

January 28, 2018
The Second Sunday after the Epiphany, Annual Meeting
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St. Thomas's Episcopal Church, New Haven, CT

1 Samuel 3:1-10
Psalm 139
1 Corinthians 6:12-20
John 1:43-51

Every year, about this time of year, a moment arrives carrying this realization: I miss the sunlight. As it invariably happens, I forget all about this phenomenon during the course of the year. Around the winter solstice I even congratulate myself about how well I'm managing the lack of light *this* winter. But then, one day in January, I experience a sort of reverse epiphany: instead of being struck by the light, I am struck by how much I crave it.

You would think that I would have learned to anticipate this. After all, I lived in Seattle, that most light-starved of cities: imagine day after day, week after week, month after month, of charcoal skies and inky pavement. My last few Februarys there, I visited a tanning salon once a week. That full-body immersion allowed me to bank enough rays to survive the cruelest month, March. It was better in Vermont, mainly because dry snow is more reflective than wet asphalt. Still, it was there that I learned the energizing magic of a morning dose of full-spectrum-lamp light.

Here in Connecticut, I manage pretty well without artificial interventions. But I still have that annual light-craving epiphany. This year, it happened about ten days ago. Since then, I've started hearing light-craving comments from others. Apparently, I'm not the only sufferer.

As of last night, we Northern Hemispherians have made it through the darkest 75 days of the winter. February and March still lie in wait. Spring won't *really* spring until April or May. It seems to me that we have a couple of options: we can count the days, or we can locate a source of light.

Today is one of several Sundays in a row that we're hearing from Paul's first letter to the Jesus-followers in Corinth. Paul founded that community of gentile converts and then moved on to found communities in Ephesus and beyond. Paul, perhaps back in Ephesus, receives a letter from the believers in Corinth. There are matters of conflict among them, and they seek his guidance.

Here's the gist of the issue we learned about today: In the mainstream Corinthian context, religious practices include the sacrifice of animals to the Roman gods. The meat is then sold on the open market. Should the Jesus-followers eat it?

We live in such a different culture that it's hard for us to slow down long enough to hear the question as seriously as it was voiced. But imagine how difficult long-distance written communication was in those days. We talk about email versus snail-mail; back then it would have been glacial-mail. This food question was important enough to justify at least two glacial-mail letters. And we're still reading one of them.

The gist of Paul's reply is this: Idols are ... *idols*—they're meaningless icons—so the meat is just meat, and one can eat it or not. *But*, every follower in Corinth has a fairly new relationship with the true one God and one Lord. Those are the relationships that Paul is *really* concerned about. Not all the new believers really get the meat nuance. Some can eat meat with no problem—to themselves. But the example of their consumption might be problematic for others. And if that's a risk, it's a risk Paul won't take.

In Paul's time, food consumption had spiritual implications, and Paul was concerned about spiritual harm. Food sacrificed to idols is of no concern to us today. But we have finally become conscious of other concerns about food—from the land it grows on through its arrival on our table. It seems that, even today, food consumption has spiritual implications, even if those implications are different.

Paul seems to be saying that every Corinthian Jesus-follower bears some responsibility for the spiritual health of every other Corinthian Jesus-follower. If so, maybe Paul is also saying that every St. Thomas-ian Jesus-follower bears some responsibility for the spiritual health of every other St. Thomas-ian Jesus-follower. And maybe, just maybe, our responsibility extends even farther than that.

For us, the point is about *food*, and about so much *more*. Our patterns of consumption—our patterns of life—can cause spiritual harm—to ourselves and to others. When that happens, in the end, the entire community is harmed.

On Thursday morning, I went to hear Ruby Sales speak at the Unitarian Universalist sanctuary in Hamden. Her presence was part of the Deeper Change Forum hosted by local nonprofit CEIO, which stands for Co-Creating Effective & Inclusive Organizations. She is most known because of an incident that took place in her home state of Alabama back in 1965. If you don't know about it, I urge you to read the details. Here's a brief summary: Ruby Sales was then a 17-year-old black civil rights worker. Under threat by a white man wielding a shotgun, she was pushed away—by 26-year-old white Episcopal seminarian Jonathan Daniels from New Hampshire. He took the blast and died instantly.

As an activist, Sister Ruby, as the CEIO leaders called her, has made good use of the 52 years and running that Jonathan bought her. On Thursday morning she covered a lot, so much that I'm still processing it. I want to try to follow one thread of her thought, beginning with the parallels she drew between the verbal abuse thrown by whites, at black children in the 1960s, and at immigrant Latino and Middle Eastern children very recently. She called the imperative to stand with *all* children of color around the world “the spiritual calling of the 21st century.” And she offered that it's not just for them, but for everyone, because our society is “spiritual malformed.”

She went on to speak of white supremacy, and the danger to white people of what she called “soul death.” The spoke of “the empire” which I understand as what many theologians call the “powers and principalities.” As she put it, “The empire that has told us we are nothing, when in fact it’s the other way around—they are nothing without us.” She called *this* point in time an important moment, “to get out of not only economic poverty but also spiritual poverty.” She called for a return to Dr. King’s dream of building the beloved community.¹

This takes us back to Paul. Yes, I believe that our patterns of consumption—our patterns of life—can cause spiritual harm—to ourselves and to others. And when that happens, in the end, the entire community is harmed. But let’s turn that around: our patterns of consumption—our patterns of life—can bring spiritual *healing*—for ourselves and for others. When *that* happens, in the end, the entire community is *healed*.

Today is Parish Annual Meeting Sunday. Episcopal Church canons—that is, the rules for church governance—require congregations to hold a business meeting every January. *Your* business task today is to vote on the slate of nominees for parish leadership—officers, Vestry members, and delegates to diocesan convention. In addition, the Wardens will speak briefly and the Treasurer will give a financial report. Please read the written reports from other parish leaders, because we’re using the time saved from oral reports for other activities.

On Annual Meeting Sunday, the sermon is often a sort of “state-of-the-parish” address. Therefore I was tempted to catalogue the many ways that St. Thomas’s has grown as a Christian community over the last two years. But you can probably see that first-hand, so I’ll move on to something else.

Two Sundays ago, you heard me say that Jesus is still staffing up, with us individually, and with us as a community. Last Sunday, you heard Sara remind us that Jesus gave his original staffers three years to get up to speed before he asked them to take over.

Whether you’ve been here three months, or three years, or thirty years, you *are* here, at this place, at this time. Though I can’t describe the exact mechanism, Jesus has pointed to your astonished face, God has whispered into *your* doubting ear. This parish will never be exactly the same as it is today. The world around us will never be exactly the same as it is today. The triune God of loving relationship has lured us, *here, now*. Jesus is holding up the light and offering it to us. It’s a mystery, a miracle really. It’s a stupendous gift.

On Friday morning, after I was up and showered, the dogs, as usual, started agitating to go outside. I put them off, because it was still full night. For one thing, I prefer not to walk them in the dark. More importantly, I wanted to sit with the sunrise, something I seldom take the time to do. I thought to myself, *Enjoy it now, because pretty soon the sun will be up before you are.*

I am fortunate to have been able to be a bit of a sunrise aficionado. I like to be settled in when the sky is still as dark as it can be. Then I just wait quietly for the sky to slowly brighten into full light. It feels like keeping company with the day as it awakes. I have roused myself painfully early for incredible sunrises at places including Mount Rainier, the Grand Canyon, and Acadia—in that case both on the coast and atop Cadillac Mountain. I've seen the light come up behind Denali, better known to non-Alaskans as Mount McKinley. Because Denali is so tall, I could see that from Fairbanks, over a hundred miles away. By the way, in midwinter, sunrise in Fairbanks is at 11 a.m.

For Friday's sunrise, I was just at home in Hamden. Fittingly, I sat in the sun room. Nothing *unusually* spectacular happened—but something *usually* spectacular did: from among the shades of lilac blossoms, the sun rose, bringing with it the light of another day.

Notes

¹ Ruby Nell Sales, speaking at the CEIO Deeper Change Forum, January 25, 2017.