

Sermon for Proper 15A - August 16, 2020
Church of Reconciliation, San Antonio
The Rev. Judith L. Rhodes

Witnesses to God's Justice: A House of Prayer for All Peoples

Before I begin to focus on the Scriptures before us this morning, I wish to reflect with you on last Sunday's celebration of Holy Eucharist and the celebration of "Communion Under Special Circumstances" that happened in our courtyard from noon-1pm.

First, a confession... I was afraid. I was afraid because in the experiences of drive-thru celebrations of the past few months, I could see your faces, we could listen to each other's voices, and we could maintain as safe as possible a social distance between us. Each of those experiences brought such joy and solace to my heart in the days following the complete and utter shut down of in person services. It was what I knew from experience.

And so, when we found out or rather, in truth, remembered, that a drive-thru Holy Communion was specifically forbidden in the Diocesan guidelines, my heart broke. How, I began to pray, when you hear the deepest longings of your people for the experience of receiving the Body of Christ, into their physical bodies, how can we ever do this safely? And so, as your staff, we pondered this out loud.

I love how Josh described what happened next, "We called an audible!" And, my friends, it was exactly that... in the midst of what we had planned as a drive-thru, Josh and I agreed that outside in the courtyard, in the fresh air and beauty of that sanctuary, we would distribute Holy Communion under special circumstances. But when Sunday morning came, I was uncharacteristically emotional and resistant. I did not "envision" how this could be done as safely as I already experienced and fear set in.

My heart raced as we took our places for the live stream service of Holy Eucharist. We had 10 wonderful and generous persons to lend their voices for the praise and worship of our God in Jesus Christ. As we prayed together, as I saw each of the faces of our Reconciliation family stream through at the time for Holy Communion, I realized exactly what was happening within me as the Holy Spirit lifted my fear of what was to unfold in the courtyard. I also began to understand the complexities of my fear and anxiety, the deepest source of which is rightly named grief, as the second anniversary of my middle sister's death looms large before me.

Just as Josh over the past weeks has described the parables and the scriptures as complex, multivalent, living words that find their way into our contemporary lives, the waves that battered my heart, the fear that overtook my emotions, the grief that I must still process, found their way to a little more healing, a little more self-awareness as I heard Jesus' own voice of reassurance, "Take heart, it is I. Do not be afraid." washed in and through and over me. I knew in that moment I was not alone. I knew by the end of the celebration of Holy Eucharist that I deeply desired to be present to the people I love, those I have missed so dearly, who would come to receive the precious Body of our Savior, Jesus Christ. And so a number of folks remained to help.

As we organized ourselves, Gary Kinder came up with the logistics plan that made this experience not only safer but even more sacred. It became a procession. Entering masked and using the hand sanitizer, there were smiles and tears, laughter and virtual hugs... there were reverent bows before one another, adults, youth, and children alike... bowing and gesturing in love and reverence before one another. There were those who came who are not members of Church of Reconciliation but hungered deeply for what they would receive in the sanctuary of our Courtyard.

Following Communion, each person proceeded to the path by Brown Hall and exited the campus from there. Minimal contact with others... except those "usher/greeters" who stood to assist them if needed.

Monday, in an email exchange with a parishioner who affirmed the sacred beauty of the experience, I shared this...

... my heart was so full of gratitude for Josh and for his opportunity to begin to fall in love with those he is called to serve. The discernment of a call to a parish in a search process is a powerful experience ... and the gradual falling in love with those you are called to serve in Jesus' name deepens over time with the privilege of saying yes every day to that call... in good times, in pandemic times, and in all times in between.

You and I are each called to self-awareness, self-compassion, and healing of all the broken and painful places in our hearts and in our relationships. And so we must listen... listen more deeply, listen more open-heartedly, listen more faithfully to the voice of Jesus, "Take heart, it is I. Do not be afraid." Then and only then will you and I make the most loving, most just, most compassionate decisions we need to make on our own behalf and on behalf of others. **All others.**

Today, my friends, we hear the beginning words of what has come to be known as "Third Isaiah". A latter portion of the Book of the prophet Isaiah that reflects upon the return from exile for the people of Israel. This return was not the grand and glorious restoration Second Isaiah had promised. And so some of the real fear and disappointment are reflected while also, the prophetic writers challenge those who remain in doubt and fear to return to honoring and keeping holy, the Sabbath and other rituals that anchor them in the sacred Covenant with God.

Thus says the Lord: Maintain justice, and do what is right, for soon my salvation will come and my deliverance revealed.

Words of assurance, words of remembrance, words of challenge... Keeping holy the Sabbath and worshipping the God of faithful and abiding love, the God of infinite and boundless mercy, the God in whose image they were made as children of God.

So the Lord reminds them that even in the midst of doubt, fear, and disappointment, the covenantal relationship that brought them back from exile, would continue to make its demands upon how they lived their lives even in uncertain times.

These seem to me to be words of deep relevance and meaning for us this very day. Perhaps you feel the doubt, the fear, the disappointment, the exhaustion, and the grief that exile from your life as you had come to know it, seems no longer possible. All of these feelings are true, holy, and human. But lest we forget who we are. Lest we forget that just as the Lord reminded the people of Israel of the demands of sacred covenantal relationship, we are reminded of this as well.

The Lord reminds Israel that the radical and inclusive nature of Divine Love must not be forgotten, denied, or in any way withheld from those deemed “foreigners, outcasts, and exiles.”

... these I will bring to my holy mountain, and make them joyful in my house of prayer; their burnt offerings, and their sacrifices will be accepted on my altar; for my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples...”

The Lord’s vision is specifically one that has tremendous religious impact. Outsiders, former enemies and even oppressors are welcome to join in worship alongside the Israelites if they accept their fundamental responsibility to the One God and keep holy the Sabbath. And, let’s not lose the political implications of this radical religious inclusiveness. Former enemies, oppressors, and outcasts may be standing alongside those they have oppressed and otherwise rejected, thus becoming, a house of prayer for all peoples. Can we even imagine this in our own day? Can we even entertain its implications for us, right here, right now? Seems to me, we must.

These are hard, hard days. And rightly so, it seems to me, that this sacred reminder of who we are, whose we are, and in whose likeness not only you and I are made but every man, woman, child and creature of the Divine is made.

The Lord reminds us for sure of our sacred responsibility to this inclusive Love and the Lord also reminds us that in the gathering for worship, in the sacramental rituals of the Church we are given everything we need to live into this vision of the inclusive kingdom of God.

We see something of this in our Gospel today as Jesus is challenged to heal the daughter of a Canaanite woman. This woman acknowledges Jesus as she addresses him as Lord and begs him to deliver her daughter from the tormenting demon. The Gospel addresses the tension of Jesus' humanity AND the divinity of Christ. On the one hand, we hear Jesus' response as one that specifies his mission is solely to house of Israel. Yet in the face of this woman's persistent faith, Jesus proclaims, "Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish."

Without trying to mitigate the challenges of Jesus' responses to the woman, the outcome is what is ultimately so powerful. ***The outcome is the lesson we must take to heart.*** No one stands outside of, or underserving of the healing power of God. And at the end of Matthew's gospel, the Good News is for all nations, all people.

My friends, I invite you to recall Jesus' command to the disciples at the very beginning of the Gospel text today, "Listen and understand." So let's keep listening, let's keep talking... as we seek deeper understanding of and respect for the dignity of every child of God. May we remain steadfast in our worship. And may we act only in ways that seek after God's justice, God's kingdom as a house of prayer, a body of witnesses sent into the world founded on the radical and inclusive love of God.

Amen.