



Three Steps



A Sermon By
The Rev. Andrew W. Walter

May 19, 2019
The Fifth Sunday of Easter

Grace Episcopal Church
Silver Spring, Maryland

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John 13:31-35

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Earlier this month, we hosted a meeting of all the Episcopal churches in southern Montgomery County. The meeting was part of the Diocese of Washington's strategic planning process, and the churches in our region came together to talk about what was happening in our communities.

After dinner, an opening prayer, and introductions, the main part of the evening was spent discussing four important questions:

First, what's healthy at your church? What's going well? What are its strengths and positive results?

Second, what's stuck? What, at your church, is losing momentum, or is broken? What needs renewal and revitalization?

Third, what's unclear? What in your church is confusing, or lacking direction?

And, finally, what's missing? What does your church need, or need to do? Is it more people, more money, maybe, new idea, or a new ministry?

It was fascinating to hear what people had to say. We all came from these different churches; and so, there were different perspectives, different struggles, different successes; but, we also had a lot in common, particularly a sense that we were all in this together, as part of the same diocese, and therefore, we had a shared mission and purpose.

The moment that really struck me, though, came as we were discussing the third question, "What's unclear?" We went around the table, with everyone sharing thoughts about their parish, and after a while, we ran out of things to say. We sat there in silence for a bit, everyone lost in their own thoughts, until the man to my left said, "What does it mean to be a Christian?"

I was the facilitator at our table and his words caught me off guard. "What was that?" I asked.

"We're talking about what's unclear, what's confusing," the man said. "Well, what does it mean to be a Christian these days? With everything that's going on in the world, the tension, animosity, polarization, it's really hard to know. So, what does it mean to be a Christian?"

The man's question has been haunting me ever since, and over the last few weeks, it occurred to me: if one person is wondering what it means to be a Christian, others are probably wondering, as well, including some of you, so today, I want to try and offer some kind of answer, and in order to do so, I want to begin with today's Gospel story.

For Jesus and the disciples, it was the evening of the Last Supper. All of them were together celebrating Passover, one of the most important holidays of the year, and on the surface, their life together was going well. They had been together as a group for about three years, and in that time, changed the lives of countless people. Yes, there had been tension and arguments with the Jewish authorities, but in the big picture, that was nothing compared to all the men and women who experienced God's love through their work and ministry. So, as Jesus and the disciples sat down for the Passover meal, they had a lot for which they could rejoice and give thanks.

But, Jesus knew it was all coming to an end. He knew Judas would betray him. Jesus knew he would be arrested. He knew he was going to die. And, Jesus wanted to prepare the disciples for life after he was gone. It was imperative the disciples continue Jesus' work and ministry. They had to continue sharing God's love with as many people as possible. They had to do the preaching. They had to do the teaching. Without Jesus, it would all be up to the disciples. So, after Jesus confronted Judas and Judas ran out into the night, Jesus gave the disciples his last instructions: "I give you a new commandment," Jesus said, "that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

And, that's exactly what the disciples did.

In the first few decades after Jesus' death, the disciples, and the other early Christians, lived in a way that was completely different from everyone else around them. They devoted themselves to Jesus' teaching, to fellowship, to breaking bread together and praying together. They held everything in common, selling their possessions and other goods to distribute throughout the community, as any had need. They cared for the young and the old, the poor and the sick. They treated women with dignity and respect. And, the early Christians resisted violence, strength and power, at a time when these were cardinal virtues. In other words, the disciples led a social revolution, challenging the cultural expectations and norms of the time, by seeing the world through the eyes of a loving God who sought only healing and justice and wholeness, and then, they lived their lives as God wanted them to live, seeing every human being as a child of God, and working towards that healing, justice and wholeness for everyone, not just for themselves, but everyone.

To be a Christian in the world today is to follow the example of those early Christians. It's about living differently from everyone around us. To be a Christian is to see the whole world through the eyes of God, to respect the dignity of every human being, to strive for justice and peace among all people. It's acting out of compassion. It's seeking understanding. It's being kind and showing mercy. To be a Christian is to love your neighbor as yourself.

Now, I know that all sounds well and good. If we could all just act that way everything would be fine, but unfortunately, we don't. We don't all act that way, and so, if you're like me, you want something a little more concrete, something tangible, some actual steps on how to do what I just described, some actual steps on living a Christian life.

So, I have three for you. Three steps:

1. Come to church. Pray. Spend some time in community. Spend some time with God. In this day and age, it's completely counter-cultural, but it's the best way to bring God into your life, to say God matters to me, God is important to me, and my life is better because God is apart of it.
2. Do something for someone else. Give of yourself in service to someone else. This could mean offering someone a ride to church, calling someone when their sick, helping someone at work, in your neighborhood, in your nursing home. Or, it could be listening to someone with a different point of view, walking in someone else's shoes, trying to see things from their perspective, but it's about opening yourself up to someone else, maybe even someone you don't like that much.
3. Find a cause. Pick an issue, one that you care about deeply, one where you think: that's wrong, that's not right, that's not fair. And then, get involved, do something about it, don't just sit on the sidelines but get in the game, make your voice heard, stand up and be counted. We have a lot of systemic problems in this world, problems that affect the poor, the hungry, children, senior citizens, the LBGTQ community, people of color, people of different faiths... There are a lot of issues out there, and if there is one that gets you fired up, it's God pushing you in that direction, so do something about it.

There you go. That's it. Three steps on living a Christian life: Come to church and pray, do something for someone else, and commit yourself to a cause you care about deeply.

They may not cover everything it means to be a Christian. Being a Christian may involve more than just those three steps, but if you do those three things, you're doing pretty well.

Amen.