pain, and how our faith helps us navigate through all that, we get to know God.

Unfortunately, getting to know one another can be a challenge, even in a church community.

If you're new to church, just walking into worship can be daunting and produce anxiety. You don't know where to go or what to do. What if no one says hello, or even speaks to you? What if you sit in someone else's pew?

On the other hand, for those of us who have been around for a while, it's hard to know if someone else is new, or if they've been around a long time, and so there is that whole awkwardness around introductions: "Hi, I'm Andrew, are you new to the church?"

"Actually, no, I've been a member here my whole life."

What do you say that? It's easier not to say anything.

Here at Grace Church, we want to help everyone get to know God and get to know one another. We believe that's what church is all about. After all, our *Vision for the Future* is to be that "city on a hill" where people of all races and cultures can come to build their relationships with God and others. And, therefore, our theme for the coming program year is ***Faith & Fellowship***.

Our hope for the next nine months is that all of us will grow in our faith and deepen our friendships, and we will be providing many different ways to make that happen.

If you would all open your worship bulletin to page 14, you can get a sense of what I'm talking about:

- Beginning today, we'll be having a fellowship event, at least once a month. There's food and fellowship today. In October, we have a luncheon and town hall meeting planned, as well as the annual Harvest Dinner, which you'll be hearing more about over the next few weeks.
- Then, on the second Sunday of every month, my wife and I host a Supper downstairs in the undercroft, hence the name Second Sunday Suppers. Those take place immediately following the afternoon worship service, and you don't have to bring anything. We provide it all. All you have to do is show up.
- Finally, we also have a new offering this year that we're calling Dinner Groups. These will be informal gatherings in the homes of parishioners for nothing more than food, fun and social time. There will be more information and sign-ups downstairs after church, so please check that out.

All of these are great opportunities for us to get to know one another better.

As for getting to know God:

- We have our weekly worship services on Sunday mornings and Sunday afternoons. Don't forget: if you can't make it to church in the morning, we have a service at 5:30 pm, as well.
- There are also Adult Forums, which are held on Sunday mornings between the two services and explore a different topic of life and faith each week.
- And, we will be having several small study groups this year that will delve deeper into issues of faith and spirituality through book discussions and presentations.

Imagine how your relationship with God might grow this year, if you committed to attending worship on a regular basis, or coming to Adult Forum, or participating in one small study group for a few weeks, just one small group sometime this year.

Imagine the new friends you might meet, or the old friends you might get to know better, if you join us for brunch once a month, or you come to the Second Sunday Suppers, or you sign-up to be part for a Dinner Group.

Who knows how your life might be changed... In one year, your life could change.

And, it's time to take notice.

Amen.