

Proper 24: Year A: 21 / 22 October 2017

St. James Episcopal Church, Clinton NY

Karen Anderson, Lay Preacher

## **Letter Writing: to encourage, scold, plead and praise**

Proper 24 -  
Exodus 33:12-23,  
Psalm 99,  
1 Thessalonians 1:1-10  
Matthew 22:15-22

In this digital age of tweeting, texting and chatting, even email seems a bit of a throwback, and the hand-written letter is practically extinct.

Not all that long ago, letter writing was a crucial form of communication. Some people still have boxes of letters that they received stowed away in their closets. Entire books have been written based on the letters (romantic and otherwise) of famous folks in history, often long after they have died.

I grew up in western NY where we like to tell the story of how one local young girl changed history by writing a letter to a tall skinny man from Illinois who was vying for a rather important job. The way the story goes, 11 year old Grace Bedell sent a letter to a candidate for president of the United States, encouraging him to grow facial hair. She argued that growing a beard would make him more attractive to women, who would then encourage their male relatives to cast a vote for him. He subsequently was elected president.

I don't know how much influence the beard actually had, but there is a lovely bronze statue commemorating the President-Elect's stop in Westfield, NY on his way to Washington DC for the inauguration. Abraham Lincoln got off the train and called Grace out of the crowd to personally thank her. In Chautauqua County the power of that letter is legendary.

In the bible, perhaps the most famous letter writer is Paul. We read from his epistles ("letters") every week in our lectionary. Paul wrote to fellow believers to encourage, scold, plead with and/or praise them.

I can relate to Paul's passion for letter writing. I have always been fond of expressing myself in writing. Perhaps that is why I enjoy authoring sermons so much!

This year, we are shaping our stewardship campaign around the 5 marks of mission. Last week, we began with the 1st mark: "To proclaim the Good News of the Kingdom." This week the 2nd mission is "To teach, baptize and nurture new believers."

This mission makes some feel uncomfortable, after all that sounds an awful lot like evangelizing and that is not what we Episcopalians are known for. New believers? Sure, we want some of those. After all, like most Episcopal churches we are an aging population. But according to The Pew Research Center 27% of Americans identify themselves as spiritual but not religious. Now, to be clear, that does not mean that those folks have no moral compass. Many of those people donate monetary sums to causes they believe in, or give their time and skills benevolently. Both acts give me hope that they may at some point seek out a religious home. I would love for that home to be St. James. Not because it would mean new pledging units or new faces to help out, but because I believe worshipping with others would change their lives and in turn, change our world.

According to Lillian Daniel in her book *When "Spiritual But Not religious" Is Not Enough* the significance of attending church becomes evident when we witness suffering and pain, "rather than feeling lucky, God wants us to get angry and want to do something about it"(p9) she writes. "As Christians we expect more, way more, like a new heaven and a new earth, and because we follow Jesus, we better expect to be involved in making it happen, alongside other people." (p 10) She goes on to list some of those people and some of their flaws as well as some of their hopes.

In the spirit of St. Paul, I would like to share a letter to St. James'. I hope that this letter will serve as an invitation to continue your support of this church, in this town, so that when new believers are searching for a place to worship they will know that they are welcome here, and that God knows them by name. They will realize that we belong to God and in God we live and move and have our being.

To the church of St. James', Clinton in God the Holy One and the Lord Jesus Christ. Grace to you and peace.

I give thanks to God for this community of St. James'. I am thrilled that we have this little yellow church in Clinton. Countless people throughout the world have to travel many miles to reach a church building. This property not only provides a convenient place for us to worship God, it also serves this community in countless ways. We house a certified pre-school, we host AA meetings, exercise classes, choral rehearsals, and a wide variety of group gatherings. People come to God in many ways and anything we can do to bring people in the door, could lead them to come to God's table. So playing host to this vast array of meetings and events could be instrumental in nurturing new believers.

As grateful as I am to have this building, I know that this structure is not the church - we are the church. Those of us who are present, as well as those of us who are traveling, or working, or home-bound. Those among us who over 150 years ago founded this building, and those of us who walked through her door today. We are the church - not these walls nor roof, not this lovely

organ, not the candles nor prayerbooks, not even this pulpit nor that altar. We are the body of Christ, along with all of our saints who have moved on to life eternal, and all of those new believers that haven't discovered us yet.

I give thanks for our companionship and our calls for social justice. I am grateful for our worship and our prayers.

I give thanks for our drive to help educate others, here in Clinton and in Haiti.

I am grateful for our current leadership of Bishop Michael and Bishop DeDe and Father Gary. I give thanks for our companionship with Père Fred.

I am grateful for all the people who work and volunteer, who pray and worship, who give of their time and talents to help the people of this community and the world around us. I appreciate all the financial support we receive to help us fulfill our mission.

We are not God, and I give thanks for our human imperfections. I am humbled by God's love of us. I pray others will find this community to be as important in their lives as I find it to be in mine. I can and do worship God in many ways, but belonging to this church, in this town, being inspired by all of you, that is my Good News. I am more than happy to share that with everyone I come in contact with.

I ask you to continue to help us be the Jesus movement in Clinton and beyond. We, this small group of humans, who are sometimes broken, and sometimes petty, and oft-times sinful; we are seeking together with each other and with God's assistance to make life better for all, both here on earth and in the next life.

As we look to the future of this community - I can only wonder what we will look like and where we will be. Wherever life takes us I pray that we will continue to be the "loving, liberating, and life giving" people God intends us to be.

With great love and hope,

Karen

**Resources:**

"More Americans now say they're spiritual but not religious" by Michael Lipka and Claire Gecewicz, Pew Research center. September 6, 2017. <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/09/06/more-americans-now-say-theyre-spiritual-but-not-religious/#>

**When "Spiritual but Not Religious" Is Not Enough: Seeing God in Surprising Places, Even the Church** by Lillian Daniel Jericho Books; Reprint edition (January 14, 2014)

"loving, liberating, and life giving" - The Most Reverend Michael B. Curry