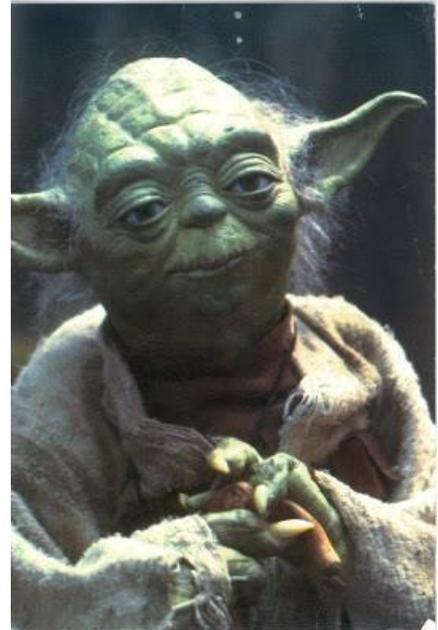


When I read today’s gospel lesson, I thought of Yoda. Now, I know there are some of you ... LUDDITES ... who haven’t seen *Star Wars* and don’t know who Yoda is. So, I put his photo on the front of our bulletin. And, to ensure your education is complete, let me introduce Yoda to you:

- Yoda is at least 900 years old.
- He is funny, in a self-deprecating way.
- He is very wise, in the mystic tradition, and deeply centered, at peace with himself and with all.
- Yoda embodies and teaches others about The Force (this is another name for the Holy Spirit).
- And Yoda has a distinctive way of speaking, both pithy

and out of sequence. Here’s a Yoda-ism to illustrate how he talks: “**Named must your fear be, before banish it you can.**” My personal favorite Yoda saying is this, “**Do or do not... there is no try.**”



As I said, today’s gospel lesson brought Yoda to mind. I wondered, “What would Yoda have said to his most advanced disciples if he knew they were jockeying among themselves for power, for position, for fame, and followers?”

“**Last you must be, when greatest you are.**” That’s what Yoda would have said.

The gospels tell of this incident which occurred after Jesus had once again told his disciples about his coming crucifixion and resurrection. Jesus said he would be killed and after three days rise again and they all “mummed up.” Mark explains their silence as incomprehension and fear so great they didn’t ask any Jesus to “explain himself.”

We have a word for this: DENIAL. “You’re going to be killed. We are your followers. We may be killed, too. At the very least our lives will be radically different.” Our human brains are very, very agile, very speedy, at identifying risks to our existence and calculating probabilities of survival options. And, when the danger to us is too great to even contemplate, we use our emergency coping strategy:

DENIAL.

You know what happens in denial, I’ll bet. Our subconscious selves shield our conscious thinking processes. They put up a barrier to shield our conscious selves from anxiety-producing thoughts.

What our bodies do in this denial state depends on who we are inside and what aids, what crutches, we normally use to deal with anxiety.

- People with deep prayer lives pray and turn the anxiety over to God, moment-by-moment when necessary.
- Talkers talk; isolators isolate.
- Alcoholics and other substance abusers drink or eat or get ugly with other people, as is their habit. Shopaholics buy things.
- Power-trippers argue about who’s the greatest. Sometimes their arguments are cloaked, as when they argue about who knew what first, or whose judgment is most correct, or ...

You get the idea. You KNOW denial because you have faithfully developed other strategies to eliminate or deal with threats to our existence. How do I know this about us, about Church of the Resurrection? Here’s one example:

According to Resurrection’s written records, we first recognized our existence was threatened by a serious decline in 1994. That’s when Jim Green, our beloved first rector, decided to retire. Decline didn’t happen BECAUSE Jim retired; it was one of the reasons Jim decided to retire. The population center in Northern Virginia had moved the suburbs far west of us, and our immediate neighborhood’s demographics were changing radically. And Jim was tired, ready for a well-earned rest, and he commended you to continue to thrive here in Alexandria’s West End.

And thrive we have! All through the intervening 16 years of our beloved second rector’s tenure, you worked diligently and faithfully with Anne Ritchie to find a way to keep moving toward “Jerusalem” without becoming helplessly trapped in denial.

Of course, we’ve had other coping strategies of our own. My favorite is the one we adopted to be able to punt our anxiety down the road: “**Here in another half-decade, we won’t be.**” By my read, we have been saying our version of this myth for at least 17 years, proving our fears wrong for almost four “half-decades.”

“Brilliant, Church of the Resurrection!” Our coping mechanism has worked. We have survived. We have not only survived but thrived. While other churches and congregations are riding their declines and denials into “ashes to ashes, dust to dust,” we have survived. Not only survived but thrived.

Jesus knew his future earthly reality and embraced it. No denial. Some fear, but lots and lots of prayer and living the life God gave him to the fullest. And when Jesus told his disciples all this, their

denial wall went up, for a while. Some began to argue among themselves who was the greatest. There’s a big hint for us about their coping mechanism and what “stuff” they were made of, at “rock bottom.”

Most disciples who were with Jesus that day later emulated him in his walk to the cross. They became martyrs for telling the world about Jesus’ death and resurrection and today’s teaching he gives us about power: **“Last you must be, when greatest you are.”**

Today we call Jesus’ style of leading “servant leadership.” The irony is that servant leadership was lived and taught by Jesus-followers who learned this lesson after arguing who among them was the greatest.

Churches have their power struggles. I have attended other churches whose vital ministries ended because egos clashed. Some churches very near here even left the Episcopal Church (in my opinion) because their theologically conservative priests calculated they could not become bishops in any other way. When we get things this wrong, like the disciples in today’s gospel lesson, Jesus calls us to account, gently, by asking oh-so-innocently, **“What are you arguing about on the way?”**