

Sermon – Second Sunday of Christmas / 01-12-2022 / Jon Achee

Loving God, you fill all things with a fullness and hope that we can never comprehend. Thank you for leading us into a time where more of reality is being unveiled for us all to see. We pray that you will take away our natural temptation for cynicism, denial, fear and despair. Help us to have the courage to awaken to greater truth, greater humility, and greater care for one another. May we place our hope in what matters and what lasts trusting in your eternal presence and love. Knowing good God, that you are hearing us better than we are speaking, we offer this prayer in all the holy names of God – Amen.

Richard Rohr

Happy New Year! Here we are – the second day of the New Year, and on a somewhat rare Second Sunday after Christmas, which we will not experience for another 4 years – if I am doing the calendar math correctly. It is also the ninth day of Christmas, so a hearty Merry Christmas is still in order as well. We gather at a time of birth and renewal, and at a time when we have just welcomed in a New Year. Emotions should be joyous as we are reminded of, and live into the promise, hope and overwhelming love of Jesus's birth... incarnation, the divine in human form, Emmanuel..Christ our Savior. A birth that reminds us of our own inner divinity and divine purpose as beloved children of God. Yes – we are loved, each and every one of us unconditionally, and this provides great joy and reassurance as we look forward to a New Year. Typically, a time for assessing where we are, and changes we might make. A clean slate, full of new possibilities. New opportunities to maybe heal a wounded relationship, try a new exercise routine, move on to a new career, join a new ministry or organization that speaks to an unaddressed passion or call, or maybe just finally committing to losing that extra fifteen pounds that might have been added a past Christmas or two ago. Everything is new! A time of resolution to act. Happy New Year!

Well...I must confess, that while I do feel all this joy of Christmas and for the beginning of a New Year, I do have mixed emotions today. I don't know about you, but I also feel weary and tired even amongst the joy of this day, and the joy of being here worshiping in community with you. There is a sadness and worry that I cannot fully shake off in this time of joy. I would like to say this is simply due to the fact that I am now missing my daughter and son who have returned to their respective homes after spending more than a week with us over the Holidays. The house is a lot quieter now, and little less

vibrant and joyous without their presence. However, Kelly and I have been “empty nesters” for a while now, and while the sadness of goodbyes is always a recurring theme, it is not unexpected, and always fleeting as we know we will be together again in the not to distant future. No, I think my mixed emotions are driven by the realization, that in many ways, we are still a community, both locally, nationally, and globally experiencing the impacts of exile and division, a community that has experienced profound disruption in our daily lives, and in the lives of our community, nation and world. I feel this is as we enter now into a third year of a pandemic with cases and deaths increasing once again due to yet another new variant. Somehow, unbelievably, one million deaths from COVID now seems a possibility. We also are just days away from the one-year anniversary and reminder of the attack on our Nation’s Capital building by our fellow citizens. A stark reminder of our political divisions, and a willingness by many of our fellow citizens to employ the “by any means necessary” approach fueled by personal and tribal self-centrism. We seemed to have abandoned the more measured approaches of respectful debate, and compromise so necessary for a vibrant democracy. Unresolved issues around race, diversity and inclusion remain, and we now face forces that apparently desire to deny the honest examination, discussion, and understanding of these issues. Understanding and discussions needed for long term reconciliation, healing, and growth. Once again, not only failing to address and rectify racial inequalities and recognizing the dignity of every human being, but which also includes denying our Native American brothers and sisters the acknowledgment of the intergenerational trauma they continue to suffer as a result of the attempted genocide, taking of lands, and subsequent forced separation and loss of their children to boarding schools. We face a growing rejection of the other, the stranger and the immigrant seemingly fueled by the fallacy of scarcity amongst abundance. We face historical inequalities in wealth with over thirty seven million people living below the poverty line in the US as of 2020. So many homeless brothers and sisters in our communities, and children dealing with the soul crushing impact of being poor and marginalized. A climate crisis that is already changing our world as we know it. All this occurring while many of our churches, important communities possessing the potential of the radical love needed to address these issues, continuing to experience declines in attendance. Yes, declining somewhat as an outcome of the pandemic, but a decline that was already underway pre-pandemic.

Why bring this all up during what I just called out as a time of joy and renewal? Well, I feel it is important, even cathartic, to recognize and more importantly acknowledge the pain, fear and exhaustion that I have to assume many of us are experiencing within and outside our community right now as we enter into a new year with the troubles and pain of the past years still with us. If this is the place you are in right now, you are not alone. In community we acknowledge and affirm your feelings, and that it is OK to be of one or mixed emotion. As spiritual beings we will experience both sorrow and joy – often at the same time, and God is present in both. As the prophet Jeremiah points out in today’s Old Testament reading. “Sing aloud with gladness for Jacob. See, I am going to bring them forth from the land of the north and gather them from the farthest parts of the earth....a great company, they shall return here. With weeping they shall come, and with great consolations I will lead them back. He who scattered Israel will gather him, and will keep him as a shepherd and a flock”. We are reminded that God is always present in the bad times and the good. He is as much with us in these current turbulent times as during times of great joy. The Good Shepherd who gathers the entire flock, even the blind and the lame, and turns their mourning into joy. I find great comfort in this. I hope that you do as well.

However, I also bring this up, because as followers of Jesus, and I emphasize followers here, and not worshipers, we are called not only to be faithful and comforted in that faith, but to also be active in our faith and spiritual lives. As followers of Jesus, we cannot continue to sit comfortably in our pews and allow the injustices and inequalities of our world to go unaddressed. Benedictine nun, theologian, author, and speaker Joan Chittister during an interview discussing her book “The Time is Now – A Call to Uncommon Courage” reminds us that the Jesus we follow was not only a healer and comforter, but also a prophet calling out and demanding an end to the injustices and hypocrisy of empire, and the religious elite of their time. God incarnate, born into, living amongst, and serving those living on the margins of the society. We are called by Jesus through the Holy Spirit to be active and to take action in the daily realization of the Kingdom of God, and in the becoming of Beloved Community.

And what is Beloved Community? As defined by Rev Stephanie Spellers in her book “The Church Cracked Open”, it is a community of people who help one another to grow into all that they were created to be; where each person is committed to the other’s flourishing and to the flourishing of the whole as they are to their own; and where the members are willing to sacrifice their own comfort and even their own lives for the sake

of the other and for the dream they share. In discussing the Episcopal Church's public, long term commitment to racial healing, reconciliation, and justice in 2017, titled "Becoming Beloved Community", (and notice it is "becoming", not "being") Rev Spellers explains how the Episcopal Church understood that "beloved community is the enactment of the reign of God, which means it is at once a compelling reality and a distant hope. It beckons as God's preferred future, the bright beacon we see through fog and rain, inspiring, and guiding our next best steps toward home. We may not get there, but we know God has already prepared it."

Now in making this plea for greater action in the year ahead, I am not saying that our community is not taking action already – even in these times of pandemic hurdles and restrictions. I see it in the work of the weekly food pantry, Laundry Love, Thanksgiving dinner bags, and CAPS. In the pre-COVID Corazon house builds, and in the Longest Night Remembrances of those who died during the year while homeless on our streets in Orange County. In our work with the Greater Interfaith Council of RSM, and in the adult formation and education topics and discussions over the past year and a half following the murder of George Floyd. And I know that there are also many acts of Beloved Community by individuals in this community that go unrecognized here. But as a community we are called to do more, and I know that is not always an easy ask. The call of the Spirit, the call of God to be in service to the becoming of Beloved Community can be a difficult one to answer at times. It can involve taking risks, and just as Jesus did, taking actions and stands that while working against injustice and answering the call to radical love, might not be viewed favorably by others in the community. We need only to look at our Gospel reading from today for inspiration to find Joseph answering God's call to pick-up his family and flee to Egypt in order to protect the baby Jesus from being killed by King Herod. A move to a foreign land, a move into exile from his family and community to protect a child that was not his own. This openness to action even after God had already called on Joseph not to abandon Mary after learning of her pregnancy, and to take the counter cultural action of going through with the completion of the marriage to a woman bearing a child that was not his. A call to a potential life on the margins of his community through the breaking of social norms. A tough ask, and a response driven by faith, love and integrity.

In answering the call of the Spirit to our community to address the current difficult issues in our homes, towns, nation and churches we our provided the opportunity to live into our true selves, our divine selves. The opportunity to experience the freedom

of emptying ourselves out, just as Jesus did throughout his ministry of serving those living on the margins. Answering the call also provides an opportunity to revitalize our church, to deepen our faith, to become an enticing beacon of light to those outside of our church walls looking for a community of purpose where they too can live into their own desires to be part of something that adds meaning to their lives. In these times I believe there is a hunger in our younger communities to be part of a church not just focused on its own internal community, not settled in its pews, but one active and serving the needs of the community outside their sanctuaries. See, God is present right here, right now, providing us a call and opportunity to radical love – to becoming Beloved Community even within this time of pandemic exile, climate crisis, and hyper partisanship – even as the prophet Jeremiah reminds us in the “scattered” times.

There are many ways we can answer this call to becoming Beloved Community. To quote again from Rev Spellens book “The Church Cracked Open” - a concrete way for us to be in the service of God’s dream is for us to:

- LOVE the face and voice of God in others
- CELEBRATE the culture, gifts and lives of rejected groups
- CARE and carry each other’s burdens
- EMBRACE uncomfortable spaces and experiences
- SURRENDER overcontrolling behaviors
- RISK making the first move, sharing your own stories and being wrong
- LISTEN with love to the stories of people who do not share your privilege
- SACRIFICE possessions and resources for the sake of love
- SHARE access to privileged spaces and relationships

Even in our pandemic exile we can still gather members of our community together via technology as needed and advocate for justice, equality, affordable housing, our environment and peace. We can get more involved in groups like the Greater Interfaith Council of RSM, or we can join as a group of members from St John’s organizations like the Poor Peoples Campaign, United to End Homelessness, Citizens Climate Lobby, and other groups advocating to bring about the changes that will drive the dream of Beloved Community. We can find ways to become better informed, and discover places where we can hear and honor the stories of others and gain greater understanding. Get on the mailing list for the Episcopal News from the LA Diocese, where you can find numerous ideas and opportunities to become Beloved Community. If you need any ideas, please

talk to me or Christopher or Karen. As a Postulant in the Diocese I am often exposed to opportunities and groups that might call to you. And do not be overwhelmed by the needs of our world that need to be addressed. To quote Archbishop Tutu (thank you for this one Rev Karen). *“Do your little bit of good where you are; it's those little bits of good put together that overwhelm the world.”* Every act and action, no matter how small only helps to build and realize the Kingdom and may lead to larger impacts that you never imagined. The Spirit works in amazing ways!

At times when I get overwhelmed by the needs of the world, and how my efforts seem meaningless, I always keep in mind the story of the man walking along an eastern shore after a tremendous storm. The beach is littered with thousands of horseshoe crabs that have been thrown out of the water by the storm. In the midst of all the crabs, the man sees a young boy stooping down and throwing one crab at a time back into the water to save them. Incredulously, the man walks up to the boy, and says to him, “What are you doing? Why are you wasting your time?” There are so many crabs, and your simple act of throwing one at a time back into the water really does not matter. You can't save them all. The boy stoops down again, and tosses one more crab into the water, and says “well...it matters to that one”.

Using the words from Paul's letter to the Ephesians, “I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him, so that with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know the hope to which he has called you.”

Let's dream of a new church, for a new year. Amen.