

“Let Mutual Love Continue”

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First Presbyterian Church of Kirkwood

Sunday, August 28, 2016
Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Readings from Scripture: Luke 14:1, 7-14 and Hebrews 13:1-8, 15-16

On one occasion when Jesus was going to the house of a leader of the Pharisees to eat a meal on the sabbath, they were watching him closely.

When he noticed how the guests chose the places of honor, he told them a parable. “When you are invited by someone to a wedding banquet, do not sit down at the place of honor, in case someone more distinguished than you has been invited by your host; and the host who invited both of you may come and say to you, ‘Give this person your place,’ and then in disgrace you would start to take the lowest place. But when you are invited, go and sit down at the lowest place, so that when your host comes, he may say to you, ‘Friend, move up higher’; then you will be honored in the presence of all who sit at the table with you. For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.”

He said also to the one who had invited him, “When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, in case they may invite you in return, and you would be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.”

Luke 14:1, 7-14

Let mutual love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that, some have entertained angels without knowing it. Remember those who are in prison, as though you were in prison with them; those who are being tortured, as though you yourselves were being tortured. Let marriage be held in honor by all, and let the marriage bed be kept undefiled; for God will judge fornicators and adulterers. Keep your lives free from the love of money, and be content with what you have; for he has said, “I will never leave you or forsake you.” So we can say with confidence, “The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can anyone do to me?”

Remember your leaders, those who spoke the word of God to you; consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith. Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.

Through him, then, let us continually offer a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that confess his name. Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God.

Hebrews 13:1-8, 15-16

Let us pray. Gracious and loving God, we open our hearts, our minds, all of who we are to the power of your Spirit. I pray that you would take all the words that we have heard and sung, the words that we are carrying within, the words of scripture and those that you have laid upon my heart. Transform them into the living word of Jesus Christ. And let that word dwell in our souls, fill our hearts, and guide our actions. Let it be on our lips as we speak to loved ones and strangers. Let it be in our hands as we serve those in need. Let it be our way of life. We ask this in the faithful name of Christ our Lord. Amen.

A couple weeks ago I was in Baltimore, as I have shared with you, and the during the time of great silence, a time when each of us had committed to being quiet for 24 hours, I had this gnawing calling--I don't think it was from God, but I had this calling nonetheless to go have a wood-burning cooked pizza. It may have been the Holy Spirit, but I'm not sure. I had decided ahead of time to take a pad and a pen so that

I could write down what I want so that I wouldn't break the silence. I walked in and showed the little message that said, "I'm not allowed to speak, but I'd like a table for one." The waitress kind of looked at me and then said, "Follow me." She took me over and sat me down right between a crowd of people that were celebrating a birthday with helium balloons floating everywhere and right behind me was a group of about 8 adults and 4 kids and the 8 adults were talking about where they had gotten their latest tattoo. Needless to say the pizza joint was not quiet or still or calm. As I placed the order and handed it to the waitress, the next thing that happened was a poem that came. It's called "How Are We to Be?"

In this world in which we live, there is so much noise, too much noise.

How are we to be quiet?

In this world in which we live, there is so much violence, too much violence.

How are we to be peace?

In this world in which we live, there is so much suffering, too much suffering.

How are we to be comfort?

In this world in which we live, there is so much rushing, too much rushing.

How are we to be still?

In this world in which we live, there is so much brokenness, too much brokenness.

How are we to be whole?

In this world in which we live, we are

to be quiet,

to be peace,

to be comfort,

to be still and

to be whole.

This is how we are to live in this world.

These words came to me as I sat in the cacophony of a pizzeria, waiting for that perfectly burned crust to show up before me. I realized again that the world we live in is a noisy and demanding place, screaming at us to pay attention to this or to get to the next event, to do busy work all the time, one thing after another.

I was sitting with that sense of invitation to be more quiet and more centered, when I recalled this week, an email that I got from Jim Hershfelt asking me to address the Breakfast Club and to offer the annual "State of the Church" talk. I told Jim this morning at 8:15 that, unfortunately, I wouldn't be able to be there in October as I am out of town, but I'd be happy to be there in November. I also warned him that I'd be mentioning his name during the sermon and as I turned and walked back into the sanctuary, he said, "Pssst. Preacher. Come here." So went back thinking he's going to say, "Don't mention my name." Instead, he leaned real close and said, "Make it quick." I said, "Okay, don't worry. I'll make it quick."

The reading from Hebrews has provoked in me an invitation, if you will, to think about who it is we're being invited to be as we begin this program year. There is part of me that just wants to repeat the phrase, "Let mutual love continue" over and over and over. If you don't hear anything else that is said today or anything that's sung today or anything that is prayed today, remember this one verse, "Let mutual love continue." To me it captures the essence of who we are and it guides every decision and every act that we make. We try to let mutual love continue to flourish here in this place, whether it is welcoming new members, whether it's caring for loved ones, whether it's offering prayers, whether it's singing songs or whether it's praying for a friend who is about to embark on a sabbatical. Our invitation is always the same. In everything that we do, let mutual love continue.

I realized as I was thinking about what identifies who we are as a congregation, the first thing that jumps to my mind is that we are welcoming. For years we paid little attention to visitors, incapable as a staff, given all that has transpired in our history. But over the last several years, we have been able to pay

attention to visitors. We have been able to figure out how to sit down and have coffee with them, invite them to learn about the church and maybe even consider becoming members. With the formation of a New Member Committee, the process is now even streamlined more and today we bear fruit of this wonderful commitment that we have to be an open and welcoming congregation, as we welcome new members into our life.

The second thing that comes to mind is that you are a generous congregation. Time and again needs have been placed before you for funds or for clothing or now even for stuff that you don't want anymore. I shudder to think about the mountains of things you are about to unleash upon us. I heard someone say, "Bill's office will be used for storage and we can lock it because there is a key." And I thought, "Bill's office? We're going to need 14 rooms and Fellowship Hall if I know...." And then someone said, "No, it's just the expensive stuff." And I'm like, "Okay." You have paid off capital debt, you have covered the needs of maintenance. When things come up that are genuine and real and you hear and learn about them, you respond in generosity. Whether it's supporting the workers going to Work Camp, or volunteering to teach--time and again, you are a generous congregation.

The third thing that came to mind is that you and we are a caring congregation. Over the past several weeks, it seems we've done more than our normal share of memorial services. Many of you do not participate in the sense of this ministry of caring in that maybe you will come to a memorial service if you knew the person, but a lot of times the caring that we provide as a congregation is done in smaller groups and sometimes even in private. But I can tell you that we care. We show up when things are going wrong, when there is hurt in this world, when people's lives are falling apart--your caring, your generosity and your welcome are all operative in our ministry to those in need.

On the dashboard of my car sits a thank you note, written by a husband whose wife's memorial service we did not long ago. It says something along the lines of "Dear David, Thank you for the care you have provided and for what may have been the most spiritual experience of my life." I put that card on the dashboard as reminder every day of what it is we are about. We are about being present to those in need and allowing the love of God to flow through everything that we do.

The fourth thing that came to mind is that we are a discerning congregation. We are willing to ask questions, to be open to doubt, to wonder whether we are doing it right. This Fall, the Session will be engaged in a process of coming up with a Mission Statement. Each committee next year will be invited to consider how they fulfill it. We will be wondering about staffing, do we have enough people, are they in the right positions. We will be wondering about the allocation of resources, how we can support better those things that matter the most. All of these come from a congregation that is willing to discern what the Spirit is inviting us to do.

And the last thing, which is the first thing, and which is everything, is that we are a loving congregation. We care. Time and again it amazes me to hear the murmur after worship. I don't know if any of you stop and listen to yourselves as you talk amongst each other. But what I hear is the loving presence of Jesus Christ bubbling up in the community of faith that we call First Pres. Let mutual love continue. May that be our direction all year long. Amen.