

Sermon: Loss & New Creation

Once again it seems we have arrived at a new phase in this pandemic. Churches, including our own, are beginning to think deliberately about an eventual re-opening; about ways to connect in person that do not involve gathering in-doors. Are there ways to worship outside? Are there ways to meet, safely, in smaller groups? Can we do more congregation-wide celebrations, like we did when we paraded our love and affection for Gladys a few weeks ago? Quietly and with patience, we are becoming more creative and confident when we answer the question: How do you ‘do church’ during a pandemic? We are blessed with a great partner in St. John’s Episcopal and in Vicki Ix, a partner with whom we work not only to nurture our communities spiritually, but also to prioritize our communities’ safety.

Our two churches’ constraint in this creative work is to respect each other’s right to safety and good health; to respect our communities’ right to peace and health justice. I think we have done this very well, we have honored and respected our health by accepting that church just can’t be the same right now. That might seem like a small and obvious thing for us--of course we would not risk each other’s health, of course we would not insist on our religion to the point that it puts the wider community and the country in jeopardy. But we’ve all followed the news, we all know this has not been as obvious to every faith community. It is worth taking a moment, I think, at a time when there is a gradual re-opening effort beginning here, to lift up and celebrate that our community is still vigilant and continues to put service to God’s people ahead of what might be convenient or personally gratifying. We are truly blessed by our deep faithfulness and sense of responsibility.

This does not mean we are any less frustrated, any less overwhelmed, by this ongoing ordeal. I can only imagine how difficult this has been on our community’s youth, on anyone who relies solely on the church to provide community and comfort. I especially *cannot* imagine how difficult this is on those experiencing loss. The hospital room filled with visitors, the funeral home, our sanctuary most of

all--these are sites of some of the most important spiritual moments in our lives; they are places where loss is acknowledged, where it is really faced. Gatherings of family, friends and community in one place, on one ground, allow God's love, God's hope and God's faith to actually begin the long process of a new way of being. This way of being doesn't forget what has been lost but yet is allowed, in the course of time, to find some sense of peace, some sense of freedom in the trust that we together, we as a community, we will never abandon or betray the tender soul that has departed this place. In this world we do lose loved ones--loved ones will lose us--but we do not lose their love, they do not lose ours.

The longer this crisis extends, the more clear it becomes: Our responsibility to those in grief is to find ways to collectively build and sustain the very sanctuary that will allow them to really face their loss. May they feel the communities' presence and care, may they *know* that their loss will not go unfelt, trust that it will not ever be forgotten. We must sustain this sanctuary in our very bodies.

The past two weeks or so, our church has been hit by the devastating losses of Morgan, of Martha, of Pete. Right now, loss falls on these families and communities unfairly--more than in the time before this crisis, more than when we could gather together to bond through physical presence and embrace, more than when we could endure together that which would be too much to bear on anyone's own.

On Pentecost Sunday, we read scriptures from the Hebrew Bible and from the New Testament, scriptures that testify unequivocally that where once the greed of humanity was broken and scattered by God when humans tried to take heaven for themselves, tried to displace God with the construction of the Tower of Babel, now God urgently re-unites humanity through the recognition and admiration of human diversity, a diversity which is itself only a hint of the still vaster diversity of God's Creation. Finally then God reunites the deepest and greatest diversity that is God's own image--the image of love--from which all is made. Pentecost Sunday is a celebration of the church subverting the greed and stratification of the world as

we find it today. We lay the groundwork for generosity and equality in God's kingdom as we leave it tomorrow.

It strikes me that Pentecost is a powerful demonstration of loss and new creation. We lose the idea, for example, that our lives can be justified by how we provide for our own children and parents only, that our concern for justice can end at the borders of our own nation, that one community deserves justice but another does not, that so long as I am square with God myself, I need not become partners with God in spreading freedom to all people everywhere. When the wind of understanding rushes over all the people gathered from many nations and regions of the world, when it rushes into different languages and bodies, the Pentecost wind blows away narrow ideas of the self, and allows a new creation of the self. Ethnicities, races, languages remain different, remain authentic, remain essential--but what they say is brand new, radically new. They speak the beginning of the end of an old world, where some were free and some were slaves, where some were men and some were women. Darkness is setting on that old order, so that a bright new creation can begin its climb over these hills, a new creation where all are free--all different still, still sharing with the world their unique portion of God's image, but now the same in freedom.

Knowing and loving and caring for one another is all God and God's prophets have ever commanded of us. Each loss is difficult precisely because in that loss--in its heart, where knowing, where love and deep caring were already present and understood--in that loss is the seal of God's presence among us, is the sign that God's wind is gathering strength, is proof that a new creation draws nearer.

Alleluia and amen.