

Sermon for Christ & Grace Church Petersburg, VA  
Proper 20, Year A, September 24, 2017  
The Rev. Bill Queen  
“What Endures”

in the past several years I have experienced two deaths in my immediate family; my older brother David died from cancer in 2009; my father Bill, after whom I am named, died from cancer and Alzheimer’s in 2013; I was executor for both of their estates, and so it fell to me to deal with their possessions; it is strange to think just how many of our possessions may outlast us, and for which someone else may need to take responsibility

my brother left behind many cassette tapes he had recorded; I was listening to one of those tapes that really carried me back in time; he had set out the recorder over twenty-five years ago while our family was watching old home movies; the movies had no soundtrack, but the tape recorded our commentaries and our reactions—laughter, oohs and aahs, and “look at that!”—as we relived memorable family experiences: a children’s birthday party, cooking breakfast in the sand dunes by the ocean, clumsy belly flops into a neighbor’s swimming pool, and a Little League home run hit over the fence (the belly flop was mine, the home run was my brother’s); in that tape my brother’s and my father’s voices were eerily prominent, along with those of the rest of the members of my family; they sounded like they were right there, alive, with me; it is strange that our recorded images and our spoken voices may outlast us also

I recall this experience reflecting upon how our Collect of the Day (BCP p. 234) speaks about other things that outlast us; the Collect mentions “earthly things” and “heavenly things” and then prays that “while we are placed among things that are passing away, [we] hold fast to those that shall endure”; it reminds us that while it is true that certain material objects may stick around longer than our physical bodies, there is something far more important than physical duration to be considered; we are promised by God that there is more to our existence than that of our physical bodies; the Collect is taking a longer-term view of us—by taking an eternal view of us and of our relationship to God

I am also led to reflect upon this Collect after spending most of the day yesterday in the Vestry retreat; while our focus was largely upon things that we can do over the next three to five months to prepare for the arrival of your new Rector, we also prayed and did Bible studies that reminded us of the larger picture—of the things that we, as the Church with a capital ‘C’, are responsible for that are bigger than any one of us, that are bigger than this parish, and that will endure beyond our lives; the departure of one Rector, the passing of an interim year, the arrival of a new Rector, as momentous as they may seem to us at the time, are tiny blips upon a long continuum of Christ’s ministry in this place; in every decision we make we have to consider that long view

the Collect contrasts earthly things with heavenly things; but it would be too quick and easy a judgment to say that these differences are always recognizable, or that they are even able to be disentangled from each other; is loving God with all our heart, soul, body, and mind an earthly thing or a heavenly thing?; I think it must be a bit of both; is loving our neighbor the way Christ loved us an earthly or a heavenly attitude?; I think it also must be a bit of both

as an incarnational faith Christianity believes that Jesus lived out a divine life on this earth; he brought a heavenly plan to bear upon our human existence; so, as Jesus did, we take our heavenly outlook and we put it into action in this earthly, human world

the Collect also recognizes that we may often find ourselves overly anxious about earthly things; as an antidote to such anxiety, it urges us to set our priorities differently, and that the way to avoid anxiety about earthly things is to focus upon, and to love, heavenly things more than earthly things; but, as I’ve said, these are hard to separate from each other; what I would suggest, is that we consider everything we engage with in in terms of how it helps or hinders our relationship to God, and how it helps or hinders our relationships with other people; another way to think of this is to try and separate the essentials of our life from the non-essentials

through prayer, through Bible study, and through reflection and meditation, we can try to see the world in this way; we can try to see how this earth and our lives are imbued with the heavenly; this is not something that has to lead us to being overly mystical; we believe that in our Baptism we have received

the gift of the Holy Spirit to live within us; in the words of the concluding Baptismal prayer, that has given us “an enquiring and discerning heart, the courage to will and to persevere, a spirit to know and to love [God], and the gift of joy and wonder in all [God’s] works” (BCP p 308); that’s pretty powerful stuff if we try and live it out each and every day of our lives

this viewpoint also invites us to put ourselves into a mode of thinking and living that resembles Jesus’; wouldn’t it be great if we had films of Jesus going about his ministries?; wouldn’t it be great if we had sound recordings of Jesus’ teachings and parables, like the one in our Gospel reading today?; lacking those, we go to the best resources we do have: the Gospel accounts of his life and ministry; the Epistle accounts, like Paul’s today, of how the early church tried to put Jesus’ program into action in Christian communities where people like us worshipped together, shared in fellowship together, carried out ministries together, cared for each other in his name, and generally lived out their love of God together; the church, our church, is all about these same things today; the work that we are doing will endure, because it’s not just our work we are doing—it’s Christ’s work; the love that we express and share will endure, because it’s not just our love that we express and share—it’s Christ’s love; these are the things that endure; hold fast to the things that endure