

The 9th Sunday after Pentecost
July 22, 2018
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2 Samuel 7:1-14a
Psalm 89:20-37
Ephesians 2:11-22
Mark 6:30-34, 53-56

“Good morning saints!” (The appropriate response, by the way, is “Good morning.”)

That was, I noticed, a not-uncommon greeting from more than one preacher or presenter at the General Convention held earlier this month in Austin, Texas. I might take it on as my own in the coming weeks. (Stay tuned.)

On one occasion – I don’t recall who said it – I heard a variation. “Good morning saints!” the speaker said in the usual way. The people replied, “Good morning.” The speaker continued, “Good morning sinners.” And, again, the people replied, “Good morning.” Then the speaker made the point: “Good, we’re *all* here.”

Beyond a possible change in my opening words of welcome, I don’t entirely know what all might come of this last General Convention. I do know that it was good that for nearly two weeks in July, the Episcopal Church – saints and sinners, all – gathered together to discuss and debate and deliberate and give witness to the love of God for all God’s children.

My experience as a participant inevitably affects me. It affects how I respond to this morning’s readings, as well. I think of Michael Curry, of course. I heard him preach on three different occasions during the Convention. Love was, you shouldn’t be surprised, the theme each time.

When over a thousand of us rode buses to a detention center housing as many as 500 migrant women, Michael Curry fired up the crowd with words of love.

Allow me to say we do not come in hatred. We do not come in bigotry. We do not come to put anybody down. We come to lift everybody up. We come in love. We come in love because we follow Jesus. And Jesus taught us love.

Love the Lord your ... [*God*].

And love your ... [*Neighbor*].

And he continued with the point of emphasis for that time and place:

Love your liberal neighbor. Love your conservative neighbor. Love your Democratic neighbor. Love your Republican neighbor. Love your Independent neighbor. Love your neighbor who you don’t like. Love the neighbor you disagree with. Love your Christian neighbor. Love your Muslim neighbor. Love your Jewish neighbor. Love your Palestinian neighbor. Love your Israeli neighbor. Love your refugee neighbor. Love your immigrant neighbor. Love the prison guard neighbor. Love your neighbor! ⁱ

I want to come back to his point in a moment, because I think it comes very near to the real point of at least our reading from Ephesians this morning. But first I just want to tell you that one of the real joys of General Convention – at least for me – is how much it feels like a love-fest.

I've been ordained for a little over 30 years now. I've served five different congregations in five different dioceses. So for me, it's a lot like a family reunion – a chance to reconnect with former classmates and colleagues and other friends I've met along the way ... and at least one former parishioner and one former parish secretary, as well.



And for me, General Convention is also a celebration of an ever-widening family. Here at Trinity, in central Oregon, we are a relatively homogenous group. But the Church is much more diverse and interesting in all sorts of ways – ethnically and racially and regionally, as well as how we identify ourselves in ways other than straight and getting older.

It's so exhilarating to gather with, and just to spend time with, people not like me – people who, for all our differences, worship and serve the one God we all love.

And it's this same sense of wonder that's behind our reading from Ephesians this morning. And that passage insists that we are, by the grace of God, bound together: "citizens with the saints and ... members of the household of God." And it defies the cultural norms for the time.

The opening phrases strike me as more spatial and geographical and even political divides than something metaphorical. You Gentiles were, the writer says, “without Christ” – “without,” as in “on the outs” with Christ, outside rather than “within.” You – we – were “*aliens* from the commonwealth” and “*strangers*” to God’s promises, “having no hope” and “*without God.*” But the love of God draws us in.

Surely, it’s no accident that the words are evocative of parts of the Old Testament:

You shall not wrong or oppress a resident *alien*, for you were *aliens* in the land of Egypt.

Exodus 22:21

The *alien* who resides with you shall be to you as the *citizen* among you; you shall love the *alien* as yourself, for you were *aliens* in the land of Egypt: I am the LORD your God.

Leviticus 19:34

You shall also love the *stranger*, for you were *strangers* in the land of Egypt.

Deuteronomy 10:19

Here’s a “fun fact” I came across this past week: in the Old Testament, God’s people are commanded 36 times to “love the stranger,” but commanded just twice to love their neighbor. ⁱⁱ

If this feels a bit political, it’s because it is. It was then. It still is. Back in Old Testament times, the People of God were constantly reminded of what God did for them, in the hopes that they would go and do the same for others.

Abraham was told to leave his home and to go to a new land in order to be blessed and to be a blessing to others. God still wants the same for us.

Joseph became a refugee who found a place in Egypt. His family came along thereafter, fellow refugees fleeing famine and find food and safety in Egypt.

When it all turn bad for them, Moses led them in the wilderness for forty year, nomads looking for a place we call the “Promised Land.”

So, too, here in this reading from Ephesians. We are each of us, and all of us, “citizens with the saints and ... members of the household of God.”

Members of God’s household, not the other way around. (As an aside, I think that’s at least part of the problem with David’s suggestion that he should build a house for God.) Apparently, God is less interested in being made part of our households than in making us part of God’s.

Because God's house, it seems (at least according to Ephesians), has no walls on the inside:

... now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us.

And the goal, in the end, is more than mere demolition work. God "in Christ Jesus" is working to raise a new structure, to make us part of God's new creation.

And I think that's why, on a sweltering summer day outside of Austin, Texas, more than 1,000 Episcopalians came together to give witness to the love of God outside a walled-off building.

Michael Curry reminded us of why we were there:

We come in love, in love. I would submit that the teachings of Jesus to love God and love our neighbor is at the core and the heart of what it means to be a follower of Jesus Christ. And we must be people who reclaim Christianity from its popular modality, from the way it is often perceived and presented to a way of Christianity that looks something like Jesus! And Jesus said, love God and love your (neighbor).

We come in love. That is the core of our faith. That is the heart of it. And we come, because we are Christian and the way of love calls for us to be humanitarian. ⁱⁱⁱ

Normally, when I quote Michael Curry, I let him have the final word. But this time, I'll end with my own personal reaction to what it was like to have gone that day. We got on 19 buses that day and, as we drove along the front, we saw the sign outside identifying it as the T. Don Hutto Residential Center. It's a euphemism at best. Not a "residential center" as if it were some sort of an apartment complex or assisted living community. But make no mistake, it's not a residential center, it's a detention center, a private prison housing migrant women.

When we arrived, we got off our buses and were told where to gather: in a designated spot outside a chained-link fence, a couple of hundred yards away from the outside walls. We were told the women inside could hear us from there, so we got loud with our cheers and our singing.

And then, after a while, some of us walked down the road in front of the center to get a bit closer. Whether any of the women inside could hear us before, it was clear that they could see us then. They put their hands up against the slot of windows. They waved back at us.

Later someone "tweeted" this report from the inside:

A woman called from Hutto after today's prayer and told us they were glued to the windows until the last bus left the detention center. Women inside were crying, saying they knew they weren't alone after seeing so many people there. ^{iv}

For a moment in time, we were drawn near to God and one another, the dividing wall still between us and yet somehow being crossed as well.

For me, it was simultaneously heart-breaking and heart-warming. It felt like something holy, to be (if only for a moment) “joined together and grow[ing] into a holy temple ... a dwelling place for God” – a dwelling place big enough for God and one another.

I said Michael Curry wouldn’t have the last word, but maybe he’d say this ... that we were in that moment living out something of what it means to be the Episcopal branch of the Jesus Movement.

ⁱ Michael Curry @ <https://www.episcopalchurch.org/posts/publicaffairs/presiding-bishop-michael-curry-preaches-hutto-detention-center>.

ⁱⁱ Ian Cook @ http://laughingbird.net/SYCB/SouthYarraBaptist/Recent_Sermons/Entries/2012/7/22_Exiles_and_asylum_seekers.html.

ⁱⁱⁱ Michael Curry @ <https://www.episcopalchurch.org/posts/publicaffairs/presiding-bishop-michael-curry-preaches-hutto-detention-center>.

^{iv} “Episcopal News Service, reported by Lynette Wilson, <https://www.episcopalnewsservice.org/2018/07/08/episcopalians-gather-in-public-witness-outside-immigrant-detention-center/>.”