

The Twenty-Sixth Sunday after Pentecost
November 13, 2016
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A Way Forward

Grant, O God, that your holy and life giving Spirit may so move every human heart, that barriers which divide us may crumble, suspicions disappear, and hatreds cease; that we may live in unity, justice and peace through Christ our Lord, Amen.

No matter where you fall on the political spectrum, it has been a turbulent time in our nation. We have been bombarded with divisive and uncivil discourse in our public sphere, and an air of fear and uncertainty has settled in. All of this has taken a toll on our hearts. As people of faith it is incumbent upon us to look to our God for a way forward with hope and courage.

I was hoping for some lovely, calming words of scripture to share with you this morning, but we heard in the gospel, “Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom, there will be great earthquakes and in various places famines and plagues.” Even in our holy text we are reminded of our human vulnerability. This apocalyptic passage is not meant to engender fear, which is often the response to adversity. It is intended to create a greater context in which we see God prevailing against all forces. Even in the midst of trouble, God is redeeming and creating anew.

The Old Testament lesson from Isaiah can give us a little more perspective on our troubled times. Scholars suggest that the prophecy of Isaiah was written in three parts, during different historical periods. The first was written before the Babylonian exile, the second part, during the exile years and the third, which includes today’s text, is set in the time when the people of Israel returned to Jerusalem and began the difficult work of rebuilding. As they encountered scarcity and hardship there was increasing division. In their disillusionment, many turned away from God.

Isaiah paints a picture for these discouraged people, a vision of the kingdom that God plans for them, “For I am about to create new heavens and a new earth. I will rejoice in Jerusalem and delight in my people. No more shall the sound of weeping be heard in it, or the cry of distress. Before they call, I will answer. The wolf and the lamb shall feed together.” While nothing is beyond the capacity of God to redeem, Isaiah points to the role of the community to participate in the creation of this kingdom.

These sojourners were living in a time of already but not yet. Already returned to their homeland, but God’s vision had not yet been fulfilled. That place of in between evoked fear and mistrust. Isaiah proclaims God’s desire to renew hearts as they turn back to God and restore relationship with one another. But the people of God must take part in bringing about this transformation. The writings in third Isaiah invite them to trust in God’s goodness, pursue peace and to practice justice.

This invitation extends to us today. Our community of faith is no stranger to living in the “in between.” We have already begun our journey of rebuilding but we have not yet fully realized God’s vision or purpose for this parish. It is easy to become discouraged and exhausted, if we try to go it alone. We have been given an example through the life, death and resurrection of Christ, of the redeeming power of God’s love. We need God and each other to build a community that lives and proclaims resurrection, especially in these times of conflict and division.

But how can we make a difference to a world that seems so polarized and discouraged? If we listen to the prophecy of Isaiah for a path forward, we hear three directives to live as a people of

faith. We must trust in God's promises, pursue peace with our neighbors and practice justice. When we are grounded in prayer and scripture we strengthen our relationship to God. Recalling the stories of our faith puts our difficulties in perspective to the wider human story, where God is always faithful to God's people. Connecting to our source of creativity empowers us to live with hope and courage.

Pursuing peace with one another means practicing kindness, compassion, and empathy. These are not finite resources that once used are gone. They multiply as we practice them, and create a new ethos of mercy and grace. In our baptismal covenant we promise to seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving our neighbors as ourselves. If our children witness God's love for all people through us, we become co-creators of a more peaceable kingdom where all are welcomed.

God's vision will be made manifest as we practice justice and stand up for those who are in any way disenfranchised or oppressed. It is not enough for us to be kind. The life of Jesus mirrored one of advocacy for those who were in need. This is why we promise in our covenant to strive for justice and peace and to respect the dignity of every human being. God is faithful to God's promises. Will we hold up our end of the covenant?

Today is our ingathering Sunday, where we make our pledge to this parish and the programs that form us as disciples, strengthen our connections to each other, and send us out to be examples and proclaimers of God's goodness. You may be pledging your treasure or your time and talent. This is where you decide to be a co-creator of the kingdom that God has envisioned. But the church's job is not to cloister itself, rather it is to send us out into this broken world to proclaim resurrection life. God calls us to look for glimpses of the Kingdom here and now, and to share these with others so that we may be voices of hope.

We need each other and the help of God to work passionately for the kingdom. How will you participate in this transformation? We do this by loving God, reaching out beyond our differences to pursue peace, and by practicing justice for what is right and true. Let us pray to our faithful God that we may live with courage and become that voice of hope. Please turn to page 833 of your BCP and prayer with me the prayer attributed to St. Francis.

Lord, make us instruments of your peace. Where there is hatred, let us sow love; where there is injury, pardon; where there is discord, union; where there is doubt, faith; where there is despair, hope; where there is darkness, light; where there is sadness, joy. Grant that we may not so much seek to be consoled as to console; to be understood as to understand; to be loved as to love. For it is in giving that we receive; it is in pardoning that we are pardoned; and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life. *Amen*