

September 28, 2014

Isaiah 58:6-12; Matthew 5:1-12

This Is What It is All About

Rev. Adrienne Carr

And I thought, when I stood before you eighteen years ago, giving my candidating sermon, that it would be the most difficult I'd ever have to do. That's how much I knew. Could we please make a pact that no one is going to use more than one box of tissues during this Service. Clean up is really messy. Neil and Peter and I spent a few days at the annual Clergy Convocation where we heard much on death and dying. It was a good conference and a wonderful opportunity to see friends from across the state. One notion I took from the Convocation was that there are many little deaths in life. One's beloved car finally gives in and needs to be towed away. Neil is still grieving the loss of his Passat. After years in one's home, the time comes to move and the home where children were raised and life was good is sold. From leaving college and facing the future, to retiring from a challenging and satisfying work life into whatever the future holds there is uncertainty. This parting for me is one of those little deaths and there is grief at the parting. The best I can say is that with this death, I get to be present at the wake and the funeral.

For weeks, I have been struggling to find appropriate words to say on this day. You have meant the world to me. In fact, you have been the world to me. You are my community. We have shared adventures at home and in the wider world. We have born one another's grief and celebrated one another's joys. Eighteen years ago, you had children in the nursery. Now they are in college. Time truly seems to fly. Beginning 17 years ago, I took turns with Bob Lee on YETS trips. He always got the countryside. I always got the summer in the city. Lucy and Linda and Bonnie and Laura as well as a corps of devoted parents always got both. And at every Youth Sunday, graduating seniors describe how both city and country have broadened their horizons and their sense of justice for all of God's people. Many of those young people have come back to be married and to have their children baptized. All of those young people are making significant contributions to their communities and to the world.

And, as I look around this sanctuary, this heart of our community, I recall so many of the faces of those who are no longer with us but whose memory lingers in our hearts and for some, at our finger tips or our derrieres. The pew cushions on which you sit are the work of Win Lewis. Many of the book and cup holders in the pews were repaired by Neil Slocum. The lights that brighten our sacred space are a gift by Andy Davis in honor of his wife Rette who was a light, herself. Look up and see the sprinklers. After one of those crises of too much water that did great damage to the sanctuary; to raise money for repair, individuals bought sprinkler heads and received a certificate of ownership. If your parent or grandparent bought one, you may have inherited your own church sprinkler head. How cool is that!

Many of the hymnbooks you are using are contributions from members, many of whom are here singing today. Other hymnbooks are in memory of parents or great grandparents; yet other generations of our family. When we sing, it is a community of all the saints, indeed.

And we still have an abundance of fruitful imagination and practical ability with us in the persons of those whose talents have been and continue to be a gift to us all. Dale Critchlow designed this movable lectern that Peter loves and Barbara Carter created the paraments for all the church seasons that are draped on the lectern. Charlie Church keeps us audible and wireless.

David plays the magnificent piano gifted to us by Bill and Miny Stouch. Ann and Doug have been a significant presence in design and construction of such work as handicap pews, adding a new entryway to the sanctuary as well as a new set of hundred year steps.

Other people give the gift of talent: the voices of the choir members; the sounds of the bells; the children and youth singing and playing instruments; the acting out of parables by middle school thespians. In the background we hear the quiet sounds of ushers greeting friend and stranger, and Deacons serving Communion. These are the sounds of love and life and hope and faith. My love and admiration go out to David, Sylvia, Kathleen, Lucy and Laura and all those who give life to music and to words.

On the other side of our sanctuary is the Memorial Garden with restored plaques on the wall that are largely the work of Elliot Douglas and a redesigned and lovely landscape thanks to Bill Whitman and his corps of gardeners. The Garden is a place of memory, of celebration, of deep appreciation for the continuity of life.

This Sanctuary, this place, the heart of our community, our church family and those whose lives we remember as well as those whose hands we shake each Sunday; this sacred place is a profound symbol of our past, our present and our future.

So, a building is just a building without the people who give it life and function; who make it sacred. For this reason I have chosen two scripture passages that are complementary expressions of that faithfulness which can be a roadmap for our mutual and individual journey through life. The first is taken from Isaiah who never minced words. He was disgusted by the wealthy leadership of Jerusalem who made a show of their piety by walking around with torn clothing and ashes on their heads during the Yom Kippur Fast while refusing to care for the poor, the sick and the vulnerable members of the community at any time. He spoke out to them demanding that they listen to God's command:

to loose the chains of injustice
to share your food with the hungry
and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter—
when you see the naked, to clothe them,
and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood?

Do you recognize our community in these words? I hope so. With every act of support that is given to those in need of care, the chains of injustice are loosened. Every day that JUMP is open and every Saturday morning on the steps of the Chapel where food is being shared with the hungry, and with every meal that is delivered through Meals on Wheels, and with every meal prepared for Dismas House, through those volunteers who faithfully serve, we are sharing our food with the hungry. Through the constant attention that Lucy Samara pays to the needs of those who seek shelter and services; and through the pastoral Care fund and through the annual COTS walk, we provide shelter and services to those who need that specialized care. The volunteers who work in the Possibility Shop and those who donate good clothing and household items, serve hundreds of people who come in, both to shop and also to find a warm welcome; and for those who come with a JUMP voucher that will get them warm clothes or shoes or baby supplies, we indeed clothe and care for those with no where else to go.

Our own flesh and blood are not turned away. Those who are a part of our family here and a part of our neighborhood and world family are cared for in innumerable ways. Through the hands of those who have worked in Mississippi, the variety of YETS places, Habitat for

Humanity, Central Vermont flood clean up and Haiti and India, our family has been cared for. Through visits and the weekly distribution of flowers, we bring light and joy into the lives of those who are fragile or recovering from illness, and the same can be said about the meals that are brought to many of those same folks. And each month, as we bring music and meditation to four Nursing Homes, we also bring the message that we care. So, yes, we observe the fast of faithfulness that God requires.

In doing so, we are drawn into the Beatitudes.

Blessed are the Poor in Spirit. Many of us are quite comfortable in our lives and could easily write a check for JUMP or COTS or CROP and then get on with the comfort, but we don't. We volunteer our time and our energy to making life better for all those others who are not so comfortable. In doing so, we grow in respect and love for those whose life is challenged and, thus expand our understanding of family.

Blessed are the meek; those who quietly give time and care to others. Where there is a need, they are present. They need no invitation. They simply come. And our whole family is blessed by their presence.

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for justice; crying out their concern for the lost, the mentally ill, the challenged, the sick, the wounded in mind or soul. They march for justice, for the rights of others. They march for climate action and against war. They keep God's justice in the minds of the rest of us so that we are reminded that our human family is a part of us. We may feel uncomfortable around these prophets but we need them; the world needs them.

Blessed are the peacemakers who have the hearts and the words to speak with such care that division is eased into unity. They are the glue that holds us all together. And blessed are those who don't feel comfortable with a new way of worshipping or a new direction of leadership but keep coming and keep speaking and keep volunteering. These folks are my heroes. They know that the church is still standing after many transitions and will continue to stand through many more. And they are the soul of this family of faith.

Neil and I have so much to be grateful for during our years here. The many kindnesses you have shown us; the friendships we have made; the adventures we have been on are all a part of what it means to be family; to be community. And that community will endure as it has since 1805.

We are an anachronism, a throw back, if you will, to a time when everyone was expected to be at church on Sunday morning. Today, some of us look around each Sunday wondering where all the others have gone and wishing for that full Sanctuary. While I would love to see those pews filled to capacity, I look with wonder at those faithful souls, individuals, families, singles and couples, younger and older; who come week after week. As our Communion Invitation states, you come not because you must but because you may. You, my dear friends are the lifeblood of this family.

And here we are, the family, in this sacred space. You come to bid me farewell. I come to honor you for all the love and support you have given to Martin Copenhaver and Jean Andrews; to Bob Lee, to me and now, to Peter and to the Associate, as yet, known only to God. May we all be surrounded by God's love as we, together, celebrate the continuity of faith that sustains each and all of us.

Isaiah tells the ancient Jerusalemites and also us, that if we live in faithfulness:

Your light will break forth like the dawn,
and your healing will quickly appear;
then your righteousness^[a] will go before you,

and the glory of the LORD will be your rear guard.
⁹Then you will call, and the LORD will answer;
you will cry for help, and he will say: Here am I.

May this community, this family continue to be a source of love and care to one another and to the family beyond our doors. Amen.