

Sermon – The Fourth Sunday in Lent

John 3: 14-21

Not long after I moved to Chicago in 1996, I went back to church. It was the first time I had committed to going to church regularly for over 16 years. I went back to church because I felt the nudging of the Holy Spirit after spending some months reading the gospels and letters of Paul, Peter and John.

The church I went to was Lakeview Presbyterian Church, mainly because it was closest to my apartment and a woman was the pastor. I'd been raised in a church that would not allow women to lead congregations. I still recall how nervous I was on that first Sunday walking into an unknown space, filled with strangers and traditions I didn't really understand. My partner at the time wasn't a believer so I went alone.

Walking into an unfamiliar church to attend worship can be a nerve-racking experience for anyone, especially if you are single and unsure of what you'll find inside. The experience can make you feel incredibly vulnerable and that's not always a feeling we want to embrace. I spent most of my time at Lakeview Presbyterian arriving a minute before the service started and leaving pretty much as soon as it ended. Toward the end of my time in Chicago I joined the Lenten study group at church and found there to my delight, welcome and connection.

The pandemic the world over has caused us all to become socially isolated. This necessary impact from the pandemic has left a lot of people alone and vulnerable. Our aged folks have been isolated in retirement homes and nursing homes. Our loved ones have been alone in hospitals where many died alone. It has left some to mourn the deaths of loved ones by themselves. It has isolated single people everywhere, even more so than in regular times. And it has isolated us from each other as we have been cautious about in-person gathering.

The church is a place where community gathers for common worship but it has also been a social gathering place for many more people, a place where people in a community find connection. Churches are often a reflection of the local community and especially in a place like Brooklyn where there is often a church on every block in every neighborhood.

The downside of this is that churches are often very segregated and cliquey because we can 'church-shop' to find the 'goldilocks church', the one that is just right for us, where we feel included and in the majority.

For many people who are single, or indeed feeling alone in the world, joining a church or deepening their participation in a church can be challenging because quite often church cultures overlook the needs of these people because the church glorifies marriage and married life. This can often lead to feelings of alienation, intentional or not, as single and alone people seek the same desire for inclusion, love and welcome as married people.

As I reflected on the readings for today's service I was drawn to the welcoming and embracing sentiments contained in the letter to the Ephesians, and also in Jesus' response to Nicodemus concerning his life's purpose, and that of God. I couldn't help but connect them to what it means to truly welcome all people into a community of faith where they should find loving connection.

We are after all the body of Jesus Christ in the world and it is vital that we convey the welcome to a life of faith and worship that Jesus offers to all of us, no matter our own life circumstances.

"God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ-- by grace you have been saved-- and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the ages to come he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God-- not the result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life."

These words from the letter to the Ephesians clearly offers each one of us this incredible promise of Jesus Christ. First, that by God's grace, freely given, we have been saved. Second, being saved is not of our own doing it is a gift of God. And thirdly, we are what God has made us. So whether you are in a relationship or you are single, whether you are black, brown, or white, Asian or African descendent, whether you are gay, straight, transgender, queer or questioning, you are as God has made you, you are gifted the grace of God freely, and you are loved by God unconditionally.

The church in its broadest sense has for far too long looked down upon those who are different from what many religious folks see as the 'norm'- married, heterosexual people. We all fail in some ways to welcome all people into our church communities and to go out of our way to get to know each other. We might recall the first day we walked into our church. Like me, you might have been nervous and shy, but hopefully soon after found connection and welcome.

God loves all people in the world, each one of us, and as Jesus told Nicodemus, sent him into the world, to reveal God to each one of us personally and to welcome us all into a new age, a new relationship with God, through Jesus Christ. Importantly, Jesus reveals that he didn't come into the world to condemn us, rather that we might be rescued and saved from ourselves so that each one of us might benefit from inclusion in our faith and love of God.

For God so loved the world ... It is possible to read the whole of Scripture, from the creation to the eschaton, as God's love story for the world. It was, after all, love that stirred God's heart at the pleading of the slaves in Egypt, and love that offered them both the guidance of the law and the security of the promised land. Whenever inequality or injustice threatened the welfare of the poor and the powerless, just about everyone, God's love raised up prophets who declared

God's desire for compassion—shown not just to insiders, but also to sojourners and foreigners within the boundaries of Israel.

It was divine love, stronger than well-deserved judgment, that carried Israel during the time of exile, and the love of God that was celebrated with the psalms of adoration in the rebuilt temple in Jerusalem. It was God's love that sent Jesus, God's Son, to be incarnate in the world, where he taught that love is not merely for those who look and think and believe like us, but even for our enemies and those who persecute us.

It was love that stirred the first-century church to open the doors of communion not only to Jews but also to Gentiles, not only to those deemed worthy but also those whose very existence was troubling: the widows, the orphans, the sick and the blind, the eunuchs and the outsider.

Even in our own day, when established powers have sought to limit God's love by the exclusion of others from full participation in the community, divine compassion for the oppressed and divine passion for justice have called forth prophets to declare that God's love includes all, regardless of age or race, nationality or creed, gender or sexual orientation. The cumulative weight of the biblical record and the multifaceted experience of salvation within the contemporary church seem clear: God so loves the world ... God so loves you and me!

When society is so polarized as it is today, where systemic racism exists in every institution, where sexism and homophobia is all around us, it can be hard to put aside how we are impacted by all this so that we wholly welcome and include all who want to be close to God and a part of a community of faith. When someone new walks through the doors of this church, either on Sunday morning or any other day, how will they feel after spending some time with us. Will they find welcome, acceptance, love and grace.

The neighborhood around our parish church is rapidly changing and we are right in the middle of it. Gentrification has resulted in sky-high rents, unaffordable prices for houses and apartments, and retail stores and restaurants that are high-end and pricey. The construction of new apartments on our doorstep will not stop until all the available land has been developed. So our show of God's love is to embrace the new community exemplifying Christ's message of free love and grace for all people.

I want to encourage you today to reflect on these passages of scripture and how you might enhance the welcome of all people into this community of faith. God's grace is a free gift to us all and so it is not for us to withhold it from others.

God so loved us all that he gave us his only Son, that we all may participate in the love and embrace of Jesus, rather than fall away into a life in the shadows of isolation and individualism. God does not condemn us but rather wants to be reunited with each and every one of us, God's unique creation, because "... *we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.*"

So if you are experiencing the nudging or pulling of the Holy Spirit then seek us out. If you are single, married, in a relationship, whether gay, lesbian, transgender, queer or questioning, join us. We are all as God made us, and we are all called by God to be reconciled first to God, then each other. We are all stronger together than apart and we are all more nurtured by God's grace and love as the body of Christ, than alone in the world.

We welcome you as you are into the body that is Jesus Christ. We hope that you will take up this invitation and shape the life that has been made for you by God's love for you.

Amen.