

St. James' E-pistle: **SPECIAL EDITION**

A Letter from the Rector for June 12, 2020

Dear People of St. James',

Though the social media revolution started off on college campuses, studies have shown that the primary users of Facebook and similar platforms nowadays are of an older generation. For religious organizations like the Episcopal Church, whose membership skews towards that elder demographic, social media has proved itself an incredibly important and useful means of connecting our members together. As the Covid-19 pandemic has pushed us out of our familiar worship space and onto the internet on Sunday mornings, Facebook, Youtube, and Zoom have been essential tools for keeping us alive and well as a community. In fact, in just the past week alone, I have had two queries come in from people interested in formally becoming members of St. James', thanks to our opportunities for online engagement with our church. If there is a silver lining to our present pandemic circumstances, our vastly expanded geographic reach just might be that shining light.

Nevertheless, we can see all around us ample evidence of the darker side of social media. Rumors and falsehoods can spread like wildfire, unchecked and unquestioned when shared from a "friend." Trolling abounds, where masters of division stir up the worst in us, gleefully turning family members and friends against one another. The echo chamber effect permeates social media, where algorithms push specific messages and posts our way, luring us deeper and deeper into social silos. The world is a nuanced and complicated place, but the ease of "tweetstorms" and "reply all" messages and "like" buttons make it so effortless for us to look and see only with simplistic, binary vision. We now seem to be charging headlong into a predictable time of protest and counter-protest in America, where sides must be chosen and tribal integrity maintained. We've certainly been here before, but social media and the 24-hour cycle of cable news are only exacerbating our tendencies to defensively dig in with like-minded individuals and shut down in our camps.

This pattern of human behavior is not new, of course. It is the exact same dynamic that Jesus entered into in first century Palestine. From the moment of his birth, though, Jesus put forward a new, controversial way of being. He aligned himself with neither of the great centers of power of his day, and instead brought his good news of liberation and love to those most in need of it—the poor, the sick, the hungry, the lonely. To get that message of hope

out, Jesus did not need the endorsement of the imperial or the religious powers of his day. Instead, you might say he tapped into the social media for his time, and made the most of its best qualities, while avoiding its harmful consequences. Historical sociologists remind us that the people Jesus called to his side were not the band of unsophisticated wanderers we sometimes picture them to be. Though they may not have been the most respected members of society, the fishermen, tax collectors, and people of ill repute that Jesus gathered around him were, by virtue of the professions, some of the most well-connected members of society. Yes, they transformed their lives once they began to follow the way of Jesus, but I'm certain that those fishermen never lost their business savvy, nor the tax collectors their extensive contact lists! Like the fish collected in a net of his parable (*Matthew 13*), Jesus kept what was good and healthy and useful in his well-connected followers, and cast away the bad.

It is my hope that, as a church community, we will find a similar way forward for ourselves that will help us to make the most of all the technological and social media resources that are now available to us, without suffering the harm that these powerful tools are now inflicting all around us. But we must be careful. As we remember from the temptations of Jesus, Satan did not lure Jesus with obviously wicked desires. Satan tempted Jesus with reasonable, wholesome, Scripturally-based invitations (*Matthew 4*). So it is, I would argue, with the possibilities before us in 2020. Temptations are multiplying all around, trolling us in our famished, stressed, isolated, and frustrated state, trying to turn us away from our focus upon God and the well-being of all our neighbors. That turning away from God and neighbor and towards our *own* desires is, of course, the very definition of "sin." We take that temptation very seriously as Episcopalians. That's why, in the first order of business in our Baptismal "Examination of the Candidates" (*BCP, 301*), we don't begin with affirmations of right beliefs, but instead head immediately into a threefold set of bold and blunt renunciations. We renounce Satan and all the spiritual forces of wickedness, we renounce the evil powers of this world, and we renounce our own sinful desires. We begin our rite of Christian initiation with those renunciations, because we have learned that we cannot make peace or tolerate such forces in our lives, or in our Christian community.

In this moment in our nation, those forces, powers, and desires are surging around us, I believe, for a reason—because through the cracks now appearing in the hardened places of our society's heart, God's light is beginning to shine forth. That Light threatens to expose much, and Darkness will not stand by passively as it is dispelled from our midst. It never has. Such powers of darkness even crushed the Light of God incarnated among us in Jesus

Christ. But just as that Light was not overcome forever, and rose again on the third day, so too may the new beams that are breaking forth today illuminate the way for St. James' into a future that none of us could have imagined possible. As we make our way, may remember the comforting and encouraging words of Saint Paul to the fearful and confused Church in Thessalonica:

"...You are all children of light and children of the day; we are not of the night or of darkness. So then, let us not fall asleep as others do, but let us keep awake." (1 Thes. 5:5-6)

Yours in Christ,

Fr. Dustin+