

Now, we all know Covid has put a damper on a number of aspects of our lives. We all know that. But lately, I've been getting more and more interested in the mundane things that we just take for granted that are being affected. I'm sure you all remember the Great Toilet Paper Drought of 2020. That was weird. Then there was the Infamous Pipeline Hack of 2021. Most of us have experienced gas hiccups before, but coupling a gas shortage with a pandemic was just a cruel trick. You can't find used cars anymore, and the ones you do turn up are way overpriced. It's suddenly uncool to leave the house without a mask. And if I could go back in time, I'd invest in hand lotion - I go through gallons of the stuff to counteract all that sanitizer. Of course, there's big stuff, too. Visits with family are rare, hugs and handshakes and other casual human touch are off the table, trips to the grocery store or the gym or pretty much anywhere outside of the house are occasions for grumpy run-ins with people who just refuse to play by the same set of rules as everyone else. It's a lot.

All of our patterns are off. I remember way back in high school, I had this philosophy teacher who asked us to try to go through a single day and question everything. Just try it. It's not possible, he claimed, and if you actually could do it, you'd be exhausted. We had one smart-aleck kid who wanted to prove him wrong, so he came into class with a notebook full of all the things he'd questioned during the day, plopped into his chair, and began to pat himself on the back for a job well-questioned. Before he even got started, though, the teacher could see what was coming. He'd been down this road before and had an ace up the sleeve. He asked the smart-aleck just how he knew the chair he'd just plopped into would hold him up? How did he know that someone hadn't come in the night before and loosened all the screws? I know it's nit-picky and very Philosophy 101, but that lesson has stuck with me. We put more trust into our world working the way we expect it to than most of us'll ever realize. Now, that trust isn't necessarily a bad thing, but it's often unexamined. We just assume that because things have always worked out for us before, they'll work out for us now. I think part of why the Covid Era is so exhausting is because we are having to examine all sorts of things we've taken for granted all these years. Seems like everything is in question, or at least everything is affected. And we have to adapt, and adapt again, and adapt yet again.

One of those adaptations for me has been a major disruption of my weekly schedule. See, time was when Fr. Steve and I would go to a different diner every Friday morning. We explored all the ways to do eggs and ham from here to Liverpool and all the way to the back of a hardware store. And just about the time we'd thought we'd tried 'em all, a new one'd open up or we'd hear tell of an overlooked hole-in-the-wall. Well, for the first time since March of 2020, Steve and I went to a diner last week. And I gotta tell ya, the food was fine. I had an omelet and an endlessly topped-up cup of coffee. But it wasn't really about the food. It was about carving out a few minutes to just be with my buddy and see the world in one place before things got rolling too much to slow down. There's something about diners that I've always loved. They're an equalizer. You see all sorts of folks in diners, from scrubs coming off a 12-hour graveyard shift to worn out work boots or neck ties and khakis. And once in a while you'll see a pair of black shirts and white collars. The staff is always a mix of friendly and sassy, and the decor'll tell you as soon as you walk in just how salt-of-the-earth the experience is gonna be. And if the tablecloths are plastic and stapled to the underside of the table, it's gonna be worth every penny.

But this first diner since 2020 got me wondering about something else. There was a retired professor with retired professor hair in one corner, a shell-shocked young couple that looked like they'd snuck out while their newborn was napping for some rare, much-needed quiet, a couple of hungover students staring into the relief of a pile of greasy food, and a cop guzzling cup after cup of coffee. While we were all sitting there, a

couple of LL Bean types walked by, peering in and deciding whether or not to come in. They passed by several times, and I'll be honest, I have no idea why they didn't come in. But it got me to thinking about how diners can be equalizers, but beyond the walls of a diner, where you get your coffee, where you top-off your caffeine fix or if you're more of a tea person or if you're one of those rare freaks of nature that doesn't drink any caffeine at all, where you get your morning fix says a lot about where you fit in society. I love me some FoJo's, for example, but it's very coffee shop. You can get a good cup of joe at Flour & Salt or Rye Berry, but really, all three of them cater to a particular crowd. And whether you know that you know it or not, you do. Dunkin' probably has the widest cross section, which still blows my mind. Not that I have anything against Dunkin', it's just that Dunkin' isn't a super big deal down south. Like, I'd only ever really been to one Dunkin' before coming up here; that was where people came in under the auspices of getting coffee and donuts, but really they'd do unseemly things in the bathroom and get a hit of meth on their way out the door. All that to say, it's taken some reprogramming for me to get the feel of Dunkin' up here. And then there's McDonald's. It's a quick and easy and good enough cup of coffee, but it's no FoJo's.

You know, there was a time when churches followed the same set of unspoken social rules? Yeah, it used to be that the blue-collar folks went to Baptist churches. And then when they'd get promoted to shift manager or charge nurse or whatever, they'd start going to Methodist churches. And then when they traded in their blue collars for white ones, then they'd start going to Episcopal churches. Everyone knew, without anyone saying it, everyone knew where to get their coffee, and everyone knew where to get their Jesus. All our churches (and all our coffee shops and all our diners, too) have shifted away from that to a degree, but we still have remnants of that old way of being. You know there's a stereotype that persists to this day that Baptists change their own light bulbs while Episcopalians pay someone else to? Thank God it isn't all that true anymore, right? Well, mostly.

I guess there is something to be said for finding a place where our way of being is met with a similar way of being, but if we come to church for solace only and not for sustenance or challenge, we're missing a pretty big part of what it means to be Christian. That pesky Holy Spirit troubles our waters, keeps on digging at us to get up and do, and even though the pandemic has hamstrung our ability to get out and go, that Spirit keeps presenting us with ways to adapt, ways to shift focus, ways to reach across the divides and find Christ in each other. The Book of James, week after week, keeps throwing that reality at us. How many different ways can we be reminded of where our priorities should lay? Today, in the midst of a nudge for teachers to be aware of what they're teaching, James drops a little nugget that's easy to miss, as subtle as the forces that direct us past one coffee joint and into another. "With the tongue, we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse those who are made in the likeness of God." Now, I'm not saying that where you get your coffee immediately and necessarily puts you at odds with people who don't get their fix in the same place. BUT, I am saying that where we gather and why we choose to gather where we do, makes a claim on us.

We trust that when we go into a certain kind of establishment, we're going to be comfortable and we're going to be met by people kinda sorta like us. People that get our struggles, understand our successes, feel our frustrations. And that's fine, so long as we don't get so comfortable being surrounded by people like ourselves that we neglect people that aren't. You know people go to FoJo's to meet up and talk about the weather and grumble about some news thing or another. You know I meet up with people there? And sometimes folks even do business over a muffin. But did you know people do this at McDonald's, too? To steal a line from Randy Travis, entire communities are held together by the social glue of old men talking about the weather and old women talking about old men in places like that.

I suppose my challenge today is for all of us to spend some time considering where we go, those things that are so much a part of our routine that we take them for granted. And in the next few days, mix it up. Where

do you get your groceries? What would happen if you tried another place just once. I don't mean just to see what kind of spices you can get or how lousy the produce section might be, but, like, who do you see? If the produce is lousier there than somewhere else, consider why. Where do you get your coffee, and who do you run into there? What would happen if you invited someone from McDonald's to grab some coffee with you at FoJo's? There's something of what James calls the likeness of God to each and every person in this world, every one of them, and when we buy into the social stratification and class distinction - and those institutions that serve particular classes - we neglect that likeness of God, sometimes entire swathes of that likeness.

I know, I know, it's just a cup of coffee, right? And you'd better believe I'm gonna keep going to FoJo's, cause I love them and I love their coffee. But I wonder if the next time Fr. Steve and I pick a diner, or the next time I decide to post up to write a sermon out in public, I wonder where I'll choose, and I wonder what that choice will show me of the likeness of God. 'Cause like with all mundane things, it's never really just a cup of coffee.