

Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost
October 13, 2019
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Church of the Holy Cross

Walk in Love

Good morning. I'm Clare Beam, and I'm the chair of the stewardship committee. I thank you for the honor of welcoming me to this podium. In turn, I would like to welcome you into the excitement of stewardship, and specifically the annual pledge campaign, at Holy Cross.

This is the second year I have overseen stewardship for our parish. In this year, I have had the great fortune to see our community commit more and more volunteer time and financial resources. We do these things because we love Holy Cross.

This year's pledge campaign theme is "Walk in Love." Today, I will talk about how we walk faithfully, generously, responsibly, together, and confidently in love. This sermon will walk a path through our liturgy, Shrine Mont, scripture, parish life, and 40 years of building the future. So, let's begin.

Walk in Love. These are three words you hear every Sunday at Holy Cross. They come from our Prayer Book, immediately after Holy Cross's very special message of welcoming and inclusion. It's on the first page of your bulletin under "Welcome." Please find it and let's say it together.

Here at Holy Cross, whoever you are, and wherever you find yourself on the journey of faith, you are welcome, as you are, to receive the blessings of God so freely given of new and unending life in Christ.

Now, Walk in Love as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, an offering and sacrifice to God.

These words have become so routine in our liturgy, that perhaps we think of them more as a cue that announcements are over and the Eucharist is about to begin, rather than taking a minute to reflect on what it actually means to be welcoming to all, as they are, and to walk in love. I know I'm guilty of hearing these words as a reminder to ensure my children are back in the Nave for communion and find a few dollars for them to contribute to the offering plate.

But what if we took the time to reflect on these words more closely, as defining principles and values of Holy Cross's identity? During this time of leadership transition at Holy Cross, I think it's especially important to remind us of who we are, no matter who is in charge.

First, we welcome whoever you are to come as you are to receive God's blessings. God's blessings aren't for us to give, they are God's, and we extend open arms and open tables to anyone who walks through that door. Genuine hospitality means we don't care about your background, your ethnicity, your class, or what you're wearing. What's important is that you are here now, and we are called to welcome you into God's house to receive God's love.

Second, we welcome you no matter where you are on your journey of faith. This means we invite everyone on the spectrum of belief.

Third, we are reminded that God's blessings are freely given, renewing, and unending, because they are eternally rooted in Christ's love.

Finally, we are called to Walk in Love... to be Christ-like in giving of ourselves and from ourselves. Love is how we engage in stewardship... stewardship of our planet, our families, our homes, and our parish.

These characteristics: welcoming, inclusiveness, faithfulness, and blessedness, are all parts of Holy Cross's identity: our own Walk in Love.

As I was preparing this sermon, I started thinking about what it means to actually walk in love. I mean, we can all say it means to be welcoming and giving, to imitate Jesus's selfless and compassionate way of life. But what does walking in love feel like?

Last weekend, I was one of 21 women from this parish who participated in the annual Women's Retreat. It was a wonderful time, and the weather was simply perfect to get out and enjoy God's creation.

Whenever I go to Shrine Mont, whether it is the Parish Retreat or the Women's Retreat, the highlight for me is going on a hike with friends. Last weekend, several of us hiked up to the cross at the top of the mountain. This is sometimes called the "Stairway to Heaven" hike.

For those of you who have not done this hike, let me describe it to you. The trail begins at the Cathedral Shrine of the Transfiguration. It's a gorgeous open-air cathedral, consecrated in 1925.

You then embark upon a 1,150ft elevation ascent in a little over a mile. Leaving the rustic manmade beauty behind, you start walking and huffing up a natural trail that seems almost intentionally uncertain and rough. The walk was refreshing and renewing, but it was not easy, as our legs began to hurt and our hearts began to race. It was a walk in love with my parish friends, but then again, love isn't always easy. It takes strength and courage to push forward.

At the top, you are rewarded with... yes, three levels of stairs to ascend to the cross and get a view and a great sense of accomplishment.

This is a description of any old-hike involving the physical exertion and triumph of many of your parish, but so far I've left out the most important part of the hike. Before the hike began, I advised the other women that the hike followed the Stations of the Cross. One of us immediately said, "Oh! I really want to do that—I've never done it." I suggested that maybe there would be a group that did it and a group that just, you know, hiked for exercise. We realized that the group was too small to divide, and none of the participants had been to Shrine Mont before, besides me. And it became clear that walking the Stations of the Cross was something our group had to do. And I'm so glad we did.

As most of you know, the Stations of the Cross follow Jesus's journey from condemnation to entombment in 14 pictures. Look around—we are surrounded by them here in this Nave.

While we walked up the mountain and looked at Shrine Mont's station images, we each took turns reading aloud the texts describing Jesus's ultimate Walk in Love. Jesus is condemned, he's made to bear the cross, he falls the first time, he meets his mother, Simon bears the cross, Veronica wipes Jesus's face, he falls the second time, the women of Jerusalem weep, he falls the third time, he is stripped of his garments, he is nailed to the cross, he is taken down from the cross, and he is placed in the tomb.

Shrine Mont's interpretation of Jesus's Ultimate Walk in Love, perhaps purposefully, gave us moments of rest. Just when we were really huffing to get up the hill, we made it to the stop where Simon takes Jesus's cross. At every station, we stopped, rested, pondered, and prayed.

Of course, what I'm calling Jesus's Ultimate Walk of Love has another name we all know: The Passion. Jesus knew that he would be sacrificed for our sins, yet loved us anyway. This is how we arrive at the end of this phase of Jesus's walk of love: he is dead and resurrected; those who follow him are called to walk in his ways of love and find life after death as well.

Today's scripture recounts one way Jesus walked in love: healing. I want us to look through a slightly broader lens and understand this reading in context with the one that directly precedes it, which many of you heard last week.

In Luke 7-10, Jesus asks the disciples, “Who among you would say to your slave who has just come in from plowing or tending sheep in the field, ‘Come here at once and take your place at my table’? Would you rather say to him, ‘Prepare supper for me, put on your apron and serve me while I eat and drink; later you may eat and drink’? Do you thank the slave for doing what was commanded? So you also, when you have done all that you were ordered to do, say ‘We are worthless slaves; we have done only what we ought to have done!’”

This Gospel reading is the obligation to obedience. Jesus tells us that when God asks us to do something, no matter how many hours we’ve put in, we respond “we have done only what we ought to have done!”

Then comes today’s Gospel reading. Jesus heals ten lepers. Notably, given the context of the previous passage in Luke, this is the only time Jesus is called Master by anyone who is not a disciple. The healed lepers leave the scene, and Jesus essentially asks, “hey! Where did everybody go?,” which is also asking, “who is going to take what happened to them, spread the Word, and grow the Kingdom of God?” But only the Samaritan returns to Jesus to offer thanks. And he offers thanks in a LOUD voice, prostrating himself at Jesus’s feet. The Samaritan was one of ten lepers healed that day.

So, pop quiz: who here can tell me what the word is for giving one tenth of your blessings back to God? That’s right, a tithe. I don’t think Luke is making a mistake here.

These Gospel readings together are a clear illustration of obedience and gratitude. Do what you ought to do. Give thanks for your blessings with a generous heart.

God’s love is freely given, but fully participating in our parish has costs. During this sermon, I’ve mentioned two parish retreats. I’m currently participating in worship. I go to Bible Study on Wednesday nights. My children participate in Sunday School. I had a delicious breakfast this morning, and the lights are on in this room. I’d say I am fully participating in Holy Cross life, but every time I read a weekly email or bulletin announcements, I always feel like, “But wait... there’s more!” There are so many volunteers who offer so many opportunities to engage with our parish, our neighbors, and God in myriad ways. In these opportunities, we are rich. And it takes riches to make them happen.

Pledging shows our commitment to walk in love and to be more Christ-like. Pledging demonstrates our responsibility to each other and to spread God’s love. As we give to the church we participate in, we help carry out the many works of Jesus: teacher, social advocate, servant, healer, and leader. These works are what we ought to be doing, and it takes commitment to gratitude to make these works good.

Our founders understood obligation and gratitude when, 40 years ago, they established Holy Cross. We are marking this special anniversary with a full weekend of events in November, carefully designed by and for the many fellowship interests of our parish. We will honor our founders, enjoy beautiful music, share our food, and worship together to celebrate four decades of walking in love.

Perhaps “40” seems like an odd year to do an over-the-top celebration. Why not 50? But then we remember that “40” has a special meaning in the Bible. In fact, the number 40 shows up 146 times in Scripture. We are probably most familiar with Noah’s 40 days of flood, Moses’s 40 days in the wilderness, and Jesus’s 40 days in the desert. I am not suggesting in any way that the past 40 years have been trials of those proportions; I am, however, suggesting that 40 years tends to mark the end of one epoch, and the beginning of a new one. Noah made a covenant with God and rebuilt from total destruction; Moses and the Hebrews built a new life in the Promised Land. Jesus emerged from the desert to begin his ministry and change the world. In each of these stories, new birth and growth began after 40 years, and God’s people became stronger... together through their faith and confidence in a bright future. Our parish’s founders started with a spark of an idea and grew it into the loving congregation within this gorgeous Nave we see today. What will we do with this legacy? How will we show we’ve walked in love?

It is now our generation's time to boldly set our path for what the next 40 years will bring. What is your vision for Holy Cross? How will you help shape it? How will we walk in love? Pledging is the first step to creating and realizing our vision. I feel like pledging is like voting: if you don't do it, you can't complain. If you do do it, you have a stake in the outcome. Being a full member of Holy Cross means you are confident in our parish's bright future, and you want to help form it.

When you invest your time, talent, and treasure in Holy Cross's future, you invest in generations of inclusive worship, hospitality, service, and fellowship, that Holy Cross invests in you. When you pledge, you walk faithfully, responsibly, confidently, generously, and together, in love.