

October 14, 2018
21st Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 23, Year B, RCL
Day School Sunday
The Rev. Keri T. Aubert
St. Thomas's Episcopal Church, New Haven, CT

Job 23:1-9, 16-17
Psalm 22:1-15
Hebrews 4:12-16
Mark 10:17-31



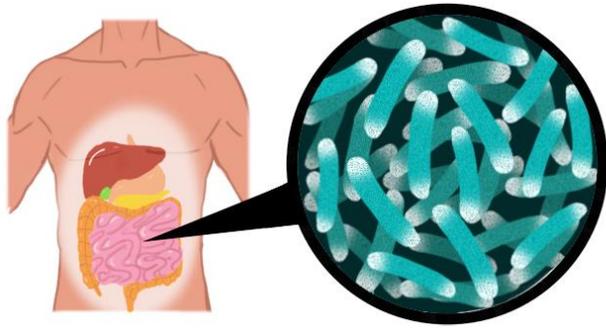
Merriam-Webster defines *symbiosis* (sim-bee-OH-sis) as “the living together of two dissimilar organisms in more or less intimate association or close union.”¹ When I Googled *symbiosis*, the first image that popped up is this one, from the U.S. National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. Here you can see a hermit crab with a sea anemone on its back.

The word *symbiosis* comes from the Greek meaning, literally, “living together.” You can hear this in the NOAA’s definition of *symbiosis* as “the interaction between two different organisms living in close association, *usually* to the advantage of both organisms (emphasis added).”²

Did you catch the word *usually*? There are three different types of symbiosis. The one we generally think of is more precisely termed *mutualism*. In mutualism, both partners benefit from the living arrangement.



A common example of mutualism is plant pollinators and plants. We’ve been seeing this in practice all summer. The pollinator gets food while the plant gets help with reproduction. Here you can see the pollen collected on the body of a bee.

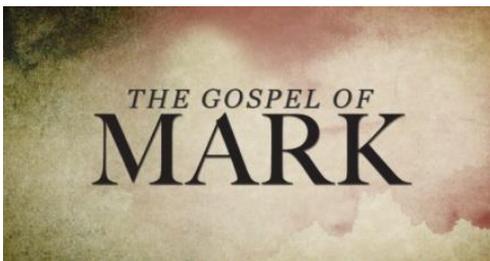


Another example of mutualism is gut bacteria. A mammal's digestive system provides a home for bacteria, bacteria that is necessary for the system to function properly. *Our* digestive tracts are filled with bacteria. Therefore we human beings are therefore living and moving examples of mutualism.

The second type of symbiotic relationship is called *commensalism*. In commensalism, one partner benefits while the other is neither helped nor harmed. The third type of symbiotic relationship is called *parasitism*.



In parasitism, one partner *benefits* while the other is *harmed*. A great common example of this is the human relationship with mosquitoes. When a mosquito bites us, the mosquito gets food, and we get stung. Because mosquitoes are disease carriers, some of those stings bring dangerous illness.



With all that in mind, let's switch gears and talk about today's Gospel reading from Mark. A man runs up to Jesus and asks what it takes to inherit eternal life. Jesus recalls for him the Ten Commandments. The man presses further. Jesus then speaks of possessions and wealth: the man must literally exchange his treasure on earth for treasure in heaven; like a camel going through the eye of a needle, a rich person will find it *nearly* impossible to enter the kingdom of God. Note the wiggle room: it's *nearly* impossible, because "for God, all things are possible."

That wiggle room is fortunate. Since the time of Jesus, few are the people who have actually sold what they own and given the money to the poor on the way to following Jesus. I certainly haven't; therefore, I am convicted by Jesus' words. Like that shocked man, I should probably go away grieving. But I think Jesus would prefer I stick around, confess my shortcomings, and explore ways to at least approach the target to which he gestures. After all, "for God, all things are possible."

It's important to remember that Jesus lived in a particular socioeconomic context, as we live in a different particular socioeconomic context. Like a skilled community organizer, Jesus did his work through one-on-one relationship building, but his goal was to change the entire system they occupied. The Gospels are filled with stories of Jesus pushing back against the cultural norms of the day.

His society was organized around extended households. One's household was one's life. Wealth was concentrated at the top. Wealth was not just about money, but also about power and influence. There was no social safety net, so the household held security. It was all a zero-sum game; therefore, if one gained, another must lose. For this reason, poor people viewed wealth accumulation with great suspicion.

When the game is zero-sum, competition and hoarding are survival techniques. This behavior becomes a way of life, even when it is unnecessary, even when it is counter-productive. Eventually people figure that's just how it's supposed to be, or they stop noticing altogether. Jesus is saying something very different. In the kingdom of God, everyone has enough. The solution is to chuck it and start over.



Jesus tells that questioning man not only to sell his possessions, but also to leave the household into which he was born, and to join the new household that he has established. At the end of the reading, Peter tells Jesus that the disciples have done just that. In response, Jesus affirms that the disciples are receiving their reward, that they already occupy the kingdom of God.

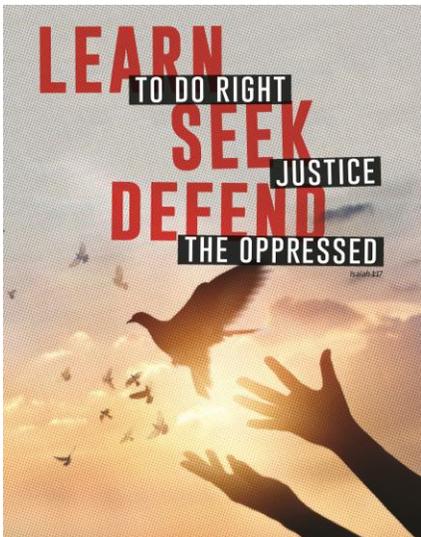
Jesus hailed a new world order, and the disciples were living into it. The rest of us have a ways to go. When Christians pray “thy kingdom come” in the Lord’s Prayer, this is what we’re talking about. The way things are is not the way things must be. There is a different way, and it’s on its way.

Let’s think about this in terms of our science lesson.



Human beings are of the same species, but our interrelationships—individual and institutional—are marked by a certain symbiosis. I think Jesus calls us to be care-full. We need to be sure that our human interrelationships—individual and institutional—are marked less by parasitism and more by mutualism.

Now, let’s talk about *all* this as it might apply to St. Thomas’s.



Today is Day School Sunday, the one day a year in which we intentionally bring together all the organisms associated with the part of God’s kingdom known as St. Thomas’s in New Haven.

Sometimes it seems like we are organisms of two completely species. We might have scientific names like *Parish churchitus* and *Schoolus dayis*. We are two species, and we *are* in a symbiotic relationship. The symbiotic part is not a choice; we live *here* together. But we do have a choice, and the choice is what kind of symbiotic relationship it will be. At its best, and for our best, the Church–School relationship is and must be marked by a deep and authentic mutualism.

To be honest, each species has at times looked upon the other as a parasite. But it's important to remember that looks can be deceiving.



This crocodile and plover are actually doing one another a favor. The plover gets to eat, and the crocodile gets its teeth cleaned. It's mutualism at work.

In every Church – Day School pairing, the relationship is tricky. The experts say it's always tricky. Here at St. Thomas's, it's especially tricky, because of the extensive shared use of building and grounds. It's tricky, but that doesn't mean it doesn't or can't work, well and to the mutual benefit of *Parish churchitus* and *Schoolus dayis*. One of the oddities of our symbiotic relationship is that our two species aren't often present at the same time. That's why Day School Sunday is so important.

Okay, so maybe that image is not quite what we should aspire to. But how about this one:



Despite the challenges, Church and Day School have been in a mutually beneficial relationship for over six decades. It might even be true that our species have saved one another from extinction: other churches and day schools have succumbed to the changing tides, but here we are. *Parish churchitus* and *Schoolus dayis* are still alive, with health that is improving, and doing great work that has effects *in here* and *out there*. Together, we are in a period of growing understanding of our differences and our commonalities. St. Thomas's is an amazing place. It would not be what it is if either institution was absent.

Maybe Church and Day School *are* two completely different species. Maybe that's okay, or maybe it's better than okay. Maybe it's exactly how it is supposed to be, as each species lives into our mutualistic symbiotic relationship in continually new and exciting and life-giving ways. Maybe that's good for all of us, and maybe it's good for the world.

Notes

¹ "symbiosis," Merriam-Webster online, available at <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/symbiosis> (accessed October 12, 2018).

² From the "Ocean Explorer" area of the NOAA website, available at <https://oceanexplorer.noaa.gov/facts/symbiosis.html> (accessed October 12, 2018).