Proper 10 All Saints’ Church

July 16, 2017 Year A

Isaiah 55:10-13 Romans 8:1-11

Psalm 65:9-13 Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30

A couple of weeks ago, in a sermon, I shared a story about a young couple, Kim and Dale, who were in the process of adopting, when a social worker asked them if they would be willing to adopt three sisters, a four-year-old, a two-year old and a nine-month old. The girls were living in a tent on the Merrimack River, and their parents, with much grief, realized that they could no longer take care of their children. They were willing to let their children go so that they could have a secure life; a life their birth parents could not give them. The parents had only one stipulation: the sisters needed to stay together.

Would Kim and Dale be willing and able to become instant family? They were members of a church where I assisted at times as a supply priest, and I was blessed to see how they processed this momentous decision within the church community. They met with members of the church over coffee hour- could they manage; where would they get help; how could they furnish new bedrooms? And then one member of the church picked up the prayer book and turned to the Baptismal Rite, and asked, “Will you who witness these vows do all in your power to support these persons in their life in Christ?” And everyone said, “We will.”

The decision was made….bringing these three sisters into their lives as their own daughters, was made so much clearer with the church’s support… indeed, it would take a village to make this all happen. So we all become parents in waiting, on call, to help as Kim and Dale invited these three little girls into their lives forever. It was a bonding experience for all of us, especially in the ways we problem-solved together.

The four-year-old had the most difficult time…. Though it was all a good change, it was very disruptive and frightening, and there was a lot of acting out on her part. Of course, even though it was all for the good, her whole life was being turned upside-down. One of my favorite stories, one I shared a couple of weeks ago, is when she peed in her juice cup and threw it in the dishwasher. Obviously, a bright child.

There’s another story; one that I witnessed. Dale’s father, a Presbyterian minister, was invited to come to the church as a guest preacher. Presbyterian clergy wear beautiful black, flowing robes, and he came in his finest and preached a great sermon about all the ways lay ministries weave the fabric of who we are as the Body of Christ.

At the coffee hour, still dressed in his robes, we gathered around to speak with him about his sermon, and the little four-year-old kept coming up to him and kicking him in the shins. Dale kept pulling her off her grandfather, saying, “Sweetheart, we don’t kick people.” She persisted. The grandfather kneeled down and said, “Honey, it’s me, Papa.” And the little girl, with wide eyes, said, “Papa!!” and ran to her grandfather’s arms.

Dale leaned down and asked, “Who did you think he was?”

“The Judge.”

Of course, black robes, courts, decisions, disruption, chaos. I love this little girl’s tenacity. Many of us would acquiesce and let the judge have his way, as the power is in his hands, be passive. Not this little girl. She was kicking him away, protecting her new-found family.

The memory of the grandfather bending down, at her level, and saying, “Honey, it’s me, Papa,” reminds me of Jesus saying to us, “Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.”

Jesus is bending down to us, on his knees, at our level, and saying, “It’s me Papa…. Abba…. Daddy.”

Jesus throughout the gospel story, always challenged the image of God as judge. And it probably got him killed, so much disorder he was bringing to those in charge, to those who were judicators of laws, to those who had categorized the blessed and the cursed and ostracized the poor and the sick. To those who thought that they knew best.

Jesus, the Christ, as he is reaching out to us in love, is the clearest image we have of the unseen God. You matter. You always have and you always will, for eternity. The Christ, the Head of the Living Body, is the One whom all things are reconciled and overcome, no matter what. God Emmanuel: God with us, not just God above us or beyond us, but God with us. There is no condemnation.

Our cloistered monks and mystics help us to understand God as the Ancient Heart of Love: “Be caught by the love God has for you and for everyone else. It’s real, and it’s forever, and it’s for now. Who you are, what you are, however it is that you’ve gotten to be the way you are, God knows. God desires, God loves. God loves you.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

“Never mind your weakness; it is the very thing that qualifies you. Never mind your feelings of inadequacy; it is God’s work, not yours. Simply make yourself available, and let go of any need to impress others, or prove yourself worthy, or achieve ‘success.’ What matters is that God has chosen you, and that God claims you as God’s own.”[[2]](#footnote-2)

Jesus came as the image of Love, helping us to see the way to a God who is madly and passionately in love with us. We matter; we have a calling; we can make a difference in the world; we can be Christ’s hands and heart, preaching the gospel without using words.

We can act, we can pray, we can serve. Yet, how many of us grew up with the image of God as Judge, as Arbitrator, and if we did not meet God’s standards, we were doomed. Feelings of inadequacy that left us fearful, in shame, disconnected and disillusioned, dependent on other’s authorities, not our own God-given beauty. And we became passive.

I grew up not only the idea that God was Judge, but also with the idea that the priest, “father knows best” was in charge, because he was holier than the rest of us, dedicated to a life of sacrifice and service. And we in the pews were to follow as best we could, his imitation of the Christ. Though, of course, we would fall short.

The times they are a changin’

In October of this year, I will be finishing my third year as your Rector. Three years ago during the summer I was interviewing here at All Saints’….. why was I leaving my cushy job at Phillips Exeter Academy?; (not completely sure)….why did I say no to the church in Manhattan? (not completely sure). I just felt called to All Saints’. It was that simple.

My call is becoming clearer. I can feel it in my sinews.

You are the church. You who sit here in the pews. Rectors come and go, some good, some bad, some indifferent. Don’t get me wrong, leaders make a difference, but they don’t make the Church. You do. You are the fabric of the Body of Christ. Without your ministries, there is no church.

Why have I been called here by God? It is to continue with the good work started by you- by your understanding of the vibrancy and power of your own ministries.

What a blessing for me to be in your midst as we move deeper and deeper to a church that is spirit driven and lay-led.

There is going to be some disruption as we continue to lift up the power of your ministries. Change is never easy, even painful.

As many of you know, we sent out a letter this week to share some of these changes. Like the duties of Rector, having a Parish Administrator who can do everything is no longer realistic. I must admit, in these last couple of years, I have learned to read architectural designs, drainage systems, and boilers. I have measured pipes, read tax laws, called the Attorney General’s office too many times, and even fought with plumbers. All good, but not sustainable. And you didn’t call me to do these things.

I am so excited that we have created two new ½ time positions: (1) A person dedicated to coordinating all our projects, our maintenance, our IT systems, and our data. (2) And then to have another ½ time position, a person dedicated to coordinating all our ministries, who will join Jeff and Sandi and me in all the ways we are committed to lifting up your ministries, developing and honoring how God is calling you to serve.

You are the Church.

Amen

1. Sermon preached by Brother Curtis Almquist, SSJE [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Sermon preached by Brother David Vryhof, SSJE [↑](#footnote-ref-2)