

## “Welcoming God”

Genesis 22:1-14     Matthew 10:1-42

Year A, Thirteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time, June 29, 2014

Pastor Andy Kennaly, Sandpoint, Idaho

The 221st General Assembly of our Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) finished meeting last Sunday after a full week of active committees, plenary sessions, shared worship, and many, many decisions made in response to God's call through the leading of the Holy Spirit. One of the votes took place on Saturday, June 14th, as "commissioners voted on the five finalists in a national video competition sponsored by [a movement in our denomination to start new, non-traditional communities of faith called]1001 New Worshipping Communities. A video from Big Table, an Inland Northwest non-profit, came in second overall. The 90-second video shares in cartoons and animation the vision of Big Table to care for those in the massive restaurant and hospitality industry."

Kevin Finch is a pastor in the Inland Northwest Presbytery, the presbytery our congregation is part of, and several years ago he began this ministry which focuses on "Those working in restaurants and hotels [who] are almost completely cut off from traditional church communities and represent the most intense concentration of need across the country. This includes the highest rates of drug and alcohol abuse of any industry in the nation." Think about it. It's very common for Christians to attend worship on a Sunday morning, then head out for lunch at a local restaurant. But those workers, from cooks to servers to dish washers are not able to participate in the life of a church because of this schedule and the demands of their industry. I remember talking with Pastor Kevin and being surprised when he mentioned how Sundays are the most dreaded days at restaurants because Christians go out to lunch after worship. Table servers cringe when they see a group of people pray before a meal because all too often these Christians come with an attitude of entitlement and are anything but generous to the real needs of the worker. For example, some Christians think the best tip they can leave their server is a printed tract, a handy little pamphlet that talks about sin and salvation through Jesus. They think they're giving life itself, but the worker who depends on tips for financial stability; they get shafted, stiffed. Server after server tell stories about how rude Christians are, especially on Sunday. It was surprising to hear, but then again, perhaps not all churches preach and teach about God's graciousness, generosity, and hospitality toward us that we might share that with the world, that God's love isn't just given for Christians, but that it may be shared with the world.

"Big Table builds relationships with those in the industry over meals around an actual BIG table that seats 48 [people] and provides care by referral for those in the [restaurant or hotel] industry who are in crisis." As people gather around the Big Table and receive a free meal prepared by a gourmet chef, they share stories and talk about people they know in the hospitality industry who are suffering, people who need care. People who have not received a positive witness from the church and are anything but favorable toward the skewed version of Christianity they've experienced. That's how Big Table tries to help beyond the meal, with Care Projects. "The goal of each individual care project is to build a long-term

relationship where real transformation takes place, and one of the ways this happens is through [a new worshipping community called] BS IN A BAR. [which means Bible Study in a Bar]." (Quotes taken from a press release)

Big Table is a fairly new initiative that shares the love of God in ways the institutional church just can't do in the traditional sense. That this local ministry, which takes place within our presbytery, in the Spokane area, received second place in this national, Presbyterian video competition for new worshipping communities is quite an accomplishment and a celebration of the diverse ways God is at work in this world, inviting people of the church to come out and see, hear, and learn through the ministry of welcome and hospitality.

Today in Matthew we hear Jesus say, "Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me." And it goes on to talk about receiving prophets and righteous people and ordinary disciples, all in the name of Jesus, sharing hospitality.

Pastor Kevin Finch cannot do the Big Table ministry on his own, and it's too much to expect him to carry this burden on his shoulders alone. He is the Director of this ministry, but it takes countless volunteers, generous funding, and the ongoing, sustaining presence of the Holy Spirit to bring this ministry together in vital ways that bring real transformation through something as simple as sharing a meal in the name of Jesus and listening to people as they share their stories, as they talk about life from their perspective, and as they struggle and grow in their perception and experience of the living God.

Our friend, Rick Melin, former Pastor and former Presbytery Executive said something once a long time ago that stuck with me all these years. I remember hearing him say this in a sermon, saying, "By the grace of God we can do together what by the design of God we can't do by ourselves." By the grace of God we can do together what by the design of God we can't do by ourselves. We need one another and we need God. And slick little Bible tracts don't cut it, in fact they often the opposite affect that's intended. What really changes people is relationship, honest connection with people. And human beings are created as social creatures; we cannot survive in isolation and for life to thrive we need community, which means relationship. But how does the church do at fostering relationship? Not only within the walls, but beyond?

Jesus is given Authority. Back in Matthew chapter 7, verses 28 & 29 summarize several chapters of teachings where Jesus uses the model of, "You have heard it said...but I say to you...." Taking one lesson after another Jesus expands the faith experience of the disciples and the crowds are listening in, and verses 28 & 29 summarize by saying, "Now when Jesus had finished saying these things, the crowds were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as their scribes." God the Father has given Jesus the Son authority. Jesus has the authority of God.

But notice in Matthew chapter 10 it starts out by saying, Jesus summons the twelve disciples and gives the disciples authority. Jesus sends them out, in this case to the Jewish world but by the end of Matthew this expands to the whole world, telling them, "As you go, proclaim the good news." All sort of things are possible for them, like casting out demons,

raising the dead, cleansing lepers, things that Jesus himself was doing. The disciples "proclaim Jesus' message and work similar miracles" (NRSV, the New Interpreter's Study Bible footnotes). But it only works in the context of proclaiming the good news. So what is the good news? What is the message of Jesus he wants them quoting? "The kingdom of heaven has come near."

The kingdom of heaven has come near. This is good news. This involves the incarnation: God coming to earth, Creator participating in creation. Salvation, redemption, whatever theological word you want to use to liberate the world, basically God comes to say God is on our side. Sin does not need to be the defining characteristic, for the kingdom of heaven has come near. So the defining characteristic is God, and God is creating, loving, forgiving, gracious, and as the incarnation shows, connected, relational, and vulnerable.

One of the podcasts I listen to for scripture study mentioned that "a primary aspect of faith is dependence. Dependence on God, Jesus, and one another. This is not always easy. To notice or have dependence on another can be vulnerable, or dangerous." (Working Preacher by Luther Seminary). When Jesus sends out the disciples, like in Luke chapter 10, and this morning in Matthew chapter 10, he tells them to not bring anything with them but to receive the hospitality of those they come to meet. Now realize this is scandalous for that time that they would eat whatever was put before them, challenging their food purity codes they had followed so well. He's basically telling his disciples, "Go be like them, eat their food, receive their welcoming hospitality" (podcast). And he's sending them into the unknown, away from family and friends, the community of support they had known. They are, potentially, experiencing a sense of loss in this mission, and certainly they are becoming vulnerable as they create "new resources of dependence" and their faith is shared, deepened, and expanded to include the stranger.

"The story of St. Francis of Assisi and the wolf of Gubbio is perhaps the most famous of all the St. Francis legends. Maybe we can learn from this little 13th century saint who practiced the ministry of hospitality throughout his life. Francis went to the town of Gubbio where a wolf was terrorizing and devouring the townspeople who dared leave the city gates. When Francis learned of the problem, he said he would go and speak to his brother, the wolf. When the wolf saw Francis his companions coming toward him, he charged out of the woods bristling and baring his teeth. But Francis made the sign of the cross over the wolf and the wolf bowed at Francis' feet. Francis said: "Come to me, Brother Wolf. In the name of Christ, I order you not to hurt anyone." Francis explained to the wolf that he had been killing and frightening the people of Gubbio and this was against God's law. But he also knew that the reason the wolf had been eating the people was because there was no more food in the forest and he was hungry. Francis said he wanted to make peace between the wolf and the townspeople. Francis returned to Gubbio with the wolf at his side, where Francis preached a sermon in the town square on God's love and mercy. The wolf agreed to stop terrorizing the people, and in return, the people agreed to feed the wolf. For two years the wolf lived among the people of Gubbio in peace, as their companion and brother, receiving bread and water from their hands. When the wolf died, the people of Gubbio wept, for the

wolf was a reminder to them of the holiness of St. Francis and God's gentle presence with them.

Craig Kocker reflects on this story, saying, "Jesus says to do this. Reach out to our brothers. Reach out to our sisters. The world is frightening beyond our walls. Our neighborhoods are scary. Our neighbors are hungry. Welcome, engage, make yourself vulnerable to another, for there is no other way to show hospitality, to make peace; this is discipleship. It is done face-to-face, hand-to-hand, person-to-person. We cringe. For this kind of hospitality is not easy, it involves openness and intimacy with one another." (Story and reflection from Pulpit Resource, Vol. 33, No. 2, Year A, April, May, June 2005, William Willimon, Logos Resource Pub., pg. 55).

Incarnation happens and relationship is restored and renewed. God is with us and the kingdom of heaven is near. With one another we are sent to be bearers of good news in real ways that connect with sisters and brothers in Christ in ways that help us learn from the world God is in; already saving, already loving, inviting us to discover God's loving, welcoming presence.

To close I'll use Meister Eckhart's words that open up our eyes to the authority we are given by God through Christ to proclaim the kingdom of heaven and how we share God's welcome through reciprocal dependence with the world. He says this:

"Apprehend God in all things,

for God is in all things.

Every single creature is full of God

and is a book about God.

Every creature is a word of God.

If I spent enough time with the tiniest creature -  
even a caterpillar -

I would never have to prepare a sermon. So full of God

is every creature." Amen. (Earth Prayers From Around the World, Edited by Elizabeth Roberts and Elias Amidon, Harper San Francisco, 1991, pg. 251).