

## What I've Learned From You

2 Easter 2010

April 11, 2010

How do we learn about God? We learn about him from direct experience of him, through experiencing the Sacraments, through the indwelling in us of his Holy Spirit. We learn about God from Scripture, in his self revealing of who he is. And we learn about God from other people, seeing their example – sometimes positive and sometimes a negative example.

Today we can learn about God from Thomas, and I want to spend just a minute or so talking about him. You know, Thomas gets a bum rap, all this 'doubting Thomas' nonsense. Thomas was a rational and discerning man, unafraid to ask the questions others were reluctant to ask. When someone tells you they've seen someone come back from the dead, it is a sign of intelligence to ask questions and need some more evidence. Thomas thought for himself and was not going what could be hysteria control him.

Thomas also may have been the most courageous of the disciples. Think about it. While the rest of them were cowering in fear behind locked doors, Thomas wasn't there, was he? Where was he? The text doesn't say, but wherever he was, he was out and about in town that just executed Jesus, a place of real danger. Wherever he was, he was not crouched in fear behind a locked door.

You might say that Thomas was a Grade A specimen of someone who was self-sufficient. Someone we look up to. A man who can take care of himself, thank you very much. But Thomas came to see that all his self sufficiency was absolutely nothing compared to experiencing the love of Jesus, his Lord and his God.

We can learn a lot about God from Thomas, but what I've been thinking most about this week is not as much of what I've learned about God from Thomas, but what I've learned about God from you. In fact, I've put these things down in a letter, which I've placed in each of your mail boxes. I've also put a stack of letters in the parish hall for anyone who would like to look at it.

After a short intro in my letter, here's what I wrote to you and about you.

I've been thinking a lot this week about what I've learned about God from you, my friends at Intercession. I've been reflecting on the following questions. What have I learned from you that will make me a better priest? A better person? What have you given me that will stay with me for the rest of my life? Today, I want to tell you what you have taught me.

**I've learned from your strong faith in God, a faith that casts out fear.** I've been with many of you in the hospital and in times of crisis, including at the deathbeds of loved ones. I have seen your trust in Jesus in times of challenge, times when it would be all too easy to let fear take over. Yours is an Easter faith, a faith founded on the resurrection – the knowledge that Christ has indeed won the victory! I have seen this faith with my own eyes, it is real ... and it is powerful.

**I've learned from your love of mystery in worship** ... the dark ambiance of our sanctuary, the history, the soaked-in-prayer feel of the church. It feels soaked in prayer because it is. Some of the things we need to learn about God, some of the things we want to say to God, cannot be put into words. In this timeless setting, words become a little less necessary. This past year, after a great deal of study and discernment, this parish committed to staying in this old building – at least awhile longer. Sure, there's improvement yet to be made to this old structure – and the recent decision to replace the church furnace is a good start – but ultimately I sense that the decision – while paying attention to the economics of the situation -- was largely a spiritual decision to retain this mysterious ambiance that draws us more deeply into worship. Together, week by week, we have experienced the presence of God near us in our worship, and at the same time been awed by his power and grandeur as we've been renewed by his Body and Blood. And I think about those occasions when I've been privileged to baptize your children, holding them in my arms as the water is still dripping off their foreheads – and the looks on your faces of such joy and awe at what this amazing God can do.

**I've learned from your faithful love to those in need,** the importance of ministry to the homebound, the sick, the lonely, those in need. I've learned from your generosity in serving at nursing homes, reaching out with love to the homebound, giving generously where there is need. This is a part of the priestly ministry, but here at Intercession it is also an essential part of a vibrant lay ministry.

**I've learned from your love for God and each other that transcends secular differences.** At Intercession our shared faith is more important than whether we may be Republicans or Democrats or anything else. Many of us here have strong political views. I am grateful for this, as our political processes need people who are guided by Godly values. But I am even more grateful to see in you a love of God and each other that overarches political differences. The same is true of Church politics. This has been a trying era for all Episcopalians ... controversy, sharp disagreements, separation, animosity, law suits. I know it has not always been easy for some of you to hang in there with the Church, and I want to commend you that you have. You know, serving and worshipping side by side is easy when we agree on everything. Unity when we do not is another thing altogether, and it is only possible – in my opinion – with God's help and with a love of God that transcends anything else. I have seen that love in action in this church.

**I've learned from your patience and steadfastness.** Intercession feels like an old English cathedral, solid and eternal, a community, a people that has been around long before I passed through and will be around long after I have gone. There is a sense here that when your faith is built on the rock, you don't have to make knee-jerk decisions, you look at the long term, the distant view. I remember when I first arrived here, a parishioner taught me about what he called the Minnesota Shuffle – it's the way you walk on ice, something a boy just in from Texas needed to know. You walk slowly and deliberately, watching carefully, but you do not stop. Glare ice and twenty below will not stop you. Perhaps the Minnesota Shuffle is emblematic of the quiet determination, strength, and steadfastness of the people of Intercession. We may not always move fast, but we are going to get there and nothing will stop us.

**I've learned from you that what we can do together is amazing.** We've done some big things: mission trips, big outreach projects – I think of the Hmong outreach, the New Orleans mission, the rummage sale to name a few. Things that required team work, everybody pitching in. You have touched me with your willingness to step up and serve. We haven't always known how to do big projects, we have felt unqualified, maybe weren't sure where to start ... but together we do start out, step by step, work as a team – and it is simply amazing what we can do.

**I've learned so much from the children and youth of Intercession.** And I've learned from your love and devotion to our children. Frankly, Wanda the Wolf and I have had a blast hanging out with the kids of Intercession! Camping trips with the youth have been great, and I've got the sore back from sleeping on the ground and the mosquito bites to prove it. I am so blessed to know these kids, so blessed to watch them grow up. The young people of Intercession give me great hope for the world.

Now, the things written above are about you as a whole, as a community, as a group of people I admire and always will love. But when I look out upon you on a Sunday, yes, I see my community, the Body of Christ, but I don't just see a congregation. I see each of you as my friend. And I love each of you for who you are. There may be a hundred of you here, but I notice if any one individual is absent. The image of each individual face I will carry with me forever.

Thank you for teaching me so many things. I am deeply grateful to every one of you. I told the vestry this a few weeks back, and I want to repeat it here: I have never served or attended a more wonderful church than Intercession.

Are you perfect? No. If you had been, you never would have called me as your rector. Yes, there is much for each of us yet to strive for, most of it involving an ongoing deepening of our faith. What I want for Intercession, what I want for each of you is to more and more know Jesus as your Lord and your God, this God who will transform, energize, and save your life. This God who, through your efforts, will transform, energize, and save the world.

I offer these thoughts with my deepest love and admiration for you.

Yours in Christ, Jim+