

What are Your Core Values?

The scene is a battlefield one night during World War I. The struggle settles into trench warfare. A lieutenant commands his troops to sneak across a field and attack the enemy. So the soldiers obey the officer's command. Suddenly, bullets fly in almost every direction. The frightened young men scurry back to their own trenches as quickly as they can and hunker down.

When the gunfire ceases, it is eerily still, *except* for the moaning and groaning of one of the men who is left behind on the field, wounded. The man keeps crying for his friend George, begging him to come and save him. George, who is part of the contingent, in turn, pleads with the young lieutenant to be allowed to go. But the young lieutenant says "No, no, no," over and over again. "I've lost *him*. I don't want to lose *you* too." But the young recruit keeps pleading and finally, in exasperation, the lieutenant says, "OK! If you want to get yourself killed, go ahead!"

The young soldier sneaks over the edge of the trench. He crawls to his friend, grabs him, and slowly pulls him back to safety. He reaches the edge of the trench and pushes his friend over it. George falls in on top of him. But it's too late. His friend is dead.

The lieutenant yells, "George, I told you there was no point to your bravery. Why did you risk your life? You put the entire unit in jeopardy. And for what? There is no point to what you did. You were a fool!" George answers, "I was no fool. When I got to him he was still alive, and the last words he said were, 'George! I knew you'd come!'"¹

Today we meet Jesus, as we did last week, on the night of his arrest, just before his betrayal, his crucifixion, his death, and resurrection. He delivers a final testimony to his disciples to help them with the challenges of transition: challenges the days ahead will surely bring. He repeats the most important of all his commands, his core value, if you will: "Love one another the way I loved you. This is the very best way to love. Put your life on the line for your friends.... You didn't choose me, remember; I chose you, and put you in the world to bear fruit, fruit that won't spoil."²

I'm not sure there is a better Gospel reading for a congregation on the verge of discerning core values and guiding principles as they prepare to call a new rector. Which would be *you* today! And the story of George and his friend on the front lines of World War I gives you a metaphor for your work today and in the weeks ahead.

William Temple, an Archbishop of Canterbury, is known for his work in the Anglican Church as a scholar, theologian, and advocate for social justice. He's also known for saying this: "The church is the only institution that exists primarily for the benefit of those who are not its members."³ You are in the process of discovering who you are and what God is calling you to do and be. Reclaiming your identity and roots in the New Testament church as friends of Jesus, and remembering your connection to the Anglican communion are a big part of that. If you are orienting yourselves toward the future, it is likely that the best friends of St. John's Plymouth, besides Jesus, are the friends you haven't met yet. What are the values that could compel you to lay down your life as a congregation for these friends? The man who risked his life for his friend George was clear about a core value. That value drove his action.

A *New Yorker* cartoon depicts the devil introducing newcomers to Hell. "You'll find there's no 'right' or 'wrong' here," he tells them, "just what works for *you*."⁴ There are some on the outside who might say this is a description of the Episcopal Church – it's a church where "anything goes." But most insiders know that concern for social justice comes out of some very Biblically based core values that are outlined both in today's Gospel and in the baptismal covenant in the *Book of Common Prayer*: "to seek and serve Christ in *all* persons, loving your neighbor as yourself, and to strive for justice and peace among *all* people, and respect the dignity of *every* human being." There is a cost for living out such values. Part of that cost may mean being misunderstood. Some might say the church is risking its life as an institution for the sake of living these values.

This is a time for you as the congregation of St. John's to get clear about what *your* core values are. What *is* right or wrong here at St. John's and why? Why do you do what you do? Why do you get angry when certain things happen or do not happen? Pay attention to that. Your anger is a clue that a core value may have been violated. What *is* that value? Being clear about your core values is key to the future. Your values are the constant, passionate, core beliefs that will drive the ministry of this congregation. This part of the transition process is about clarifying your core values so you can make sure your mission and vision are in alignment *with* your values -- so you can move ahead in one shared, energized direction with your new rector.

Some churches have one value that dominates or towers over all the rest. That's called a unifying value. That's a single, controlling value that serves to unify the church and communicate its central thrust. Ministries with a single towering value become "niche" ministry churches. Niche ministries tend to be a little less balanced. The early church described in the book of Acts, chapter 2 is more balanced.⁵ That description is taken right out of Acts 2 and put smack dab in the middle of the Baptismal

Covenant in the prayer book. You are asked, “Will you continue in the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in the prayers?”

Here’s an example of what I’m talking about. I heard recently that an outsider described St. John’s as “the gay church.” That’s one perception. Others might refer to St. John’s as the church with the food pantry, or the church with the good music. In this process you have the opportunity to *affirm* one of these as your unifying value, or to clarify if, for example, fully welcoming our gay brothers and sisters is a form or expression of a *larger* value of maybe hospitality or justice.

If you are trying to determine if something is a value, ask yourself this: Is it what we are *doing* or is it the *reason* for what we are doing? The *reason* for what you are doing is the value.^{vi} What are the values for which you are willing to lay down your life?

As members of the Anglican Communion, you are part of a great cloud of witnesses. Sometimes lifting up these witnesses can help *remind* you of who you are and why you do what you do. Desmond Tutu was a fearless leader for racial justice in apartheid South Africa. And he was an Anglican archbishop. Why did he become an Anglican priest? In the days of apartheid, when a black person met a white person on the sidewalk, the black person was expected to step off of the pavement into the gutter to allow the person to pass, giving the white person this gesture of respect. “One day, when I was just a little boy,” Tutu said, “my mother and I were walking down the street when a tall white man, dressed in a black suit, came toward us. Before my mother and I could step off the sidewalk, as was expected of us, this white man stepped off the sidewalk and, as my mother and I passed, *he* tipped his hat in a gesture of respect to *her!*”

The bishop said, “I was more than surprised at what had happened and I asked my mother, ‘Why did that white man do that?’ My mother explained, ‘He’s an Anglican priest. He’s a man of God, [a friend of Jesus]. That’s why he did it.’ When she told me that he was an Anglican priest,” said Bishop Tutu, “I decided there and then that *I* wanted to be an Anglican priest too. And what is more, I wanted to be a man of God, [a friend of Jesus].”^{viii}

Today Jesus reminds you that *you too* are his friends. You did not choose him. He chose you. The thing about good friends is that they love you for who you are, even as they challenge you to be all that you can be. Today your call is to go deep and figure out just what it really is that *drives* you, that compels you to be here and to give of your time, your talent, and your treasure week in and week out. You have been through an ordeal the last many years. You may have been wounded *and* you’re not dead. Jesus has crawled out of the safety of the trenches to meet you right here, right now, just as you are. He comes today in bread and wine, giving you his very life, the life he lays down for you, his dear friends. “Love one another,” he says, “the way I love you.”

Pastor Dana Runestad

6 May 2018 ~ Sixth Sunday of Easter (B)

John 15:9-17

ⁱ Tony Campolo, “A True Friend” in Let Me Tell You a Story, Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2000, p. 17.

ⁱⁱ Eugene H. Peterson, The Message Catholic/Ecumenical Edition, Chicago: Acta Publications, 2013, p. 1739

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://frtim.wordpress.com/2013/11/09/why-does-the-church-exist/>

^{iv} In Mark Sagoff, “Values and Preferences” on JSTOR https://www.jstor.org/stable/2381379?seq=1#page_scan_tab_contents

^v Aubrey Malphurs, Advanced Strategic Planning: A New Model for Church and Ministry Leaders, 2nd Edition, Grand

Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2005, p. 100

^{vi} *Ibid*, pp. 106-107

^{vii} *Ibid*, p. 104

^{viii} Campolo, “He Tipped His Hat,” in Let Me Tell You a Story, p. 160-161