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Dear Friends,

Making Sense of Adult Lives: Five Sessions in Lent Whether we do it consciously or not, we are always working to make sense of our lives: we set goals to achieve what we desire; we wonder why things happen; we worry about risks and dangers; we hope, we dread, and sometimes we are surprised and sometimes gratified that what we expected or had planned has, in fact, come to pass. We carry around a wide range of assumptions—about ourselves, about what will make us, or our families, secure and happy, about how the world works, about what the past was like and what the future might bring. We have assumptions about good and evil, about what is real and what is imaginary, about what will work and what will not. We live our lives based on what we believe.

For five Saturday mornings in Lent...and one in May I will offer a series of conversations around the subject of our beliefs—not just what we say in church, but what assumptions shape our thoughts and actions. We will come at these questions from the perspective of the Christian faith as held in the Anglican (Episcopal) tradition. My assumption is that the Christian faith is not some sort of stand-alone body of knowledge to be consulted in times of transition, loss, or stress, but rather is a world view which stands up respectably to the distinctly different world views by which much of our culture operates. No haranguing, no bashing, no bible pounding—just raising some questions, exploring what resources the Christian faith might bring to the conversation, and considering what makes sense. We will meet on Saturday mornings from 10:00 am until 11:00 am in the Committee Room in the Parish House. Should you wish to be confirmed by the Bishop in the Episcopal Church this spring (May 31 at 10:00 am at our Cathedral in Newark), this course would serve as preparation for that. Here's the schedule:

March 8 Making sense of your life: Considering world views We shape our lives by our basic beliefs: beliefs about human nature (Are people basically good?), about what is real (What makes me believe that something exists?), about what gives meaning to life (What will give me a sense of deep peace?), and about good and evil (What makes something good? If I do something evil, what then?). What does the Christian faith have to say about these and similar questions, and what are some of the implications for us if we align ourselves with that world view? What is at stake in making the choice? What might it mean that we get to make the choice?

March 15 **Who are we? Looking at human nature, at families, and at nations** This week we will go into the Hebrew Scriptures, the Old Testament, to see how that part of our tradition addresses issues still very much current for us. If we're good, why do we get in such trouble; if we're bad, have we got any options to get better? If family life is not always what we had expected, why is that and what do we do about it? What about the state—what sort of power do kings/presidents/electorates/generals have, where does it come from, and what is it for? What happens when we misunderstand the role of the state and the nation? Do the old stories have anything helpful to offer modern, thoughtful, pragmatic people?

March 22 **How should we live? Looking at how our assumptions about ourselves and the world shape our behavior** This week we go to the New Testament with a special focus on how Jesus, and later St. Paul, seek to address our character and identity by probing our core beliefs, especially those which are so second nature to us that we do not even think of them as “beliefs.” We will look especially at a few stories in which Jesus takes his hearers steadily into deeper, and more interesting, territory than they expect when they begin the conversation.

March 29 **The feedback loop: Experience→Reflection→Course Correction: A theory of Sunday morning** This week we will look at our Sunday morning liturgies, Morning Prayer and the Eucharist, to highlight the function of their structure. The elements of the liturgy come in the sequence that they do for a reason, and the better we understand what the liturgy is designed to do, the more likely we are to experience its benefits. This week is an investment in getting more out of Sunday mornings.

April 5 **Beliefs shape behaviors; behaviors shape beliefs: An Anglican perspective on character formation** This week we will revisit the basic theme of these conversations—the assumption that everyone operates from a set of beliefs whether we identify them or not. Some may have a system of beliefs, some may basically make things up as they go along, but there are no “nonbelievers,” just people who believe different things. In this session we will look again at how what we believe affects the style and direction of our lives, testing the hypothesis that the question is not “whether” we believe, but “what” and “why.” Since this will be our last session, we will look at how the Anglican/Episcopal package of scripture, tradition, worship (public and private), community life, and outreach adds up to a coherent world view which can thrive in our culture without sharing the assumptions on which much of our culture seems to rest.

This is a lot to cover in five weeks, so much of what we do will be in the form of introduction and preparation for how you might follow up on your own with subjects or questions which particularly interest you. Like most of what we do at St. Elizabeth's, this will be an open-ended project. My hope is to start a conversation, not to end one.

The Rev. Canon John G. Hartnett

Rector