

The Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost
September 1, 2019
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Church of the Holy Cross

Love Is the Way

O God; open our hearts to your word, a word that passes faithfully from the ear to the heart, from the heart to our lives, Amen.

“Let mutual love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that, some have entertained angels without knowing it. Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God.” I can think of no better words to leave with you, as I reflect on the work we have done together as a community over the last four and a half years. Holy Cross is above all, a safe harbor, a place of inclusion and embrace. When we say each week, “wherever you are on your journey of faith, you are welcome just as you are, to receive God’s blessings,” this is not only an invitation but an affirmation of God’s call for us. We are both stranger and hosts in this world, sometimes needing welcome and other times, offering it. As Christ followers, we are issued an imperative to respond to others from a place in our hearts that remembers God’s gifts of love and hospitality to us.

Our readings today take us on the journey we have traveled as humankind, from guest to host, putting in perspective from where the fruits of our abundance come. In Jeremiah, the word of the Lord came to the Hebrews as a reminder of their alien heritage, brought as strangers through the wilderness into a land of promise and claimed as God’s chosen ones. The prophet’s words were an admonition to the people of Israel and to us, to remember our covenant of love with God and to turn away from “cisterns” of life that hold no water.

In the letter to the Hebrews, the writer asks us to look with compassion on those who suffer, with eyes that remember when we were in need. And in our Gospel today, Jesus speaks to us as hosts, who enjoy the abundance of God’s goodness and tells us to leave a place of honor at our table for those who cannot reciprocate. Both guest and host are offered the banquet that satisfies our deepest hunger and opens our hearts to God’s kingdom within us.

Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem the day he was invited by the Pharisees to share a Sabbath meal. Since Jesus was under great scrutiny from the Jewish leaders, I imagine he didn’t perceive this as an act of hospitality, but rather an opportunity for them to further build their case against him. Aware of the social order in Jewish culture, Jesus observed how the guests took their place at the table in accordance with their position. He challenged them to consider a banquet where the humble would be exalted and where all people would be welcomed. These practices of God’s kingdom hospitality and table fellowship were meant to heal ethnic, racial, and class divides. He envisioned a kingdom that was no longer stratified. Jesus said to his hosts, “Do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, in case they may invite you in return... invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind.” This simple act of gratitude would shift their priority from seeking blessing to being a blessing.

Yet today’s climate of fear and economic insecurity encourages us to protect ourselves and build walls around our hearts. With an attitude of scarcity, it is little wonder that fear triumphs over hospitality; that exclusion wins out over embrace. With a lens of anxiety and suspicion, the stranger’s presence magnifies our divisions and invites disdain if not hostility. Divine love risks vulnerability, and it can invite unexpected blessings from the “angels” we entertain.

During my time at Holy Cross I have witnessed extraordinary welcome, a hospitality that is ingrained in its DNA. From its very beginnings as a small mission parish, Holy Cross sought to be a place of inclusion and was intentional in its mission to share the transforming love of God. Over the last four and a half years we have worked very hard to strengthen this identity and to move forward in manifesting God's kingdom work. Our open communion table is just one example of how we prioritize hospitality over rules. There have been countless unexpected blessings as we have extended hands to others. Beautiful children in Tanzania, neighbors helping neighbors with comfort cases, the many families we have met doing Christmas and Easter baskets are just a few examples. We are given in baptism the job assignment to proclaim the good news, to strive for justice and peace and to respect the dignity of every human being. These are the ethics that ground our faith and compel us to reach out to our brothers and sisters.

The teachings of Jesus give us a glimpse of God's vision for this world and we are to continue this work as God's people. All that we do must reflect the covenant of love God has made with us. Each of us has a calling and purpose in this faith family. How is God asking you to manifest the kingdom? Last year we examined how to take what we believe and turn it into action- making faith a verb. As this program year begins you will see a new theme, love is the way. This is to remind you that each small act of kindness and care creates a path to God's kingdom. This is not done in isolation but requires mutual support. Look around you and find someone you don't know, strike up a conversation, invite them to be part of this vision. We have known the importance of that invitation to belong.

Our former presiding Bishop, Katherine Jefferts Schori, wrote this. "Encountering the stranger as potential friend means that the kingdom of God has come near, and we will continually discover it when we can find grace in the struggling sinner across the table. We are meant to be bringers of peace and shalom, a light to the nations. And we are meant to sing a new song of grace and abundance, of healing and transformation. May God bless our search for hospitality, within our own hearts and in all we meet."

As you all know, this is my final day with you as your rector. It has been a privilege and a blessing to walk alongside of you spiritually and encourage the good work you do. You are a people of deep commitment and heart, loving and passionate and I am deeply grateful for all you have taught me. We have grown together spiritually and in vibrancy and I leave this place knowing that the love of God will continue to guide your way. I thank you for the deep friendships and for the love you have extended to me. Remember that you are the Church and offering love to one another is the way to manifest the kingdom. May God fill your hearts with abundance, may Christ's example show you the path and may the Holy Spirit inspire you to be a blessing to all you meet. Amen.