

EPIPHANY 7C 2025
Immanuel Highlands Episcopal Church
Wilmington, Delaware
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A few years ago I had a conversation with a Lutheran synod official. We talked about an upcoming transition, and I told him a bit about my own theological perspective. "Most days, I'm a universalist," I said, then added, "Then I meet someone who makes me want to hope there really is a hell."

He replied that he felt the same, usually after spending a day talking with clergy.

By the term "universalist," I mean that I believe (most days) that the saving work of Jesus includes everyone, for all time. That belief is stronger than one in current fashion, especially in the region where I was serving when I had that conversation.

The congregation I served hosted a monthly food pantry, where folks would register so that a truck loaded with food could bring enough to meet the need. Usually, we had a lot left over, and sometimes needed to find nearby sources to help distribute the food.

One of those was a large semi-mega church about thirty miles away. A member of the leadership team drove a van to our location, and we loaded most of the leftovers into it. As he was leaving, he told me he wanted to use the food to "get people in the door so we can get them saved."

As he drove off, I thought "we don't need to get them saved. We need to find ways to convince them they already are."

There are certain teachings about faith that we're told we have to believe in order to be part of that particular group. Among them is fundamentalism, which I was raised in. We were told we had to believe in the virgin birth, a literal seven human days to create everything in Genesis 1. We had to insist that we use only the King James translation of scripture, and that every single word of it was absolutely true.

Just before ordination, a member of my home parish came to me on behalf of a visitor. The visitor liked the outreach and general political stance of the parish, but said she had difficulty believing the truth about some things. "Like what?" I asked. The list included things like the virgin birth, the divinity of Jesus, and the resurrection. The question got around to whether or not we had to really believe all those things we say after we say the words, "I believe."

I replied that she didn't have to believe any of them, but she had to pretty much do so to be a faithful Episcopalian. So they decided to get a second opinion, not relying on the one from the church organist. Off to the Rector they went, hoping for a different answer. They didn't get one.

I believe the institutional church got itself into a bit of difficulty when it started requiring a belief in certain aspects of teaching, or in the total and unquestioned

accuracy of church teachings. Such a stance led to a bit of embarrassment in our own time when the institutional church had to admit it was wrong, and that the earth is basically round and orbits the sun. Despite that, there remain some “flat earthers” among us, even with real proof that we inhabit a globe and not an ancient overgrown frisbee.

The variation in belief systems and in their requirements serves a purpose. Mostly, that purpose is to distract us from the more important aspects of our faith. Recently, a person with a strange relationship to our federal government was quoted as saying something like “Christianity has a concept of loving your neighbor.” If anyone’s interested, it’s not just a concept. It’s a commandment, and, unfortunately, not one many in the area I mentioned in the beginning want carved in stone and placed at the county courthouse.

Jesus takes us even further than that. Love your enemy. Pray for those who persecute you. I reminded a group of high schoolers about this during a diocesan retreat weekend. Someone had mentioned being bullied in school. Others talked about peer pressure and sibling rivalry. I asked, “Have any of you prayed for Osama bin Ladin?” Dead silence. “Pray that God will touch his heart, maybe change his mind so that the hatred he has toward us will soften, maybe disappear.” Of course, the effects of those prayers became moot a couple of years later.

Our prayers for those who work against us work much in the same way as forgiveness, another thing Jesus told us to use freely and regularly. And we do pray for that whenever we meet. “Forgive us our trespasses/sins/debts as we forgive those who trespass or sin against us, or who are indebted to us.” Forgive *us* as we forgive *them*. Do I need to quote Scooby Doo again?

At some point, most of us have done exercises to increase strength and agility. Those exercises usually require providing resistance against which we push and flex. We gain strength in the opposition. But praying for enemies, forgiving those who hurt us, those things don’t seem like strength building, at least in the physical sense.

But the spiritual sense is that they do exactly that. Prayer and forgiveness help us move beyond the present moment so that we might live faithfully into God’s future. Praying for those who oppose or hurt us changes our perspective, even as it might have no immediate discernable effect on the other person. Forgiving them is perhaps our only way of getting rid of anger and resentment, even as we move forward through the consequences of having been in that moment together. The relationship changes, which it must do. Prayer and forgiveness are the tools that prevent us from becoming just like that which we dislike, which is how hatred and abuse gain strength—they take our own strength and add it to theirs.

And, to use the example in today’s first lesson, God may use the challenges and difficulties of the present moment for a far greater purpose. Does that mean we just sit

back and let them defeat us? To quote Paul, "By no means!" Actually, that's probably how our translators make Paul's response sound nice and polite. Use your imagination.

Pray for your enemies. Forgive those who hurt you. Move back into right relationship with those words you say after "I believe." Be the alternative to the hatred and vitriol of the present time by standing in truth to what we have been given by the hand of God, and find the way through the trials, the struggles, even the death-dealing ways of the self-serving. Remember not just the words of Jesus, but also the way he paved through all of that, emerging into new life after the corrupt marriage of religion and politics had done their worst.

Because when all is said and done, God's promise is far greater than the offerings of those who seek their own power. You see, God keeps showing up and saying those very first words. Let there be light.