

This past Tuesday, as part of St. Ben's Spiritual Conversations that happen every Tuesday morning on zoom, we talked a little about church: what it is, what it isn't, where it is, where it isn't. And we quickly learned we don't all agree on a single definition.

Is Church, essentially, the people? A group of Christian faithful, doing their very best to follow Jesus. Is church a building? Any building where we can gather, where folks can sing together and pray together. Is church a specific building, set aside to be a uniquely holy place, consecrated and sanctified, and unlike any other physical space.

We can wonder, in a similar way, about the Eucharist. Is it a symbolic way of remembering the simple meal of bread and wine that Jesus shared with close friends on the night before he died? Or is Holy Communion a moment of real and effective union with God through the actual presence of Christ.

Today, we're celebrating the Feast of All Saints – so we might be asking ourselves who even are the Saints? In the early church the Saints were undoubtedly all those who had died in the faith, ordinary baptized Christians who loved Jesus and loved the church. After a few hundred years of church, though, it became clear that certain lives, certain remarkable lives, utterly transformed by their faith, are outstanding exemplars of word and action, and that the life stories of these "Saints" make a difference to the way we understand church today.

Definitions are tricky when it comes to faith, and all of the above can be said to be true.

Within this Episcopal church our piety and theology are known to be broad, honoring and recognizing the everyday, the ordinary and the simple elements of life *and* acknowledging the truth of an intangible yet ever-present ultimate dimension; the very ordinary and the utterly extraordinary. Anglican spirituality insists there is no single, correct-for-all-time way to define and embody the Holy Mysteries of our faith, instead it honors both the ordinary and the extraordinary aspects of reality.

Our task, in this way of being Church, is to carry on asking all the questions and to stay in the dance with the range of possible answers, knowing that any answers we hold at any given time will always be influenced by who we are and what we're experiencing – our lives and our world are change, and hopefully, our ideas and our perspectives are open to change too.

The co-existence of the simple stuff of our lives with vast and mystical possibility is, I think, a gift of Anglican spirituality – the spirituality that underpins this Episcopal Church. It encourages a way of considering the world, which is both knowable, practical, experiential, and tangible *and* incomprehensible, unutterably complex and impossible to ever fully define. Which particular perspective of reality are we drawn to, which viewpoint do we hold at any given time?

With practice and intention we can come to move somewhat fluidly between them, pull focus from here to there, shift perspective at will, stay aware of both truths.

And yet, making this quite a bit harder to do, is the fact we live most of our lives fully immersed in a mainstream culture that's something else. This mainstream culture of ours neither honors the intimacy and truth of our most basic human, individual existence nor does it honor the expansive, transcendent potential of our lives as truly significant.

Mainstream culture has created for us an in-between place, a not-really real space where we can get distracted, bogged down, and trapped. This is the space of human-created system and institution, a space where the ongoing struggle for authority, and struggle for power, flourishes; it is the space where the struggle for wealth and for control are what's ultimate. It's a space of politics, and war, a space where injustices and a whole heap of violences thrive, and this has real-life impact of the real lives lived of countless millions. This is a space of rhetoric and power-mongering, of clickbait and headline-grabbing. And it's at its most compelling when it's turbulent and loaded with the unstable energy of potential threat; it would, if we let it, suck us in entirely, have us believe *this* is reality.

This mainstream culture of ours peddles in fear and anger and it draws its life directly from ours. And many of us might feel stuck here right now in the run up to the presidential election.

This not really-real created space is noisy, and in this space it gets easy to forget those primary truths located in the intimacy, the most precious breathe and effort of each human life, our foundational relationships, with God, with one another and with the Earth -

– *and* it's all too easy to forget the expansive and glorious eternal truths located in the ultimate, in the transcendent, Divine reality; our inseparability from wondrous Mystery.

The not really-real space is noisy, and attention grabbing, and it's often, so often, full of junk; it is not the essence of who we are; and remembering and affirming this strips it of the power that it would claim for itself. I think this is something the Saints, whose remarkable lives we commemorate, may have understood. We have no choice but to live in it and live with it – but let's know it for what it really is.

Whatever our definition of Church, and of Eucharist, our liturgies and our feast days, it all exists to be a touchstone for us, that we remember and affirm our true and elemental nature, both intimate and expansive.

Our weekly remembering and re-affirming of our true and elemental nature offers us a practiced way into freedom, freedom from the noise and the swirl and the confusion that would consume us.

I truly believe that the Good News of God in Christ is this: that we are all of shared substance, both organic, earth-y *and* metaphysical, that our existence in time is both the passage of our days in this world and our place in the fabric of eternity, that death is never the end and so we needn't fear it, and that the way we come together as "the world" reflects our understanding of these things.

Our faith drives out fear and empowers us. We are not passive recipients of all that goes on around us, we have power and agency and the ability to live remarkable lives, each of us in our own spaces and places - and this, in turn, will transform the world.

We have immense, God-given power to shift our perspective, to interpret the world around us through our faith, and so to respond to what goes on around us with confidence and with hope *and*, by this, to be agents of life-giving change, to be healers of this broken world. It's by each of us living and trusting in this Way, that the world itself will be transformed.

Our transformation by faith into people who fully trust the truth of God in Christ, into people of love for justice and peace, this is our really-real.

And Church – liturgy – Eucharist these have been tested across the generations as ways to get us there, we may struggle to define them, but this is their reason for being. And for that: Thanks be to God!