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A few years after I first joined the Episcopal Church,
Darlington, the private school in Rome,
hired an Episcopal priest to be their chaplain.

There was a church out in the county
that always had the most interesting messages on their sign out front.

This was the kind of church that always said inflammatory things
about whatever was going on in the news.

Now, it could have been coincidence,
but right about the time Darlington hired this Episcopal priest
to be the chaplain,
that church out in the county changed its sign to say,
“Darlington harbors Satan.”

Clearly they were not fans of the Episcopal Church.

This message stayed up for about a month,
until one day I drove by and noticed to my delight
that someone had come through in the dark of night,
and changed the sign to read,
“Darlington harbors Santa.”

I have always secretly hoped that whoever changed that sign
was someone in my old youth group!

We see these signs everywhere.
Different churches say different things.

If you look online for “offensive church signs”
be prepared for some that are frankly unmentionable from the pulpit.

I do have a few favorites that I’ve seen,
either online or out and about in the world.
“Don’t be so open-minded;
your brains’ll fall out.”

“A free thinker is Satan’s slave.”

Or a particularly inspiring one,
“You may party in hell,
but you will be the barbecue.”

I have to say that I am somewhat partial
to the signs that we have up around town.
Little metal signs that read,
“The Episcopal Church Welcomes You.”

It may not be clever,
but the message is just about right.
You are welcome here.
You are always welcome here.

We get conflicting messages all the time.

Messages on television:

“buy, buy, buy”

“eat, eat, eat”.

Messages from other churches,
sometimes inspiring,
sometimes not so much.

Too often I hear other churches talk about
how little we love God,

instead of reminding us
about how much God loves us.

Too often we hear answers about judgement
instead of exploring the mystery of grace.

I have to say that I hope we hear a conflicting message at St. Mark's.
I hope we hear a message in this church
that conflicts with what we hear in the world.

I hope we hear a message in this church
that conflicts with what we sometimes hear in our own hearts.

The message we most often hear is a message of fear.

Advertisers try to tell us that we don't have enough,
so we should buy more.

Our relationships, broken as they often are,
tell us that we aren't loved enough.

But God has been telling us,
from the beginning,
that there is enough.

There is enough love;
there is enough grace;
there is enough life,
no matter what.

We say we believe that.
We say we trust in God.
But do we really?
Do we really trust that there is enough;
enough love;
enough life?

Jesus issues a warning today.
A warning against people who wear special clothes
and have the best seat in the house.

*And this makes me,
very uncomfortable.*

But, like always,
the warning is really for all of us.

He warns us that we don't always follow our own example,
so often saying one thing,
and doing another.

He's trying to tell us about humility.
Humility is saying what you mean
and meaning what you say.

Humility means being honest about who you are.
And who you are is a child of God.

Who you are is created
and loved
and redeemed.

Humility means accepting that fact
and then figuring out what you are going to do about it.

What are we going to do,
about the fact that we are children of God?

Well, all we can really do is show up.
We can keep showing up,
keep trying to love God and love our neighbor;
keep trying to love ourselves.

Jesus is the only person who could ever rightly say,
"Do as I say,
AND, do as I do."

We all make a mess of things;
but we keep showing up,
seeking grace,
and finding it.

A good friend of mine was at his office
when a new altar guild member came to set up for the next service.

She had never set up before on her own
and was a bit nervous that she'd somehow make a mess of things.

And so she came to my friend and asked him to help her,
to make sure that she did it right.

He looked at her and said,

“Is there bread?

Is there wine?

Is there water?

Yes?

Then don't worry;

we've got everything we need for church.

You just keep showing up;
you'll get it figured out.”

Try to do it right.
Keep showing up.

But no matter what.

No matter what.

Never forget that God is here.

God is with us,
has been with us from the beginning.

God created us out of love,
called us out of love,
and redeems us with that love,

no matter what.