

Peace, Rest, Gentleness
Zechariah 9:9-12 and Matthew 11:16-19 and 25-30
First Presbyterian Church, Sarasota
July 9, 2017
Rev. Glen Bell

Joe Albright, one of our previous pastors, recently shared these thoughts in a Dial Hope devotion:

Roman Catholic priest and “author Henri Nouwen once told about a time when he was going to a monastery for a retreat. The monks at the monastery observed vows of silence,” devoting their lives to prayer and worship, “and the retreat was to be meditative and prayerful. Nouwen was delayed and had to arrive late on a rainy night well after bedtime. One of the brothers met him at the door and greeted him warmly, taking his wet coat and bringing him to the kitchen for a cup of tea.

“They talked late into the night, and Nouwen began to relax and feel ready for the retreat. However, it dawned on him that this monk was supposed to observe silence, and he asked him, ‘Why are you willing to sit and talk with me?’ The monk replied, ‘Of all the duties of the Christian faith and the rules of my order, none is higher than hospitality.’”

Joe goes on to explain that hospitality “combines two separate words, one meaning friend and the other meaning stranger. So from very early on, hospitality has carried with it the idea of making friends out of strangers.”

Hospitality is one of the many words you and I would use if we were to begin to describe our faith in Christ and our experience of the church. There are lots of other words too. Grace. Welcome. Assurance. Encouragement. Strength. Love.

From beginning to end, the impetus and initiative of the living God, Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer is to bless us and care for us, to deliver us and rescue us, to strengthen us and guide us on our way.

You and I don’t come to worship and participate in church primarily because we like the style and approach of our particular service. It’s not because we think most of the people here agree with us socio-politically. No, the main reasons we trust and worship and serve is that God is love. God in Christ is always reaching into our hearts and lives, yearning to create and bless, heal and restore, encourage and empower. At the same time, we come to worship and participate in church because we yearn to understand ourselves and our world.

These two reasons are knit together. Welcome, hospitality, love, encouragement – our experience here – goes hand-in-hand with our need to make sense of our lives. Dean Thompson, our former Faith Focus Weekend speaker, calls this biblical and theological sensemaking. At heart, it means the only way we can truly comprehend our own lives is to be in relationship with the One who made us – the One who made us for gratitude and generosity, the One who made us to love and encourage others.

The goodness of this morning’s gospel lesson is the joy and tender comfort of God’s revelation through Jesus. And it’s ironic too, for as this passage from Matthew opens, Jesus presents some of the same thorny dynamics that you and I face so often.

Am I good enough?

Do others like me? Does anyone love me?

Why am I sometimes so disappointed or angry or so filled with envy? Why don’t others understand me? Why do we all disagree so sharply about what matters the most in our world?

I hear these questions echoed in Christ’s opening words, as he shares the experience of every generation: “We played the flute, but you didn’t dance. We cried out and wailed loudly, but you didn’t grieve and mourn.”

It’s like this: Those around you said it was time to celebrate, and they looked at you funny and turned away when you did not join them. At other times, our friends and neighbors were mourning their loss, but at that moment we found ourselves in a very different place spiritually and emotionally.

This is one of the greatest conundrums of human life. We feel and believe and experience things so differently – the role of parents and children in family life, the significance of marriage, the ethics of our business relationships, the rightness of our political leaders, all the issues of the day.

Our children don't seem to understand us. Our parents don't seem to understand us. Our neighbors don't seem to understand us. Even our best friends don't always understand us.

Jesus points out that both he and John the Baptist before him were terribly misunderstood. John was an ascetic, he points out, radically disciplined and separate from the society, and the people questioned and complained: Why so apart? Why the weird clothes and the strange diet?

And Jesus himself, in contrast, was always willing to meet and eat with tax collectors and self-satisfied sinners and other misfits and rejects from good Jewish society, and the people questioned and complained: Why so willing to connect with everyone? Doesn't he know he needs to spend more time with the right people?

Jesus teaches us that God is a god of love, not hate. God is a god of acceptance, not rejection. God is a god who serves, not who lords it over us. God is a god who welcomes, not turns away.

We need a God like this. We need the Lord so very badly, because you and I sometimes come to this place wounded and wondering, downcast and doubting, uncertain and unready, ill-prepared and ill-tempered.

And God's first, most important word is not, "Straighten up. Get it together. Do better." God's first word is this. "I know you are weary. I love you. I will cherish and bless and heal you."

Every important symbol in this place is all about grace and hospitality and welcome. We sit and stand before the font, remembering that God washes us clean in baptism. We gather regularly around the table, acknowledging that we are fed and strengthened even though we are unworthy. We do it all beneath the cross, recognizing through our warts and worries and wonderings that God loves us so very much that God sent the only Son to give up his life for our sakes.

"Come to me," Jesus says, "all you who are weary – and I will give you rest."

This divine energy and direction and impetus not only makes sense of our lives, in the midst of our brokenness and worry. It also gives shape and form to all we do in Christ's name.

We stay up late and talk with the stranger, even though we are tired and our vow is silence. We are patient and persistent with one another as a church, even when we see differently or feel differently or vote differently from one another. On Sunday mornings we welcome others with enthusiasm and care, even when we are eager to talk with our old friends. We forgive the rough edges of friends and neighbors, because we are created to be gracious and kind and loving.

Many of us, I'm afraid, don't get it. We think we renounce lying and cheating and stealing because it's in the Ten Commandments, because we should, because we ought to, because our mother or grandmother told us to behave.

No, we welcome the weary, we love the burdened, we sit at bedside in the hospital, we put the encouraging note in the mail because we are human beings created in the image of God. This is who we were meant to be. This is how we discover what life is all about.

You and I are almost halfway through our Imagine the Future capital campaign. We started receiving your generous gifts in the spring of 2016 and we will finish up in the spring of 2019. If you are a newcomer to the church and want to be a part of it, please speak with me; your participation and gifts are very important.

There are so many things we have already accomplished. Our parking lot debt is gone. Our church school classrooms are being renovated. Here in our fellowship hall, we have all new glass and doors in our back wall, a brand-new sound system, and in about eighteen more months, we plan to bust out this wall and extend the room to the south. We have a renewed courtyard just outside. / Here in our sanctuary building, we have a new hospitality suite and new bathrooms, a redecorated sanctuary and a renewed organ.

That's not all. Right now we are working to redo the entryway into our administration and education building. There's a lot going on.

But none of that is most important, I believe. The single most important thing about our capital campaign is not the sanctuary or organ or fellowship hall or courtyards or entryway to our offices or classrooms.

The most important thing is all the ways it is teaching us to imagine the future, to become who we are, disciples of vision and generosity and hospitality, people of grace. Welcome. Encouragement. Love.

A couple of days ago one of the leaders of our church was talking about our first Sunday back in our sanctuary on Pentecost Sunday, June 4. They found themselves crying through the first hymn. So did Steven Phillips. So did I.

What did we sing?

Here we share in Christ the love that frees us.

Here as one we claim the faith of Jesus.

Here the love of Christ shall end divisions.

Here God brings an end to fear and danger.

Here God's house proclaims from floor to rafter,

all are welcome, all are welcome, all are welcome in this place.

That is the first and last word for you today. You are welcome here. God's love frees you. The Lord's embrace is rich and strong and true. God will never let you go.

May God's tender comfort and gentle peace be yours today.