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# Life's Most Persistent and Urgent Question

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A Sermon By  
The Rev. Andrew W. Walter

January 27, 2019  
The Third Sunday after the Epiphany &  
Annual Meeting Sunday  
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/2019/01/2019-01-27-AWW.mp3>

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The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. whose life and legacy we celebrated last weekend, once said, "Life's most persistent and urgent question is, what are you doing for others?"

It was August 11, 1957, and Dr. King was preaching from his pulpit at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama. He was twenty-eight years old at the time. He had already led the Montgomery Bus Boycott and, as President of the recently formed Southern Christian Leadership Conference, given his first national address at the Prayer Pilgrimage for Freedom here in Washington, DC.

But, on that hot, August Sunday, Dr. King was preaching to his home congregation, giving a sermon that was the fourth and final in a series entitled "The Problems of Personality Integration." Drawing upon the recent work of Harry Emerson Fosdick, a well-known preacher, pastor, and author, King preached on the Gospel of Matthew, chapter ten, verse thirty-nine, telling his congregation that the meaning of life could be found in the giving of oneself to serve the needs and welfare of others.

"An individual has not started living fully," King said, "until they can rise above the narrow confines of individualistic concerns to the broader concerns of humanity... Every person must decide at some point, whether they will walk in the light of creative altruism or in the darkness of destructive selfishness. This is the judgment. Life's most persistent and urgent question is, 'What are you doing for others?'"

That persistent and urgent question also lies at the heart of our Christian faith, because our relationship with God is intimately connected to our relationship with our fellow human beings. If we love God, with all of our heart, and mind, and soul, then we are compelled to love each other, with all of our heart, and mind, and soul. We must care for the health and well being of other people, living out our baptismal covenant to strive for justice and peace among all people, respecting the dignity of every human being. And, if we love other people, not just in words, because words are not enough, but in actions of compassion and service, then we are actually loving God. By caring for other people, we show God how much we love God.

We see this intimate connection articulated throughout the Bible, in the stories of the Old Testament and the New Testament, but particularly in the life and ministry of Jesus.

Jesus began his work when he was about thirty years old. He was baptized in the Jordan River, and afterwards, travelled around the region of Galilee, teaching and preaching, casting out demons and healing the sick. Reports about Jesus spread throughout the countryside. People couldn't stop talking about this new miracle worker and prophet, everything he said and everything he did. Word even got back to his hometown of Nazareth, and so when he walked into town one day, all the people were excited to see him. Here was the local boy made good, the big celebrity returning home.

On the Sabbath, Jesus went to the synagogue as was his custom, and with everyone in town present, Jesus stood up to read. There were no assigned readings for the day, because this wasn't the Episcopal Church, but when someone handed him the scroll of the prophet Isaiah, Jesus found the place where it says:

*"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,  
because he has anointed me  
to bring good news to the poor.  
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives  
and recovery of sight to the blind,  
to let the oppressed go free,  
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."*

And, when he sat down, all of the eyes in the synagogue were fixed upon him. “Today,” Jesus said, “this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”

It was a powerful and emotional moment. Using the words of Isaiah, Jesus was telling his family and friends: this is who I am and this is what I’m all about. He was offering a glimpse of what his life would be and his ministry would be. Jesus was going to care for those who had no one else to care for them. He was going to give voice to those who didn’t have a voice. He was going to include those who were usually excluded. Jesus was the embodiment of God’s love, and he wanted people to know that God’s love was for everyone, not matter who you were or where you were from, but God’s love was especially for the poor and the blind, the captive and oppressed.

Jesus was answering that most persistent and urgent question for the people that he loved, the people who had known him all his life, the people who has raised him and nurtured him. Jesus would share God’s love with the world. That’s what he was doing for others.

As the body of Christ in this world, the church is supposed to be continuing Jesus’ work and ministry. We are Jesus’ hands and feet, and we should be sharing God’s love with the world, just as Jesus did. Every local church community will share that love in different ways, based their community and people, their passions and their gifts, but every congregation should be able to articulate who they are and what they’re all about. Every congregation should be able to offer a sense of their mission and vision. Every congregation should be able to answer that persistent and urgent question: what are you doing for others?

Since this is our Annual Meeting Sunday, a day on which we pause and take stock, I would like to share just a few of the ways we answer that question.

First, Grace Church has a long history of caring for the hungry and homeless in our community. On the first Sunday of every month, we collect canned goods here at church, which we then share with the food pantry in downtown Silver Spring, making free food available to those who need it. Once a month, Grace parishioners serve dinner to the homeless at Shepherd’s Table, which is located behind the fire station down on Georgia Avenue. And, we have a long partnership with Samaritan Ministries of Greater Washington, an organization that seeks to help the homeless one step at a time, by finding housing, training, education, and employment.

Grace also has a long history of helping refugees. Back in the early to mid-1970’s, a group of Grace parishioners came together to help a refugee family from Vietnam come to the United States, and as most of you know, we have done that again, recently sponsoring an family of seven from Afghanistan. The church has rented an apartment for the family here in Silver Spring. We furnished it and stocked it with food. And, parishioners are helping the family in so many ways, from finding clothing and getting to doctors’ appointment, to enrolling in school and looking for a job.

But, we don’t just help people outside the parish. At Grace, we also care for each other, as well, for those right here in this room. If you would, turn to page ten in your bulletin. As you’ll see, this is our prayer list. These are people in need of prayer, and each and every day the clergy and our Daughters of the King pray for these people. For those on this list who are homebound and can’t make it to church, we take church to them. We have parishioners who take communion to other parishioners almost every Sunday, and we’ll also send people flowers – after services on Sunday morning, we take those flowers from the altar, our altar guild divides them into four arrangements, and our ushers deliver them.

Whenever anyone in our Grace Church family is hurting or in need, we want to be there for them, because Jesus would be there for them, so please, please, if you ever need anything, let us know. The clergy are here for you.

That’s just a few of the ways we care for people. To get a full picture of what we do, I invite you to read our Annual Report, which is available today.

Life’s most persistent and urgent question is, what are you doing for others?

At Grace, the answer is: a lot. What is your answer?

Amen.