

A SERMON FROM ST. MARK'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH

NEW CANAAN, CONNECTICUT

START WITH THE ANSWER

Preached by Joshua A. Hill, Director of Children's and Youth Ministry

January 17, 2010 The Second Sunday after Epiphany

John 2:1-11

She said to the servants, "Do whatever he tells you."

I speak these words in the name of God:
Father, Son, Holy Spirit. Amen.

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Do you remember how you felt
when you discovered
that the answers to your Algebra
homework
were printed in the back of the textbook?
The answers. Right there. In the book.
For me, this was a life-altering event.
At first I was upset no one told me.
Every night I've been doing my
homework

Slogging through difficulties with
uncertainty and frustration.

Getting mired in wrong thinking and
complicated problems I couldn't solve.
And the answers were in the book the
whole time?

After this special discovery, I got
greedy.

I'm not telling anyone about this, I
thought.

I alone will receive perfect scores on all
my math homework.

They'll think I'm a genius.

This plan didn't work-out for long.

It turns-out my Algebra teacher had seen
this trick before.

I was an above average student in math,

but not for a moment did she believe I
had arrived at all the right answers
without the need to show my work.
Over the ensuing weeks—because I
naturally retained this laughable idea of
becoming a math whiz—
I continued turning in all the right
answers.

But I started showing good work.
Homework took more time. Effort.
Patience. Focus. Sacrifice.

And just as the textbook editors designed
it,
this is how I learned the central logics of
Algebra.

By starting with the right answer and
learning the right work.

You don't know Algebra until you
understand the relationships between the
problem, the answer and the work.

Learning to trust the answers was the
best way to build confidence that indeed
I was making true progress.

I'd like to suggest this morning
that this is essentially the same way we
discover the abundant life of Christian
discipleship.

Life can be much like a tough Algebra
assignment.

We try to solve problems our own way,
and we often get mired in wrong
thinking.

But life is bigger than Algebra.
Wrong thinking leads to more than a bad grade.
Uncorrected, it yields perpetual misdirection.
Pain. Suffering.
And we eventually arrive at serious problems which only get worse.
Addictions. Insecurities. Secrets we keep.
And these problems spill over into our relationships until they are broken.
This brokenness doesn't stop with individuals.
Wrong thinking can degrade entire societies,
causing even bigger problems.
Like toxic air quality: Did you know the number one cause of hospitalization among American children is asthma?
Wrong thinking yields big problems.
Like the quiet pandemic of domestic violence: Did you know 25% of women in America live with the memory of physical abuse by a partner?
8% of men have been physically abused by a partner.
Wrong thinking yields big problems.
Like a slavery-based economy.
Which in its wake, centuries later, still leaves Haiti's infrastructure and people so vulnerable that a 7.0 earthquake takes 50,000 lives instead of 50.
Lord Jesus, have mercy.

Wouldn't it be nice if there was a way we could
Go to the book; Find the answer; Work smarter;
Learn the meaning of our life;
As we address the problems of the world?
My friends, this is what I believe about the Gospel.
The right answer has been here, the whole time, written in the book.

Thursday I visited with Father Tony Jarvis,
Long-time headmaster of Boston's Roxbury Latin School.
The two of us briefly discussed this morning's reading,
and he helped me see this answer so simply.
A wedding party runs-out of wine.
Big Problems.
So Jesus' mother turns to the servants
And discloses the solution.
The right answer that will correct the situation
And our thinking about the meaning of life.
She turns to the servants and gives this advice:
"DO WHATEVER HE TELLS YOU"
In other words, stop doing what you're doing, and DO WHATEVER *HE* TELLS YOU.
It's this simple.
Starting with this answer, we discover that our problems
Are less problematic than the wrong thinking we bring to them.
If we start with the possibility that Jesus indeed is Lord,
And if we begin living our lives with Christ at the helm,
We'll learn what it means to live.
There's one more thing I'd like to say about our gospel reading.
Jesus takes water and makes 120 gallons of wine. Maybe more.
And the Scripture tells us the Wedding Planner didn't know where it had come from.
And then it secretly tells us—the readers--I love this...
(In Parentheses it says)
But the servants knew where the wine came from.

Here's the nugget: Those who serve Christ are enlightened by their obedience.

They will discover their own unique role in God's mission to replace scarcity with abundance. That's what God is up to.

Replacing scarcity with abundance.

I have an undergraduate degree in Religion.

I also have a graduate degree in Religion.

I paid a lot of money in order to arrive at this conclusion:

There is no secret information that unlocks the life of the Spirit.

It cannot be taught in the academic context.

Rather, the abundant life of Christian faith is learned by obeying Jesus.

Start with the answer.

"DO WHATEVER HE TELLS YOU"

Then pay attention to what you learn from the work. Amen.