

Sermon for September 22: *Choosing Life along our Spiritual Path*

This morning at 5:43 a.m. was the Autumn Equinox! “Equinox” means “equal night”, since this is one of only two points, two *moments*, in our year when the day and night, light and dark, are of equal proportion. The sun is positioned exactly above the Equator, on its southbound journey, until we reach December 21, the winter solstice, when the days are shortest, and we head toward the Spring Equinox. You probably are already feeling the change of season: it’s a bit cooler, almost “swetah wethah”, and you’re wearing longer sleeves in earth tones, searching for your boxes of Halloween decorations, and ordering pumpkin spice.

What does this day, this season, mean for our spiritual journey? As Anglicans, in Godly Play we talk about the church year as a circular pathway. An ever-returning cycle of growth, harvest, death, and rebirth. In our sanctuary, we turn our space around, facing in different directions with the seasons. This reflects the four directions of Indigenous peoples, First Nations, Native Americans, and Celts, who order their lives in this cyclical way, mindful of the shifts in focus of seasons.

On this Autumn Equinox, we honor the balance in our lives of seeming binaries: light and dark, challenge and blessing, life and death. Our first reading today continues in the Wisdom tradition and imagines what happens when the people choose a death dealing path, rather than a life-giving one.

In these writings, Wisdom herself points toward Life, and the author contrasts it with the consequences of choosing the kind of appetites, power and oppression that deal death for us and others. These “life and death” choices are not only about our physical beings, but more so our *spiritual* ones; a life-giving path leads toward eternal life, and a death dealing one causes spiritual death. The lectionary from 2nd chapter of Wisdom leaves out verses 10 to 11, where the “ungodly” say, “Let us oppress the righteous poor man; let us not spare the widow or regard the gray hairs of the aged.”¹¹ But let our might be our *law of right*, for what is weak proves itself to be useless.” Let might be right. Just hearing this makes my soul die a little.

This reading reminds me of the well-known wisdom writing, the book of Job, where a kindly human is tested by trials and tribulations. These seem like such times, don't they? When we witness the power of “right” causing oppression and suffering to humans, to the planet, how do we respond? And if we don't respond, then where do we stand? During this season of transitions, how do we transform ourselves from bystanders into *upstanders*? Today's readings offer us clues to light our way. The Psalmist observes: God is our helper; God sustains our life. As Canadian Anglicans we promise at baptisms to “respect, sustain, and renew the life of the earth”. During this Season of Creation, and honoring of the Truth and Reconciliation movement, we receive opportunities to stand up for respect, dignity, and life for all people and creatures. What will we choose?

The writer of the letter of James to the early churches offers quite a few descriptions of the wise choices that sustain life: gentleness, peace, flexibility, forgiveness, openness, and balance. It can take courage to lean into these choices when we are surrounded by the “power of right”, can’t it? And conflicts? *Good job we don’t have those, hey!* Its best to avoid and ignore them, isn’t it? Let’s face it: being a *bystander* seems a whole lot safer and easier than being an *upstander*. Seems. When in fact, trusting in God, and leaning into that courage – with *strong hearts* – leads us on a life-giving path, for all of us. Who else will lead us?

Today’s Gospel story where Jesus answers the questions of power and greatness with the example of a little child can be found not only in Mark, but also in Matthew 18: “*unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven*”, and Luke 9: “*Whoever welcomes this child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me, for the least among all of you is the greatest.*” I’m looking forward to restarting our children’s program, are you? It never fails to lift my heart and point me toward light and life. I’m so grateful for Anja returning to help us take up the program again. To turn our faces toward the future, toward the light. To bless all creatures, great and small, on October 6.

I wonder: who else do we, as a society, consider “the least”? Those without money or shelter; those who are elderly or disabled; those not in the dominant culture, gender and orientation; creatures in God’s world without a language we understand? And yet, all of these – children, elders, creation – point us toward a life-giving path, one that sustains us and connects us to God and to one another, and away from the death-dealing path generated by our human need for honor, for possessions, for power over rather than power with.

You may have heard: recently I stood up and changed my schedule with the Diocese so I can be here at the church for the Food Bank and Hot Lunch days. Last Wednesday filled with me so much joy and *gratitude*! Beholding the faces of so many neighbors, of many ages and cultures, sharing their stories of hope and resilience, changed and enhanced my own life and our common life.

Things aren’t perfect; we all of us have trials and frustrations and fears. And. When we focus on the goodness in life, in what we have in common and our shared gratitude, we “draw near to God”. So, on this Equinox, as we enter the harvest season, I invite us all to focus on sharing our gratitude for all good things, and standing up against death-dealing unkindness, judgement and competition. Together, we will participate in a spiritual journey toward Life.

AMEN.