

Faith in Community

Proverbs 22:1-2, 8-9, 22-23

James 2:1-10, 14-17

Prayer: O God you have called a people to yourself in every place and time. We seek your word of truth, we seek to be attentive to your wisdom, help us to be quick to listen to one another, to your spirit, and to voices on the margins. Sharpen our insight and deepen our commitment. Move us to be doers of the word and not hearers only...

After he left, they were still in shock...for quite awhile. He had prepared them for this of course, but when the time came they did not feel prepared, really. They missed him. And they loved him. They had practiced without him. He had sent them out from him without an extra bag, or tunic, or sandals or staff. (Not staff, as in help, staff, as in: not so much as a walking stick...) They just went out, in the skin they were in, shoes on their feet, to meet the world, share a good word, allow themselves to be received ...or not. To laugh with, to cry with, to heal, and yes, to be wounded, to accompany those they encountered... it had been what he had done, of course, when he was with them. He entered their lives, he listened, he held faith with them and with God. It changed them in the deepest ways. It was simple. It was day to day.

They had tried to write it all down for those who came after, but it was impossible to include everything, the nuance, the feeling at the time, no one knew everyone who knew him. They each had their own memories, they knew what they knew. The last line in John's gospel:

"...there are also many other things that Jesus did; if every one of them were written down, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written."

And towards the end, it had become complicated, political, disappointing, costly, making the transition that much harder.

I am describing of course, the departure of our Lord from his disciples, and the quandary they were in when they were left to themselves this way. You may hear in this the echoes of other leave-takings, other farewells. Our Lord's departure from his friends was not his first choice, he had prayed "let this cup pass from me"... but it was the cup that he was given, and which he received. He drank deeply of this life. And his disciples were left knowing what they knew, and needing to get on with it.

Jesus came among them preaching that the Kingdom of God is at hand, and what came after his life... was the church. Improvised by his followers, temporary by design. All they had was their faith and each other. And my friends, there has been 2000 years of these simple ingredients.

Jesus did not prepare them with anything more than each other. He asked his disciples to love each other. On the cross he asked his mother to look upon the beloved disciple, John, as her own son, Jesus asked John to look to his mother.

How to pass this on to the next generations? How to live without his living presence? We have symbols, bread, the cup, we can open our hearts, even if we carry doubts and wounds, you have been given one another. The quality of your relationships.

By the time James was writing to this church they had been improvising church long enough, to make some reflection appropriate. When you say you welcome all, that you will love one another... how are we doing that, what does welcome look like, and where does a full welcome take us down the line? The leaders of every church I know will say that they want the church to grow, but what is often missing from this request is an openness to where a welcome of new people will take us. Every generation has to learn to value faith in community for themselves.

I'll pause, because I am the new person here. I'd like to thank you for your welcome of me. Your thoughtfulness about it. On this Labor Day weekend, when I would like to encourage you to reflect on the value, not just monetarily, but the value of the work of those around you in this community, I will add myself to this roster. My calling here is to help you make the most out of this Interim moment in this congregation. What manner of calling is that, you ask? It may not be your idea of what a minister is or does, but it is what I have been consistently called to since 2007. I don't know yet what shape the transition will take here. I am committed to helping you to make the most out of this time, and to prepare yourselves to imagine together the future church that you understand God is calling you to become.

1. Who are we -- as a congregation?
2. What is God calling us to do?
3. Who is our neighbor?

But today, that's in the future. I am glad to meet you. And today, this old gospel is encouraging us again, to consider the nature of our welcome.

The first church I served, when I was a newly minted Pastor, was next door to a group home for adults. One day one of them came in and sat down. She was painfully overweight and had trouble moving, wearing clothing that did not fit; she hadn't bathed recently and was having trouble breathing. She wouldn't speak or make eye contact with anyone.

I could tell immediately that she was on probation among our regulars, in a way that the well dressed, well-groomed and well-spoken visitors we have, never are. In the beginning, she tried our patience. More than once she forgot where she was and lit up a cigarette right there in the pew. Her medication prevented her from being able to follow the bulletin. She fell asleep during sermons. Her breathing problems manifested as snoring problems when she was asleep, snoring so loudly no one could hear my carefully crafted sermon, my brilliant delivery.

So you can just imagine the conversations we had at the church council meetings:

- she doesn't belong here, she couldn't possibly be getting anything out of it – so heavily medicated.
- It was observed that she ate too many cookies at coffee hour – people accused her of being there for the free food.
- Some tried the financial aspect: "I'm giving substantial amounts of money to this church—and she's just giving pennies...she shouldn't be allowed to ruin it for everyone."
- They worried that she was a deterrent to other visitors.

In the end, one way or another, she disturbed us all. She kept coming; we were uncomfortable with her, and with our own consciences.

It was this very passage from James which was in the back of our minds – about not making distinctions among ourselves in the house of the Lord. What does that mean for us, not playing favorites, when people come for different reasons, have different needs when they walk in...

Finally one of our Council members, exasperated, said that she had had enough of this conversation. She announced that she would make a friend out of Daphne -- we learned her name -- and would hereafter be sitting next to her in church.[1] So when the snoring started, Daphne got a gentle nudge, she helped her find the right hymn to sing, she reminded Daphne to put her cigarettes away, and -- maybe no more than 3 cookies... not a big job, just helped her to fit in a little.

That small act was all Daphne needed. Our problem resolved; this visitor began to change. It was like kissing a frog and finding a prince.

I received a phone call from her Social Worker. She told me that this lady had never been accepted by any group, she had never in her life been able to sustain a single positive relationship, and all that changed when she started coming to our church. "Thank you for welcoming her." I learned the circumstances of her horrifying childhood abuse. Her Social Worker said to me: "I have never been to your church, but I know that it is an exceptional place."

I witnessed Daphne's healing, getting over it and putting it behind her – precipitated by a pretty sketchy welcome on our part. She went on to begin talking to people, she made eye contact and learned to shake my hand; her first words to me were "bless you." That's when I recognized fully our spiritual poverty.

She went on to make friends with the others in her group home, and, hilariously, brought them *all* with her to church... none of them were the challenge to welcome that she

had been, (no one could be) it was a delight to have them join us – limited to just 3 cookies each, though... She had gained her whole life back, put her demons behind her.

Who is rich and who is poor? Who is fit to come to this table? Hasn't God chosen the poor in the world to be rich in faith?[2] And when you think about it, aren't we?

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[1] Reader, take note: This means that after 25+ years sitting in one pew ... she changed pews...

[2] James 2:5