

22nd Sunday after Pentecost 2018 B

October 21, 2019

Church of the Advent

Capacity and Opportunity

Good morning and welcome, and thanks be to God for the opportunity to come together in gratitude to praise and worship the One from whom all blessings flow. It is good to be back in East Carolina after spending last weekend teaching and preaching with a lovely Episcopal congregation on the other coast, outside of Portland, Oregon. There is nothing like travel to remind us that the world is so much bigger--and smaller--than we think. Anytime I venture out of the South, I am soon full of wonder at new sounds, sights and smells. On this trip it was the quality of light, the absence of humidity, the brilliant color of the maple trees whose leaves were uniformly bright yellow, the lushness of perennial plants in full bloom--the same plants that are way past their prime in my home turf, where we enjoy way more sun and much less rain. When traveling I am also aware of the cadence of language--new accents and expressions that make me pay attention--though truth be told many people you meet across the country now--including here--are from somewhere else originally. On this trip I noted an open friendliness and courtesy in every interaction that showed me that I carry a Southern pride in hospitality that may not be singular. And then, I noticed those things that are more unique--those things that made me want to take a picture for my album entitled: *You won't find that in the South*. Local just-picked apples bigger than softballs; a food truck that served only what is allowed on a paleo diet; marijuana stores; more breweries per square mile than churches, and an alternative primary care medical practice that advertised IV vitamin infusions, infrared sauna therapy and whole body vibration. Seriously, you cannot make this stuff up.

But the best thing about travel is having my consciousness move from all those things that make the world seem bigger--like seeing hundreds of people moving through the Charlotte airport past me every minute for two hours--toward the things that make it smaller: worship from the Book of Common Prayer in a faraway Episcopal Church, greetings with the sign of Peace, hands open for the Body of Christ, where all are made one, without regard to identity of place.

In those moments, it is possible for me to believe that despite vast distances and differences, in spite of our human craving for tribal identity that can pull us far and away from everyone we perceive to be different, strange, and threatening, God has figured out how to love the whole world through the capacity and opportunity that he created within us to love one another, and to be the church.

And just how does God do that? How does our God, who loves us with generosity and hospitality, forgiveness and healing, also give us capacity and opportunity to be disciples of his love? Especially, when as we heard described in the gospel today, our desire to be close to God can get all wrapped up in self-interest if we're not careful. Uncomfortably familiar is the story from Mark about the sons of Zebedee, brothers James and John, who had dropped their fishing nets to follow Jesus, and hatched a plan together to stay close to Jesus, always. They were no more enlightened than the other disciples--in spite of Jesus telling them repeatedly about what was ahead of them--that Jesus would suffer and die at the hands of their own religious leaders and Roman authorities. Their attention was on the glory of eternity, and they were pre-booking their places in that glorious time to come to be on either side of Jesus-- each brother with equal status, for that was only fair. Is that not understandable, to ask Jesus to keep us close enough to him that we might be spared the trials and tribulations of those around us, the calamities of the wider world, the pain of loss, the burden of our sins? Do you think the other disciples who overheard this conversation were angry because their friends were seeking to one-up them with the teacher, or because they did not think of it first?

Jesus answered the request by addressing all of them, recalling for them his teaching about their baptism as more than a ritual of water. To be with Jesus meant that they would be baptized into his death, and then into his rising again--into a *different* kind of glory than the one honored and desired by the world. Jesus knew that when they *really* understood this--that each of them was gifted with the capacity and opportunity to become disciples of love through sacrifice and servanthood--they would not care who wound up on his right or his left--then or for eternity. Their self-interest would not hold a candle to the joy of loving one another. Their own peace would come in making room at the table for everyone.

How do we apply this teaching to our own challenges in *this* place, in *this* time, as we listen to God's call to be the beloved community? How do we work out our salvation on this path we walk called *church*? What is church for, really, and why should we care? Fewer and fewer people in our world *do* care about belonging to a Christian community nowadays, compared a generation or two ago, with only about a third of Americans who identify as Christian attending any church regularly. Yet for those who do, the Pew Research Center has determined that the primary reason people go to church is to become closer to God, followed by the need for a moral foundation for children, to become a better person, and to find comfort in times of sorrow. Not many are coming to church out of family tradition or a sense of obligation as might have been true in the past. That being said, why are we here in this *particular* church, and what difference does it--or could it--make in our lives? Not questions we necessarily ask every day or even every week, but rather those unspoken questions that bubble up once a year, when we are asked to consider how as members of a congregation we will commit to its material support and survival for another year in a ritual we call--for lack of a better word--stewardship.

I wager most of us would respond in a similar vein: I love my church because I feel at home here; I feel the presence of God here; I have friends here who support me in hard times and celebrate with me in good times. This community teaches me about love and shows it to others. All of these things are about what God calls church to be. But though this may sound like stewardship heresy, I propose that these descriptions of beloved community are *not reasons enough alone* to support a church financially.

What I am suggesting here is that if our voluntary self-determined offering to our church--certainly needed to keep the air conditioning on, the roof from leaking, the grass cut, and clergy in the pulpit and at the table--is only made because this church meets *our* perceived needs, then we are only partially getting what stewardship should be about.

Giving to God through giving to one's church is a good thing, but should not be transactional. If we give in perceived proportion to what we get, or how much we agree with what might be happening at the church, or based on the decisions made by the current leadership, or whether or not we like the clergy or the wardens, then we are not giving to God. A

transactional fiduciary relationship is one we have with a gym, or country club, or sports team for whom we buy season tickets. We make a financial decision--sometimes in our best interest and sometimes not--based on our disposable income and expected return. Giving to God should be different. Giving to God by supporting God's work in the world through charitable organizations, non-profits who care for those whom Jesus taught us were the least of these, and our own church community, should come from a heart overflowing with gratitude and blessing. We should give out of our abundant capacity and our given opportunity to become disciples of love through sacrifice and servanthood, because God's everlasting and abundant love for us makes it possible. We should give out of blessing because that is what creates blessing--for ourselves, those we love, and our church community. Then we--in turn--can together pool our resources as best we can, to offer blessing to those outside our doors who long for that love we know when we come together, worship together, sacrifice together.

This vision of stewardship--of sacrifice and servanthood--comes to us right out of the mouth of Jesus; and through our baptism into his life, his death, his rising, and his mission. What is important is not who winds up sitting on the right hand or the left, but how God's abundant love compels us--through capacity and opportunity--to get up and offer our seat to someone else arriving at the banquet--again and again--because our heart leads us to, and because we know that we will not be left abandoned or bereft by our generosity. This is our calling, our capacity and our opportunity, as members of the beloved community. So ponder this heresy, listen to your hearts for their dream for this church, and respond next week to your leaders' call for your pledge of stewardship for the coming year with joy and peace. And thank you to each and every one of you for being who you are, for being here today, and for being willing to be the church. AMEN