

The 14th Sunday after Pentecost, 11 September 2022
Saint Aidan's Episcopal Church, Gresham OR
The Rev'd Canon Raggs Ragan, Supply Priest

In the Name of God who is love, and life, and infinite invitation.

Welcome to our first service with the new-to-Saint Aidan's organ! Aren't we lucky! Thank you to Joe and to all the volunteers who have put in so much time and hard work to make this transition for us! I feel so lucky to be here for this day!

Today's Gospel begins with the guardians of righteousness complaining that "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them," as if that is a terrible indictment which calls all his credibility into question. And Jesus responds with parables affirming what they accuse him of. He says that they are exactly right, because there is 'Joy in heaven' whenever the lost is found, whenever the rejected is welcomed, whenever the circle of inclusion gets bigger.

We find him telling three stories in a row, to drive the point home: the Lost Sheep, the Lost Coin, and the Prodigal Son. (We only heard the first two today, because the last is big enough that it is its own separate Gospel reading in Lent, but in Luke the three stories are together to make sure we get the point: God has a special love for the outsider, the rejected, the lost – and the whole community of heaven yearns for all the lost to be found and brought into community.)

Some people see the Good Shepherd with that lovely image of a sheep draped around the shoulders of the shepherd as hokey, as representing a naïve piety – but it is Jesus' piety. He hits it very hard and repeatedly. He says that there is 'joy in heaven' – such a powerful phrase. We well-behaved righteous people may be uncomfortable with the 'unclean' at table with us and God, may prefer only sharing fellowship with 'nice people like us' – but it makes God very happy to see them. Even scary people like Paul the persecutor, who conspired in the killing of early Christians, are a delight to God when they choose fellowship. In fact, Paul never ceased to see himself as one of the unworthy, the outcasts, the sinners, who had been brought in. He understood clearly that he had not earned his place at the table by any of his own worthiness. He was lost in violence and rejection and self-righteousness when he was brought to the table – and he never lost sight of that fact, never lost the feeling of the joy that reverberated in the heavens when he gave up his self-righteousness in favor of God's infinite love.

It is telling to me that the image of the shepherd with the sheep draped around his shoulders is the most common image in the earliest Christian art. This is the heart of the Gospel for those early persecuted followers of the Way of Jesus.

Our Presiding Bishop is currently making a long-delayed visit to our diocese, preaching at the Cathedral right now. He is well known for saying, "If it is not about love, it is not about God." That is an excellent watchword for us in our faith and life. And that love brings joy – and inclusion.

In the collect we asked for the spirit of God to infuse us, to fill us with the love and hope and creativity that are meant for every creature. Singing is a way to express that love, to open ourselves to one another and to God. I always remember an organist friend pointing out how singing together requires breathing together, which is an essentially unifying, community-building action.

Joe and I talked about focusing this service, at least partly, on music, on the gift that the new organ will be to this community. As we considered the service, both of us were drawn to the hymn we sang at the opening.

It is one of my favorites, one that we used frequently at the prep school where I was chaplain for 17 years – and its specific images fit well in a school setting. It expresses the understanding of music as an expression of joy and creativity throughout all creation, not just among humans. Our human song joins the song of all creation, the ‘music of the spheres’, to employ an ancient image. The hymn is an expression of that joy in heaven that Jesus talked about, the joy that overflows as the community of love expands. Music can help us to find a way into harmony with one another, with all humanity, with the whole of creation, which enables us to live in confidence and hope, no matter what our difficult circumstances. In the hymn we are inviting everyone to join in.

Singing provides an experience of unity overcoming separateness. Music provides solace and delight. And the breathing together that singing requires helps to unite our hearts in love and service. We are, quite literally, all in this together, not just in our singing, but in everything. This breathing and rejoicing and working together is what we are meant to be and do. We are Christ’s body. As Teresa of Avila pointedly reminds us, “Christ has no hands or feet but ours.” So each moment is an opportunity to consider how to live that out, in compassion, in service, in rejoicing.

Some of the specific images in that opening hymn evoke laughter, which is itself healing and bonding. (People always seem to laugh at the ‘loud-boiling test tubes’.) It is also a text that invites expansion. Some parishes like to invite congregants to create their own verses to use with the hymn. As I mentioned, some of the ones in the original are specifically academic, but all spheres of existence could appropriately be brought into play. This is a fun exercise to open our imaginations and hearts to see the whole of creation as loved into being by God, and to invite all its elements, whether sentient or not, to take their unique parts in the song of creation. Who would you like to invite into the ‘happy chorus which the morning stars began’ – farmers and all who grow, process, or prepare food? Medical staffs and researchers? Rivers and seas? Explorers and adventurers? Creating new verses can be a way to expand our awareness of the vast and intricate cosmos, to understand our kinship, not merely with all the living, but with all that is. I would love to see what you come up with.

We are indeed all in this together, in ever widening circles, all people here today, all Oregonians, all humans, all life, everything on earth, everything in the universe. Sometimes we may find ourselves among the lost, feeling outside the circle of inclusion, and sometimes we are inside, able to welcome others into the chorus of joy and connection.

Many of us were touched by the death this week of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth. In his letter to the Anglican Communion the Archbishop of Canterbury paid tribute to the late monarch in words that speak to how we can live into being the hands and feet and voice of Christ, active participants in the circle of God’s all-inclusive love. He wrote: “In Her Late Majesty’s life we saw what it means to receive the gift of life we have been given by God and – through patient, humble, selfless service – share it as a gift to others.”

It all begins with gratitude – gratitude for the gift of life, gratitude for the community of love, gratitude for opportunities to serve and to rejoice. Gratitude is the source of life and love and hope. It is a way of living that invites us to open our hearts and communities, to live in ‘patient, humble, selfless service’ so that we draw more people into the circle of care and so make the heavens rejoice – and sing.

May the God who loved us all into being open our hearts to see all around us with the eyes of love: to rejoice in each person who takes a step toward love, to offer ourselves in loving service to those in any need, and to join in the chorus of praise that rings through eternity. Amen.