

“The Gift of Community”
Psalm 25:4-12
The Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost
August 27, 2023
Rev. Anita Peebles, Seattle First Baptist Church

Beloved church, it is good to be with you this morning. I am deeply and profoundly grateful for the blessing of having six weeks off this summer—time to get married, time to recover from the chaos of having family and friends in town, time to go on a short honeymoon, time to travel to see family members far away, and time to enjoy the beautiful Seattle summer and restore my soul, mind, heart and body. I want to thank the staff—Darren, Ben, Christian, Judy, Dick, Chase; our pastoral intern Vanessa; guest preachers Jim, Brooke, Margie, Cherry; lay leaders on the Council of Ministries and who serve as heads of committees; the Personnel committee, for seeing my need for time away to rest, recover and celebrate this stage of life, and for supporting me in taking the time I dearly needed. And I want to thank all of you for taking care of each other, for checking in with each other, for loving each other with grace, accountability, hope and justice in this season.

I could sum all of this up by saying that I am grateful for community. The importance of community is what comes to mind when I think about the past six weeks—for myself as an individual, for Scotty and me as a couple, and for this church as a congregation united in following the Way of Jesus called the Christ.

It is so very easy to take community for granted, to take friends and family and neighbors for granted—we enter so easily into our routines, get lost in our own web of life activities and tasks, that sometimes we forget that we are not alone, that we need not be alone, that we exist with each other and that we need each other.

My time off was a wake-up call of sorts. I realized (and probably will continue realizing for a while) that I have been swept up so much in what is going on in my individual life, as an individual pastor, in this particular church, that I forgot that I was a whole human being. I forgot that I was in a community, and that part of what community is for is to journey through life together, facing the struggles together so we don’t face them alone. Community makes it possible for individuals to be whole.

Scotty and I experienced the gift of community surrounding our wedding, as a small group of loved ones gathered from near and far to arrange flowers, set up chairs, staff a sound system, and moreover just overwhelm us with love through their presence. We experienced the gift of community as we traveled to Illinois to visit my grandma in her senior community—so many people assured me they loved her and were taking care of her, it was wonderful to see! And we experienced the gift of community in Nashville, as we gathered with SFBC church family members Nimi, Sam, Nathan and Steffi and shared part of our Nashville heart with them.

And as I returned to work this week, I was overcome with pride in our church family. Hearing about the positive reception of the news that we have a candidate for co-pastor; learning how the church picnic morphed into a fabulous celebration of our beloved nonagenarians, not the least among them 99-year-old Renna; witnessing the success of the new Young Adult group; catching up with our Evergreen family as we prepare to host the Evergreen Annual meeting right here in the sanctuary in October. All of these activities show our commitment to community, how much we can count on this community, and what a gift we are to each other.

And as I read through the sermons that were preached in my absence, I was so very moved—because the sermons, each focusing on a particular value from our church's Affirmation of Values statements, all highlighted the importance of community.

Vanessa reminded us of the cyclical nature of scripture, of life, of doing the work of justice and peace: “God doesn’t care about elaborate sacrifices, God cares for the least of these, and cares if her people are caring for the least of these.” The circling of scripture from God’s love to people’s ignorance to God’s reprimanding to the people worshipping God by loving each other—those cycles are there in our sacred stories to remind us that people have always been this way, have always needed reminders from time to time to get back in touch with what the Holy requires of us. And she reminded us, “perhaps it’s for communities like ours that the bit in [Micah 6:8] about walking humbly is included. Humility to acknowledge that the work of justice and mercy are never perfected or complete, only continued and improved upon. Humility to recognize that for all the ways we “get it right,” there will always be blind spots. Humility to be accountable to the ways in which we still, against our best efforts, are complacent in systemic oppression. Humility to name and know that we cannot do the work of justice and mercy apart from each other or apart from God.” Amen.

Then Brooke prompted us to wonder if Jesus really was perfect, and explored the gifts of imperfection...which include “finding salvation by finding wholeness,” not perfection, but wholeness! Wholeness that had space for messing up, realizing the mistake, and then changing ways. Brooke challenged us to “let us look to one who made this journey before us. Not because he was perfect. Not because he had no need. But because he, like us, could learn, could grow, could gain deeper respect for others, their dignity, their humanity!” This task is not only one for individuals, but one for our entire community.

The last Sunday in July, Jim Segaar helped us widen our gaze as we considered how community can, and should, and must be built across beliefs and traditions. He reminded us that “exclusivity isn’t limited to the Christian faith,” and wondered at how we could “get out of this quagmire of fear and hatred to a place where we can respect all religions?” Looking to the wisdom of the Dalai Lama, Jim quoted, “the truth itself is big enough to include our diversity of views,” then added, “God is loving enough to love across our diversity of views.”

Considering our fourth value of welcome, Vanessa complicated the parable of the sheep and the goats as she encouraged us not to become stuck on a path “that makes serving others about [ourselves],” so that we might feel high and mighty and over and above each other in goodness. Quoting our upcoming Romney Lecture speaker Dr. Wilda C. Gafney, Vanessa said that in the

Bible, salvation should be understood as communal and not individual. Dr. Gafney raised the question, “Imagine if your salvation independent upon the actions of your community?” Wow. I paused with that for a while. As we clap ourselves on the back for being a place of welcome and inclusion, let us take Vanessa’s lead in continuing to explore how much we really live being mindful of the “we” over the “me”? Expansive, radical welcome and inclusion push us to draw our circles wide and wider still.... always widening our views and our decision-making to move beyond individual comfort toward the common good.

And then Cherry took on the fifth value of changing our biases to challenge us to boldly consider our own arrogance...and how we might repent of that arrogance and learn humility by tuning in to what the Spirit is doing, embrace our vulnerabilities and our humanity, let go of shame and open ourselves to learning and growth. Sharing stories about her life, Cherry talked about moments when she had been called to sit up! Pay attention! Listen to Spirit! And she said, “This is why community is so important. When we already care about one another, we have a foundation for listening with respect. That is the path of humility.” And she challenged us to push through the discomfort of change, of being confronted with our biases, because staying how we’ve always been is not compatible with following the Way of Jesus.

And Margie, uplifting our commitment to Creation care, reminded us of the importance of sharing wisdom among religious and nonreligious peoples for the care of the Earth, our common home. Incremental changes, Margie said, quoting Barack Obama, make a difference; and she called us to look to all those making incremental change to limit climate change possible: from Pope Francis to the young people of Montana.

And then we come today, having finished our series on our church values, to Psalm 25. Hear this reading from the psalm, verses 4-12.

(NRSVUE)

Make me to know your ways, O Lord;
teach me your paths.

5 Lead me in your truth and teach me,
for you are the God of my salvation;
for you I wait all day long.

6 Be mindful of your mercy, O Lord, and of your steadfast love,
for they have been from of old.

7 Do not remember the sins of my youth or my transgressions;
according to your steadfast love remember me,
for the sake of your goodness, O Lord!

8 Good and upright is the Lord;
therefore God instructs sinners in the way.

9 God leads the humble in what is right
and teaches the humble Their way.

10 All the paths of the Lord are steadfast love and faithfulness,
for those who keep Their covenant and Their decrees.

11 For your name's sake, O Lord,
pardon my guilt, for it is great.

12 Who are they who fear the Lord?
The Holy One will teach them the way that they should choose.

This psalm is fitting for this day—having spent six weeks reflecting on the values that call us together as a people following the Way of Jesus, we now pause with this poem that juxtaposes learning from the Holy with asking for forgiveness from the Holy. Why put these two themes together? What is the psalmist trying to communicate?

One commentator, Beth L. Tanner, writes,

“The “why” or juxtaposition of two or more concepts is a hallmark of Hebrew poetry. The psalms ask us to stretch our theological muscles. I am sure there are many answers, but I thought of the quote from Maya Angelou, “Do the best you can until you know better. When you know better, do better.” The psalm is a reflection on the life of a person and a community. It calls us to look to the past to see how God has provided both growth and forgiveness. It also calls on us to be honest about our past.

The arc of a life is long, and usually, the arc of a church or a denomination is much longer. Individuals and the church have had positions over that time which now, after God's life lessons, must be named as sin. The church has often been in the position of asking God's forgiveness and the forgiveness of humans it has hurt or excluded...This psalm celebrates this growth in God's grace and is also honest about the mistakes along the way.”¹

And so we, with the psalmist, say, “Holy One, teach us in the way we should go. Forgive us our past mistakes and indiscretions. We are those who love you and your Word and so we want to do right by each other and by Creation.”

For our community of Seattle First Baptist Church, following the Way of Jesus and allowing ourselves to be taught by the mysterious moves of the Holy looks like us spending time revisiting our Values, singing our Heritage Hymns, and waiting attentively for the Spirit's nudge of encouragement.

I think you've practiced some of what the psalmist asks for over the last six weeks, as individuals and as a community.

¹ <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/first-sunday-of-advent-3/commentary-on-psalm-251-10-11>

Community shows up—and indeed we continue to remember those wise words that we should “never underestimate the power of showing up”...and so you’ve shown up: when someone needs a ride to the doctor, when someone is hurting, when someone asks for a listening ear.

Community holds each other accountable. This is a hard one, especially for nice progressive churches...sometimes we confuse being welcoming or inclusive for an “anything goes” mentality, allowing behaviors that thrive on gossip, exclusion of those not in an “in-group,” verbal abuse, treating some people like a doormat, and downright meanness. But as psalmists demonstrate over and over, and the writer of psalm 25 is no different, part of allowing ourselves to be taught by the Holy is admitting when we’re wrong and calling others in when they do harm. This critique is not mean-spirited, it is done with love for the aspirations that we hold dear—for us, that looks like accountability to our Values.

And while we talk about accountability, it is important to talk about grace, too. Grace shows up in Psalm 25, as the psalmist admits past wrongs and exhorts God not to remember the mistakes of their youth. The psalmist says all this within an understanding of God’s grace, that there is room for grace and forgiveness because God’s very nature is one of profound love. And you, Seattle First Baptist, you show each other grace...you extend the opportunity to try again, to do better, to change your mind, to wonder and learn something new.

And friends, community serves each other. The psalmist says that the way of following the Holy’s path is with humility...the humility to serve, to help, to spend time caring for others and providing for others’ wellbeing. And you do this, church, and you’ve done it in the last six weeks. Visiting church family members who are in the hospital, blessing those who are moving far away, spending time in prayer and reflection together, preparing food for one another, throwing parties for loved ones, and celebrating each other’s accomplishments. Service done out of love.

So, beloved church, as we seek to do what the psalmist says, and be open to the leading of the Spirit and align ourselves with the path of the Holy, as we seek to live the values of our church every day, may we be steadfast and faithful—to the love, the words, the ideas that have called us together to be a community. May we keep close to our hearts the teachings of the Holy, the wisdom of the preachers from among our number who shared their hearts so openly, and the prime importance of loving each other well. And may we know that, like the psalmist, we have made mistakes and fallen short—because we all have, because we all will, because that is part of our humanity...but we can do our best every single day, with the help of our community. That’s all we can do. It is enough. You are enough. We are enough.

May we go forth from this place to celebrate the gift of community, the gift of each other, never taking each other for granted and always leading with love.

May it ever be so. Amen.