

I imagine all of us have some favorite things. Perhaps a favorite food or beverage. Maybe a favorite song, or favorite place to vacation. Do you have a favorite color, or hobby, or television program? A favorite movie, or sport, or sports team, or book, or poem? Have you a favorite flower, or animal? What are some of your favorite memories?

For the past several days as I have been thinking about what I should say to you on my last Sunday in this pulpit, some of my favorite church-related things have come to mind. I decided since this is my final Sunday at St. George's, and who knows if I ever will have another opportunity to officiate at Sunday worship anywhere, I might as well use the occasion to inflict on you some of those favorite things of mine.

So here goes.

During the thirty years since I was ordained in 1992, I have served either as rector, or associate priest, or interim rector at four very different parishes in this diocese. I have served at what was at the time one of the most liturgically innovative, progressive, and non-traditional parishes anywhere. At the other extreme, I have served at our diocesan cathedral, which cherishes tradition. I have served at what was at the time one of the three largest Anglican parishes in Canada in terms of its membership and attendance at worship. And I have served here, at St. George's, twice.

Among those four very different parishes, this parish of St. George's is my favorite. It is by far, my favorite. This beautiful and quaint little church stuck out on the 13<sup>th</sup> concession is my ideal of the perfect parish church. But beyond its bricks and mortar, the real reason this is my favorite parish are its people ... you. My experience of the people here is that they are welcoming, impressively faithful in their commitment to regular Sunday worship, helpful, caring, and cooperative. Both individually and collectively the people of St. George's do not take themselves all that seriously, and how refreshing that is for a parish. Moreover, there has never been the slightest doubt in my mind that if ever I needed anyone from this parish to help me with anything, you would do it.

There's nothing quite like being alone at St. George's, at dusk, when it is perfectly quiet, and you can sit in a pew and close your eyes and imagine all the people now long departed who entered this place during their lifetime, and who called this church, either for a short or a long time, their church. There is an impressively long line of Christian saints who have preceded us in this place.

If I could leave just one permanent impression on you, it would be to encourage you never to take this church of St. George's for granted. Cherish it for the rare and wonderful place that it is. Never take for granted how fortunate you are that God led you to a parish such as St. George's. And I encourage you to remain faithful in worship as a parishioner of St. George's.

In my professional life I have been a businessman, an academic, a university administrator, and a priest, all of which have brought me into contact with a wide range of people. My favorite people, by far, are church people. The most decent, understanding, reliable, trustworthy, and caring people I have encountered in my life have been church people. People like you.

Since this is my final Sunday, I decided to stray from the usual practice of following the schedule of Bible readings as they appear in the lectionary, and instead include three of my favorite scriptures: Romans 12, the 145<sup>th</sup> Psalm, and the gospel parable of the sower. I also picked my favorite hymns to be sung today. Sarah, our music director, whose knowledge of church music vastly exceeds my own, always granted me a huge favour by selecting the hymns for our worship services each week. Today, however, for good or ill, the choices are my own.

As for my favorite passage from the Gospels, all of us are familiar with the Parable of the Sower. Jesus used the familiar image of a farmer sowing seed, casting them by hand. When the seeds are scattered in a wide arc, some fall on the path and are eaten by the birds. Jesus compares this to people who hear the word of God's Kingdom but do not give it a chance to take root in their life.

In the second illustration, some of the seeds fall on rocky ground. They spring up quickly, but without sufficient depth of soil to protect their roots the sun soon scorches and withers the new plants. This refers to people who initially respond eagerly to Christ's word and ways, but quickly fall away when challenges arise.

Then there are the seeds that fall among the thorns. As the thorns grow, the seeds are choked out. This is a reference to people who hear of God's word and ways but over time, perhaps even after a long time, are lured away from their Christian faith by other concerns and desires.

Finally, there are the seeds that fall in good soil and bring forth an abundant and lasting harvest. Their hundredfold yield calls attention to God's extravagance and to the abundance of peace and joyfulness that will result from living as Jesus instructs us to live.

On the surface, the Parable of the Sower does not appear to be a particularly hopeful parable. After all, only one in four, 25 percent, of the seeds that were sown flourished. This parable honestly acknowledges the struggles and failures that are part of every human life, and of the attempts to proclaim and share the love of God. Nevertheless, at its heart this parable is a story of hope and possibility, not because of the expertise of the sower, and not because of what we do or who we are, but because of who God is and what God is doing.

The Parable of the Sower is ultimately a story of hope, a story based in the mysterious and extravagant love of God, a love that is beyond our control and beyond our understanding. The parable's lesson is that, despite the odds, we should never forget the powerful image of the love of God working in our individual lives and in the world.

The reason this is my favorite parable is because it makes me look at the four different outcomes of the sewn seeds and their analogies of how people respond differently to the demands of being Christian, and it forces me to identify where I fit into the story. Am I like the seed that fell on the path, with a weak and superficial faith? Or am I like the seed that has fallen on rocky ground with a faith that was initially enthusiastic, but lacked depth and substance? Or am I like the seed that has fallen among the thorns, and my faith failed because over time it proved insufficient for dealing with life's concerns and challenges? Or am I like the seed that has fallen in good soil, where my faith endured and enabled me to do God's will with benefit to others?

And how frequently, as the circumstances of life with all its highs and lows changes, do I switch among those four levels of faith and faithlessness?

You know me well enough to know that I am going to ask you to ask yourself, which of the four examples of the seed is your faith most like today?

Now, just two more of my favorite things. Here is one of my favorite stories:

Once upon a time there was a man who loved living in his tropical paradise. Having been born on the island where his parents, grandparents, and great-grandparents had always lived, he held in his heart a reverence for the beauty of the palm trees, the white sand, the sloping mountains in the distance, and the gentle climate. This man, approaching death, told his loved ones to place some of the island sand into each of his hands when he died, so that he might hold on to the memory of his beloved place forever. They did as he asked, and so the man proceeded to the gates of heaven still clutching the sand.

At the gate, he was warmly greeted and told that as soon as he emptied his hands of the sand and let go of his former life, he could enter into eternal joy. The man was crushed, as he could not imagine letting go of what he loved so much. So, he waited. He waited for a long, long time. So long, in fact, that at last his hands grew weary and could no longer hold the sand. The grains of sand eventually slipped through his fingers, lost forever.

At that moment, Jesus came to him, holding the man as he sobbed at the loss of his favorite memories of his former life. Jesus said to him, “*Come with me now, and enter into your rest.*” Jesus then walked with the man through the gates of heaven, where before them stretched for all eternity the man’s beloved island.

As a Christian, that is one of my favorite stories, with its image of being accompanied by Christ into the glorious wonders of the next life that awaits all of us when this life has ended. It is a reminder that when we live faithfully with a clear and certain awareness of Christ’s Holy Spirit touching our hearts and guiding us through this life, the best is always yet come.

Lastly, I leave you with what has become for me over the past couple of years, my favorite saying: “Live as if you were to die tomorrow. Learn as if you were to live forever.” It is a useful daily reminder to treat each day that is given to us as the God-given blessing that it is. It also reminds and encourages us to see that for as long as we have this life, none of us are ever complete. We remain God’s work-in-progress until we meet God.

What should I say to you on this my last Sunday speaking from this pulpit? Simply, “thank you.” Thank you for the many kindnesses that you have shown to Cathie and me. Thank you for the example that each of you in your own way have shown me of your faithfulness and your commitment to this church, and your commitment to God.

You inspired me.

Finally, thank you for being my favorite church people in my favorite parish church. **Amen.**

**11<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost**

**21 August 2022**

**Rev. Dr. Keith Fleming**