

It's true confession time beloved: my Sundays have been less than complete and whole for years now. I've grieved the loss of Sunday evenings being meant for Downton Abbey. I know its been years and I am buoyed that another movie is on the way but its just not the same.

I know that the dialog was not true to the time period and yes, I know it was terribly classist and maybe the plot lines were starting to run a wee bit thin. I know all that and yet, the story still intrigued me.

It is the early days of the 20th Century in England. World War I has split the world in two and life at this English estate is different.

As one character states, "I feel a shaking of the ground I stand on. The nature of life is not permanence but flux. Things are changing."

Things are indeed changing. Poor Lord Grantham. He wants to run the estate as he always has without having to worry or ever talk about money (talking about money is so middle class) but when the money runs out and he is bailed out by his middle class cousin, values begin to change how the estate is run.

This is not easy. There is great conflict in the family as the world is changing and estate after estate all around Downton is closing down. Lord Grantham of course wants things to remain exactly the same, but Matthew the once reticent heir to the estate has his own ideas and the two are clashing with one another over the best possible future for the estate. Lord Grantham can't see his place in the world and the changes are more than he can bear. His very personhood feels threatened.

With more than a little bit of irony, Lord Grantham finds reconciliation to these new ideas through conversation with his son in law the radical socialist Irish man who reminds him that, "Every man or woman who

marries into this house, every child born into it, has to put their gifts at the family's disposal.”

The young Irish man then goes on to remind Lord Grantham of his value to the estate, his role and the importance of what he holds.

This story is not just a good piece of narrative drama; it is the story of our life today right now.

Beloved, Ascension is Downton Abbey. We have this beautiful estate to gather together and every person EVERY person who calls this place their church home is invited to put their gifts on the altar. Every person.

Today in Acts we get this incredible defining vision that forever changes the followers of the way. The followers of the way are invited to think of faithfulness in terms that were utterly different from their past Jewish identity. Peter who was an incredibly conservative Jew has this vision of food and eating that utterly shakes the very ground he stands on. The nature of the world is flux.

We stand beloved on the precipice of flux and reformation in the church. In Christianity itself.

Not just at Ascension but everywhere in Christendom. The average Sunday attendance in Episcopal churches nationwide is 50 or less people. The average age of an Episcopalian has risen every year that I can remember. I am still considered young in comparison to the average age which is now 69. From 2008-2012, on average 74 Episcopal churches were closed nationwide. I personally know about this reality of closing churches and how painful that can be.

I know beloved we didn't come to church to discuss our demise; I hope we came today to speak of our own deep persistence and faith.

Like Downton Abbey, beloved, the church must find new ways of imagining itself. All of us on this estate are invited to put our gifts at this family's disposal.

Ascension, we can't afford to do business the way we always have in the past; not if we hope to survive in a world that sees institutional church life dramatically changing. It is definitely time to dream new visions of what it means to be Christian in the 21st Century.

Through out the summer beloved, I will be sharing thoughts about the nature of flux and reformation in the church and hopefully together we can dream of a new future together.

One of the changes we will see coming to our church is coffee hour. Prior to Covid, our beloved Gail Coolidge was our Coffee hour Queen. She did an excellent job of this ministry and helped line up people to serve at Coffee Hour. Right now, we are inviting people to sign up for coffee hour. If we want to have a viable church we need to have a viable coffee hour. Counting on one person to provide coffee hour is not a sustainable model.

Like Downton Abbey beloved all of us on this estate are invited to put our gift at this family's disposal. Everyone, every man, woman and child is on the hospitality committee at this church. To that end, we will be forming Hospitality Tribes. Each Tribe (12 in total) will take a turn serving coffee hour at both 9 and 11, and greeting people as they come to church. Every active member will be on a hospitality tribe. Each tribe will pray for the members of their hospitality tribe. We will even be placing our elders that are not able to serve at this time onto tribes. Maybe that sounds foolish but let me explain.

The idea is that when it comes to that tribe's turn to tend coffee hour, you will be praying for that elder on your tribe and also calling them. They will receive support and prayers. If they can come, their primary ministry on a Sunday morning will be to be queen or king and host the conversation at coffee hour.

I'll never forget using this model at St Benedicts a former parish of mine. We had gone through the exact same thing as we are going through right now: we had one person doing coffee hour and it was not sustainable. We put together the tribes and off we went. Mary an octogenarian growing closer to 90 who was not able clean or set up coffee hour anymore. When she was told that her ministry was to greet people as they came into coffee hour and to host the conversations, she was thrilled! Mary never missed her chance to do her ministry and to do it well. She loved to be included in this ministry and felt like a valued member of the community.

One Sunday when it was her turn, Mary wasn't at church. Her hospitality tribe noticed her absence at church and someone phoned her cell during church. Her granddaughter answered her phone. Mary had had a stroke and was at the hospital dying. Her granddaughter had no idea how to reach me.

Immediately after church I was able to go and be with Mary because we had decided as a congregation that the ministry of hospitality was EVERYONE'S ministry. And Mary had been missed that day. She didn't slip through the cracks.

If we are to be a viable church, then hospitality has to be everyone's ministry at Ascension. No one can slip through the cracks. That's the saddest story churches ever tell: people who wander away and no one knows why or cares for them.

All of us are invited to place our gifts of kindness and hospitality on the altar. Over the summer, in our font, you will be reading about the various leaders of hospitality tribes and at the end of summer you will receive communication from your tribe leader about your hospitality tribe and your opportunity to serve your church community at coffee hour.

We are like Downton beloved; resplendent and lovely, a place of gracious living and hospitality, we are also in the state of flux in our world and all of our gifts are needed for us to be a viable sustainable place. We are invited beloved into a new vision of what it means to be Christian in the 21st century. Let us place our gifts on the altar together and continue to be a place of beauty and service beyond the 21st century.

Amen.