

Twenty-sixth Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 28, Year B – November 17, 2024

What It Means to “Do Church”

The Rev. Anne Hartley

ST. PAUL’S EPISCOPAL CHURCH

VERGENNES, VERMONT

Daniel 12:1-3 | Psalm 16 | Hebrews 10:11-14 (15-18) 19-25 | Mark 13:1-8

When I was in college, I went to a “No Nukes” concert in Battery Park at the foot of the World Trade Center. We sat on the ground in the sunshine and listened to Crosby, Stills and Nash, Jackson Browne, and Pete Seeger. It was a stunning day. If someone had told me that 22 years later, two hijacked airplanes would fly into the Twin Towers and destroy them, I would not have believed them. That could not happen here. No way.

In today’s Gospel reading, as Jesus came out of the temple, like a small town kid looking up at the skyscraper for the first time, his disciple said, “Look, Teacher, what large stones and what large buildings!” Jesus replied that “no one stone would be left here on another, and all will be thrown down.” I wonder if the disciple believed him.

Jesus prophesied the events that would take place before the birth of the new kingdom. Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be earthquakes and famines. It’s not hard to envision what Jesus describes. It sounds like the world now, but Jesus cautioned that “This is but the beginning of the birth pangs.” He didn’t tell them when, but did tell them not to be fooled into believing that anyone knows when the end is coming.

Skyscrapers aren’t supposed to collapse. A concrete parking lot is not supposed to undulate, triggering car alarms and causing transformers to explode as they sway. Gulf waves aren’t supposed to surge into neighborhoods and sweep away cars and homes. Diseases aren’t supposed to kill a million Americans. Still, anyone who watched the World Trade Center collapse on TV, or who has experienced an earthquake, hurricane, or pandemic knows that these things can happen.

I can’t think about the end times without hearing REM’s song in my head, “It’s the end of the world as we know it...and I feel fine.” But do I? Do we feel fine?

We feel a profound sense of loss—of loved ones and property, and also a loss of innocence that shakes us to our core. In time, each crisis fades and we find a new normal. We might avoid skyscrapers for a while, move farther inland, but if Jesus were here, he would not tell the disciples to leave Jerusalem, or go back to their old lives and protect their loved ones. He set out a way for us to live so that we don’t focus all our attention on avoiding or anticipating the next crisis.

One person who lived this way was a Jesuit priest who became the Superior General of the Order of Jesus, the Jesuit order. Fr. Pedro Arrupe was working in Hiroshima, Japan, on the day the United States detonated an atomic bomb over the city. He described his first sight of the wounded, the result of the atomic bomb. “On and on they came, a steady procession numbering some 150,000. This gives some idea of the scene of horror that was Hiroshima. . . . We did the only thing that could be done in the presence of such mass slaughter: we fell on our knees and prayed for guidance, as we were destitute of all human help.”

Fr. Arrupe prayed for the victims, then he took action. He used the medical training he had finished before entering the Jesuits to care for the wounded. The Jesuits’ house became a makeshift hospital. Pedro Arrupe didn’t run away from the devastation. He ran into the city to care for the victims.

On this Stewardship Sunday, we offer up our promises to the Church, the Body of Christ, for the coming year. We resolve humbly as members of the church to continue Jesus’ ministry in the world. We pray our church’s basic needs will be met so we can focus on witnessing to the Gospel in a way that reflects our authentic lives in Christ. Each of us has to discern what that means.

Will we move toward the victims of hunger, fear, injustice, and oppression or will we distance ourselves? Will we treat all people with compassion, like members of our own family, or keep them at arm’s length? In the eucharistic prayer, we pray to come to the table for strength, as well as solace, for renewal as well as pardon. The last prayer calls on us to go out to do the work God has given us to do. Ask God what that work will be, and remain open to the answer every day. Lucy told me that two of our parishioners identified specific needs of their classmates and then mobilized community resources to meet those needs. They were open to and discerned the work God had given them to do.

Pedro Arrupe called on the faithful to serve “out of doors.” If we choose this path as a church, we will be grounded and when the next crisis happens, we will turn toward the wounded, who are our neighbors, even our enemies. Pope Francis warns of the “temptation of rigidity,” which is the wholly unnecessary fear of change. We have to be open to change, so we can focus on serving those in need.

This year’s speaker at the Diocesan Convention said that the church is more than budgets and buildings, then she asked, “what does it mean to do church?” She reminded a cathedral full of church leaders—lay and ordained—that our work is to meet people’s needs in our communities and

to work for a lasting peace. We can find out what people need by being in relationship with them. Giving is a mutual ministry. It transforms our lives by connecting us with other people.

Why not volunteer and give directly to charities? Why build a church and pay to run it? We give to the church for many reasons: to carve out space and time in our lives to worship God, to remind ourselves that there is a greater power; to learn and grow in the faith, by examining our own lives and bringing ourselves into right relationship with God; and to be in a Christ-centered community, where we strive to love God and our neighbors to give us and others a glimpse of God's kingdom on earth.

Let us pray:

Lord, in these challenging days, it's hard sometimes to know the direction we need to go. But we praise you because we don't have to understand where to go; we need to follow you where you want to lead us. We surrender this church and everything in it back to you, and pray that you will give us a vision for the future of this ministry.

Give us eyes to see where you want us to go, give us ears to hear your guiding words, and provide us the courage to pursue it. Help us follow you and give us a vision for the future into which you are calling us.

Now, Lord, send us from this place with the Commissioning to do your work your way for your glory. Lord, we need your courage to pursue this mission. We need your strength to take on the challenges we face.

Keep us from operating out of our strength, relying on our skills and expertise, or trusting in our wisdom. Keep us entirely reliant on you for all that we need so that we can go from this place emboldened and encouraged to follow you.

In Jesus name, we pray. Amen.