

May 13, 2012

**The Sixth Sunday of Easter**

John 15.9-17 and Psalm 139

All Saints' Episcopal Church, Atlanta, Georgia

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There's a new game I heard about recently directed toward those of us who are technologically addicted. It is a dinner game, played among friends. The game is this: when a group of friends goes out to dinner, everyone must put their smartphones in a pile in the middle of the dinner table and leave them there, untouched, for the duration of the meal. The last person to touch her phone gets her meal paid for by the rest of the group. The first person that touches her phone has to buy a round of drinks for the table.

Now before you start in on your "but what if the babysitter calls" and "but my job requires me to's", let's think for a moment about the spirit of the game rather than the letter. This is about presence.

Every one of us has been in a meeting or a meal or a party conversation with someone you know just wasn't paying attention. Maybe it was obvious, because he was typing on his phone. Maybe it was more subtle, because she was occasionally scanning the room, ostensibly for someone more important to talk to. Either way, it isn't a good feeling, knowing that I am just a placeholder until something better comes along, or perhaps whatever it is that I'm saying is just not interesting enough to warrant your full attention for a few moments.

It should be noted at this point that I'm just as guilty as the next person. My overfull mind wanders sometimes, I seek out the distraction of Facebook, email or Solitaire, my brain noodles away at my grocery list or my kids' soccer schedule when I should be in the here and now. I'm not proud of it, but I am definitely guilty.

I, too, am guilty of not being present. It is hard and it is getting harder with all of the demands on time and on attention. Family concerns, job deadlines, the advertising industry, our own needs and wants. There is a lot out there that wants us to pay attention, to give a little piece our time, our energy, ourselves. We are spread thin, stretched out, and pulled this way and that in an attempt to cover all of the very important things that need us. The webs and the magazines and the bookstores and the TV shows have great ideas to help us multitask, ways to help us get more done with our limited lives. And we listen and we do. And do and do and do.

And to all that doing, I say "Thank you, God, for Psalm 139."

*If I ascend to heaven, you are there;  
if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there.*

*If I take the wings of the morning  
and settle at the farthest limits of the sea,  
even there your hand shall lead me,  
and your right hand shall hold me fast.*

This is a God who knows how to be present.

This is a God who is present despite all of the distractions of the world, of creating heaven and earth, is there, no matter where we try to hide.

This is a God who has every right to be doing something else, to ignore our petty ravings, our thoughtlessness and senselessness. This is a God who has better things to do than be beside us, to uplift and celebrate, to mourn and grieve.

This is a God who, through mysteries that we will never in our earthly lives understand can knit us together in just the right way, can protect us from ourselves, can give us the freedom to mess up and to succeed and can be present to us through it all, ensuring that we will never walk alone, even to the farthest limits of the sea. And God does these things in a way that we can't.

Hear that? We can't.

No matter how hard we try, there are ways in which we can't be God. We cannot be everywhere at once. We cannot be everything to everyone. Unlike God we are limited in our time and in our space. We will never be present to one another like God is present to each of us.

We are given lots of power, though, the most primary of which is the power to love. We possess the power to choose love over apathy and hate. We have the power to fall into love when it is laid before us. We have the power to act on feelings of love even though there are so many other choices out there.

This impressive group of young people will stand before us in a few minutes and we will walk through a liturgy that helps them begin to define themselves as emerging adults among us. [*To Rite-13ers*] You guys know that the more you grow, the older you get, the more you will be given the freedom to make your own choices, choices to learn or ignore, choices to hate or to love. There are so many choices in front of you.

I'm suggesting to you and to the adults out here that will help you in these choices, that we should be choosing, every time, love. It will sometimes be a hard choice. It will sometimes make you unpopular and make other people frustrated with you. But it is the choice we are called into as Christians.

And one of the most obvious ways of showing everyday love is by being present to those you care about. To give others a little of what feels most scarce: time and attention. We will never do it as well as this amazing God who knit us together

and never leaves us alone, but we can exercise our power of love through the power of our presence.

In our Gospel from John, while telling his followers that love is the greatest of the commandments and the most challenging to fulfill, Jesus reminds his followers that there is no greater love than to lay down one's life for one's friends. Most days, honestly, I'm not sure I'm up to that challenge. But most days, I could lay down my *phone* for my friends.

I am not saying that we need to toss our smartphones altogether or never again answer an email at the same time as taking a conference call or delete your Facebook account. Being engaged in many places of this busy and abundant world is part of what can make being human so much fun and so fulfilling. Technology can help us stay engaged with one another, help connect with people we can't be with. It can also drive a wedge between those we CAN be with, if we are not careful.

And lest you think I am picking on avid users of technology, know that I am aware of the other things we use to distract ourselves from being present: television, work, household chores, the to-do list, the books that tell us how to do things better. We are all at times distracted by the material, away from the immaterial.

All of these things can be tools to better our lives, when used properly. But, as the old adage says: every tool is a weapon if you hold it right.

I think we need to be more discerning about *how* we use those tools, be honest with ourselves about how present we really are when it is important. Because the opposite of that person who is checking Twitter while you are talking to her at a dinner party is the one who makes you feel, for a moment, like you are the only one that matters at that same party, as if, for just a minute, your story is important to her. Being present in that way is one way that we show our love to one another, to those we see every day and to those who are yet strangers to us.

We are imperfect in our ability to be everything to everyone, but we are perfectly able to be present when it matters, to love and allow ourselves to be loved. We are perfectly able to reflect God to the world in that way.