

AND YOUR ANSWER IS...?  
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The Sixth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 11)  
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Imagine the following scenario: As you are leaving church this morning, walking to your car, maybe chatting with other parishioners, you see a stranger strolling the grounds, watching you. You give a cheerful “Good Morning!” and expect a similar greeting back, maybe a comment on the lovely weather. But the stranger stops you with a question.

Gesturing toward the church, he asks, “What is it you *do* in there?”

Well, surprising as the question is, you have answers. Think about it: What would you say? You can start with saying that we worship God, that we pray together, that we receive Communion, that we listen to stories from the Bible and a reflection on those stories. There are so many things we can say that we *do*. If you usher, if you do Altar Guild, if you’re one of our techies, if you deal with finances or administration... you can tell that to the stranger, but you might also add that you catch up with friends, have coffee and cookies after worship. We *do* lots of things in here. Where church is concerned, we’re a bunch of Martha’s, getting stuff done.

But what if the stranger follows up with another question: “Why? Why do you do what you do?”

Think fast now. How would you answer that? And specifically, how would you answer that to a person who clearly doesn’t know much about church, or even about Christianity, maybe not even about religion. *Why* do we do what we do? Your answer is important because not only is this imaginary stranger seeking an answer, but people all over the world are looking at the church and wondering why on earth we would give up a Sunday morning to do whatever it is we do in here.

You’ve heard me quote the Christian writer, Frederick Buechner, whose writings put such an imaginary perspective on faith. In his book, *Now and Then*, Buechner writes about an experience he had when he was a chaplain at an all-boys school. At one point, he was in charge of an early Sunday morning discussion group on religion—a group that the school allowed in place of the required chapel service. Given its early hour, it was attended by only the most serious dissenters, and one of those dissenters confronted Buechner one Sunday, thin-lipped with anger, and challenged him with the question, “So what’s so good about religion anyway?”

Buechner wrote: “I found myself speechless. I felt surely there must be *something* good about it. Why else was I there? But for the moment I couldn’t for the life of me think what it was. Maybe the truth of it is that religion the way he meant it—a system of belief, a technique of worship, an institution—doesn’t really have all that much about it that is good when you come right down to it, and perhaps my speechlessness in a way acknowledged as much.”

But Buechner continues: “Unless you become as a child, Jesus said, you will never enter the Kingdom of Heaven.” Maybe what is good about religion is *playing* that the Kingdom will come, until—in the joy of your playing, the hope and rhythm and comradeship and poignancy and mystery of it—you start to see that the playing is itself the first-fruits of the Kingdom’s coming and of God’s presence within us and among us.”

Think about that. Playing that the kingdom will come, practicing for it until our practice becomes the real thing. How do we explain that to the stranger outside Church? What is it that makes us believe the Kingdom will come at all? Or that our faith can have anything to do with its arrival? How do we explain to the stranger that we are motivated to serve one another in the name of Christ? That in here, at our best, we *play* at being the Kingdom of God until we do it so automatically that we carry the Kingdom with us.

We live in a time that most theologians and historians call the “post-Christian era,” when the real, essential (*not* the political) values of justice and love and compassion inherent in the gospel are not necessarily the values of our society, except by coincidence or convenience. Organized religion, once an assumed part of life, is now simply an option in a very full menu of activities competing for our time. People these days choose their activities by return on investment. A pastime is worthwhile if there is something to be gained from it. What then, is to be gained by faithfulness to Christ? Why do we come to church?

In so many ways, the Church is an anomaly in today's world, stubbornly holding to values that the world would rather reject. Why would anyone voluntarily deny her or himself and willingly take up a cross to follow Jesus? Why do we?

The stranger is waiting for your answer, and strangers to the Church everywhere are curious. Not knowing any better, they may assume that we just enjoy the Martha part of our faith, giving us something to do, a place to belong. And in these days, non-believers, and with good reason, may also assume that we come seeking social or political *power*. Many people no longer believe in God at all, or they're "spiritual not religious." (There is actually a category for that on most hospital spiritual assessment forms.) They are watching, wondering what we believe that inspires us to love God and tend to our neighbors and come back week after week and sometimes in between. And the curious, I think, are even outnumbered by those who simply consider the Church irrelevant, or even wrong-headed.

Frankly, I'm really not sure what I would say to a stranger who stopped me outside the church to ask me, "What is it that you believe in there?" I think the specifics of my reply would vary depending on the day, but I think it would have to say something about *love*, because everything we do—teaching our children, helping the poor, offering hospitality, caring for the sick, worshipping God, practicing the Kingdom—it all comes down to responding in love to the love first given to us by God. Living in love is the natural state of being for us when we are in relationship with God and with one another.

I've referred to Martha, who is dutifully getting things done in today's gospel story because, let's face it, all those people listening to Jesus **will** get hungry, but Mary's choice is just as important. If our faith is based only on what we *do*, without conscious understanding of why we are doing it, we are missing something. If we can't answer that stranger from our hearts and not using the built-in "God-talk" that we hear in our worship, then maybe we need to re-focus. Maybe, just maybe, we're not *listening* enough. We are a praying people, but think about it, how much of our prayers, both corporate and personal, is us talking, without stopping to listen to God's answers. When you say your prayers, do you allow as much time to listen, like Mary, as you've given time to talking?

Listening, being Mary-like as much as Martha-like in our lives, these are all part of "playing the Kingdom" (as Buechner said). We may never be directly confronted with a question about what we believe and why. The old adage about not discussing politics or religion at a dinner party is still *half* true, but I encourage you to think about your own answers, in *your* words,

Meanwhile, continue to pray, "**Thy** kingdom come, **Thy** will be done," and then listen, truly *listen* to how God wants your help making that happen. Amen.

Readings: Amos 8:1-12; Psalm 52; Colossians 1:15-28; Luke 10:38-42.