

Pentecost 16 September 20, 2020 Proper 20

This past Friday evening was Rosh Hashanah, the new year for our Jewish sisters and brothers, marking the commencement of the High Holy Days. Of course, just like for our Christian congregations, this is a year like no other for their worship. As the rabbi at the Jewish congregation in Woodstock said the other day, “It’s like we are all first year rabbis once again, learning how to celebrate the High Holy Days this way for the first time.” The traditional greeting at this time is “Shanah tov,” meaning “A Blessed year,” or as Rabbi Amy Small of the Ohavi Zedek Synagogue in Burlington elaborates it, “A good and sweet year for us all.” Of course in this pandemic, this sentiment is even more poignant for us all, Jewish and Christian, Muslim and Buddhist. To at least begin the new year on a good note of hope, the Ohavi Zedek Synagogue published a poem, “A Prayer of Hope during this Pandemic” by Rabbi Naomi Levy, and I thought that it is a good way to begin this sermon:

We are frightened, God.

Worried for our loved ones. Worried for our world.

Helpless and confused.

We turn to You

Seeking comfort, faith and hope.

Teach us God, to turn our panic into patience.

And our fears into acts of kindness and support.

Our strong must watch out for our weak.

Our young must take care of our old.

Help each one of us do our part to halt the spread of this virus.

Send strength and courage to the doctors and nurses

In the frontline of this battle.

Fortify them with healing powers. Send wisdom and insight to the scientists

Working day and night across the world to discover healing treatments.

Bless their efforts God.

Fill our leaders with the wisdom and courage

To choose wisely and act quickly.

Help us God, to see that we are one world,

One people

Who will rise above this pandemic together.

Send us health God.

Watch over us.

Grace us with your love,

Bless us with Your healing light.

Hear us God.

Heal us God.

Amen.

This morning we are back together on Zoom, and I really want to emphasize that word, “together.” Over the past month we had some outdoor, in-person services that we also put online as well. While it was good that some of us could be gather in-person for worship, it left a lot out, so the Vestry decided, and I agree with them, that the best way we can be together right now and make sure that we all stay safe and healthy is to have our regular worship online. I know it is not ideal, but I have to say I now find it extraordinary that Zoom seems to be the best way for us to worship together. Who would have ever thought? But I think that the most important aspect here is that we both have the desire and are working to find the means to stay together. This pandemic has forced us apart in so many ways: there is the need to maintain physical distance, which also has the effect of being social distancing as well. We also need to limit the number of contacts we have, which has lead to a number of people feeling very isolated. Finally, due to the politicization of the pandemic, there has been a marked increase in the polarization of our society. Because of this, I am very grateful for our congregation’s desire to want to stay together. I know very well it is not easy, and we are learning lessons every day about how to do this more effectively, but whether we are only more or less successful in this, at the very least the need and the willingness to sty together is truly important. And I have to say, as your pastor I am very grateful for it!

I think that in this context, the Gospel lesson from Matthew is quite interesting: again, just like a couple of weeks ago, Jesus uses a parable to give his followers a sense of the kingdom of heaven. The parable today of the

laborers in the field is fairly well known. It concerns a landowner and the people he hires to work in his vineyard. At the end of the day, he gives them all the daily wage, whether they worked all day or just the last hour. And then Jesus adds to this story, “the last will be first and the first will be last.” This parable, this story feels somewhat off, it feels incongruous, just wrong because things shouldn’t work this way. I think it is fair to say that this parable offends our sensibilities: it just isn’t right. Certainly that’s how the workers who toiled all day in the scorching heat saw the matter. But Jesus is showing us something different: the aim of the landowner for the workers is that they are all taken care of: each is given the daily wage so that they can take care of themselves and their families. This is not a story about the kingdom of heaven that is “fair” by our standards, that everyone gets what they worked for and only that. No, no this is a very different sort of understanding: in Jesus’ picture of the kingdom of heaven he gives to his followers all get what they need, so that all are nourished and sustained and all are brought together. I believe that’s the point Jesus makes for us: yes the kingdom of heaven is a place where all are brought together by God’s care and mercy, providing for us out of God’s divine love what we need, what will sustain us and help us to flourish together.

This might well be the most important lesson for us this morning, but I believe there is something deeper here as well: Jesus’ call, over and over in the Gospels, and the call for Christians throughout times to come together in the love of God, no matter our different circumstances, no matter where we have been in our lives, this call of God, this action of God in our lives, is to bring all

together in the spirit of mutual love. We see this in Paul's epistle to the Philippians, a colony of veterans from the Roman legions who had put into practice, "Divide and conquer," but now, now Paul tells these battle-tested, hardened veterans there is a different call in their lives: now they are to stand firm in one spirit, striving together, side by side with one mind for the Good News to share together in Christ. This gift of love, a mutual love to lift each of us to the divine and to bring us together, as Paul says, "this is God's doing, what God has graciously granted," to the Philippians and to you and me today.

This morning, as we gather to worship, we come together in this love. Yes, we cannot be together physically, but together we pray and together we seek to thank God for this gracious love in our lives. The times we face are tough, no doubt about it, this is not something any would seek and something we have never faced before. But the promise of God in giving us Jesus as the one to bring God's love fully into the world, fully into our lives, is that this love will lift us together to face the days yet to come: to seek God's love and peace for all, to overcome the divisions of our world, to overcome the racist policies that have oppressed the black and brown lives in our midst, a mutual love that is more powerful than the evils we now face, a mutual love through which we find our faith and in which our faith is strengthened for our lives. Today we will pray together that God will relieve our anxieties, those anxieties living in a world of pandemic, living in a world of injustices, as we hold fast to the love that will endure in Christ Jesus, a mutual love to bear us up in the days and weeks to come. Let us together give God thanks, thanks for this love

graciously given to us in Jesus and for the Spirit of mutual love that calls us together this morning and in the days to come as well. Thanks be to God.  
Amen.