

November 22, 2020

**“Who’s Thirsty”
Sermon by Rev. Susan Drake**

Scripture Readings:

Psalm 95:1-7a

*O come, let us sing to God;
let us make a joyful noise
to the rock of our salvation!
Let us come into God's presence with thanksgiving;
let us make a joyful noise to God with songs of praise!
For God is a great God, and a great Ruler above all gods.
In God's hand are the depths of the earth;
the heights of the mountains are also God's.
The sea is God's, for God made it, and the dry land,
which God's hands have formed.
O come, let us worship and bow down,
let us kneel before God, our Maker!
For God is our God, and we are the people
of God's pasture, and the sheep of God's hand.*

Matthew 25:34-40

Then the Lord will say to those at his right hand, ‘Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.’ Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?’ And the king will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.’

SERMON: “Who’s Thirsty”

This Matthew scripture is beyond a doubt my favorite scripture in the Bible. It was one of the scriptures that I picked for my ordination service and Julie has instructions that it is to be read at my funeral.

It is a great simplifier to help me understand what it means to be a Christian. To see Christ in everyone and a call to action when someone is suffering or in need.

With my bend toward progressive theology I always tend to completely ignore the passage that follows about what Matthew says will happen to those that ignore the suffering of others. Basically, he says you will be cursed and cast into the fire.

“Then he will say to those on his left, ‘Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. For I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat...’”

You see that doesn’t quite gel with the God of my understanding that is all love, all compassion, all of the time. I still believe that is the case, all love, all compassion, all the time but we live in a society that is constantly judging and Christians historically don’t have a great track record in not judging others in spite of our explicit instructions to at least try and not do so.

Historically we have used the right “belief” to judge one another. The question used? “Do you believe in Jesus as your lord and savior?” This is the litmus test for entrance into heaven. Anybody who doesn’t answer correctly, well, according to some, you are going to perish in the fiery furnace.

That includes everyone else but true Christians. I have real trouble with that and not only do I think it is arrogant it is harmful and until we refrain from judging other people’s expression and understanding of God we will miss the whole point, while hiding behind our own superiority. In history when we have felt superior and classified non-Christians as inferior we have behaved badly.

We will save that discussion for another day because right now because we have enough to worry about but

I want to point out that if God truly is judging this is the passage they should be fearing.

And it isn’t about doing anything, it isn’t about whether you cuss (thank goodness) or smoke or drink it is about one thing. Did you ignore the suffering of others?

At Parkside we have a pretty good track record of not ignoring the needs of others. It is what attracted us to this church in the first place. Foundational to our roots in the Evangelical and Reformed traditions and to our wider connection to the United Church of Christ we understand that we have a mandate to care, not just for our community but for the strangers, for people we don’t even know.

But that is not the case in our larger society. The question we must ask is whose suffering are we ignoring? Whose suffering are we dismissing or whose suffering do we simply not know about because of the segregation between our world here in Saukville and the wider world, in Milwaukee or Overseas?

Whose suffering are we not aware of because we have forgotten simply to ask. How are you doing?

In a council meeting the other night, someone simply asked that of me “How are you doing Pastor?” I don’t think it has ever meant so much to me to hear that question as it did that night, after working in the hospital during a pandemic, being exhausted from being on call on the weekend. I was deeply moved.

Sometimes it is just the asking of such a simple question that is profoundly the most Godly act we can do. I wonder if we asked that question and listened and believed the answer, what would our world look like. Ask someone who is African American how are you doing? And believe their answer.

Ask someone who is Native American, How are you doing? And believe their answer. Care about their suffering enough to not dismiss it or change the subject.

Which brings me to Thanksgiving. This will be the weirdest one on record for me and mine and probably you all as well right? Our usual traditions are usurped by a virus that has overtaken not just our country but our world. I ache to see our kids, I ache for some normalcy. How I wish to have a big dinner party and celebrate the abundant blessings in our lives.

We can’t do that in my family this year as is the case for most of us but next year will be different and as a people we are figuring out slowly but surely how to survive this and we will.

I am not a “look at the bright side” kind of person, I’m more of a look at all sides, a realistic optimist that believes that life can be incredibly hard and exquisitely beautiful. I tend to hope for the best and plan for the worst so I’m not going to say just count your blessings this thanksgiving and ignore the fact that we will be missing our families, our traditions, the people we have lost, the normalcy of the holidays but I will say this.

We do have a lot to be grateful for in the midst of the struggle. I am grateful for each and everyone of you, that you have allowed me the privilege to keep serving you during all of this. And for Carrie and the council in helping us find ways to still be the church.

I am grateful for my co-workers at the hospital that are pouring their heart and souls into saving lives. I’m thankful for the teachers and parents that have adapted to the ever changing landscape through technology to educate our children.

For the essential workers and first responder and I’m grateful for the human spirit that creatively adapts, perseveres and survives.

Isn’t that what the first Thanksgiving was about. It was about surviving that first year and the joy of the first harvest. But as much as we Americans think we are ruggedly independent we must always remember that we wouldn’t have survived without the assistance of the Native Americans that first winter.

The Wampanoag tribe who lived in the area taught the Pilgrims how to smoke meat and fish and how to plant corn, beans and squash in mounds fertilized by fish. They also taught them how to tan hides, how to identify toxic or useful plants and berries.

In other words we were thirsty and they gave us drink, we were strangers and they welcomed us, we were hungry and they gave us food.

That first winter, the Pilgrims struggled, many died, they did not know how they would get through it but they did so let this Thanksgiving truly be a reminder of how richly blessed we are even in our struggles. Let it also remind us with humility that sometimes we are the hungry, we are the thirsty, and the stranger and that being human means that we need each other.

If there is a gift to come out of this pandemic it is this. We need each other, we need each other's smiles and voices and joy and singing, we need each other to have faith when ours is waning and to pick us up so that we can keep going but most of all we need God to be the reason for it all.

So that we can continue to feed the hungry, welcome the stranger and quench the thirst of the thirsty. May you feel the blessing of a God who is all love, all compassion, all the time. AMEN

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