

Todd R. Allen  
2017  
Interim Pastor  
Sunday of Lent

March 5,  
First  
Sacrament

of Holy Communion

“Outer Walls—and Inner Walls”  
“*The Story*”: Chapter 21  
“*Fruitful Congregations*”: Radical Hospitality

You may wonder, friends, how on earth I intend to make all this work! Here we are, continuing our study of “The Story”, as well as beginning a new, five week study, making use of the Robert Schnase book, “Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations.” And it is Communion Sunday, to boot!

But, the fact of the Lord’s Table before us—and the meal laid upon it—does usefully bring us to the topic of hospitality—for the offering of a meal to a guest is the most common—and highly regarded—form of hospitality we find in Scripture. Breaking bread, as it were, with someone is a high—even a holy—act...

Of course, inviting someone into our home—especially someone we do not know well, if at all—is a risky thing to do. Indeed, if we have experienced some harm—at the hand of a stranger, for instance—we can be wary of opening our doors at all. In fact, we can be—in a sense—very much like the Israelites that Nehemiah is overseeing in “The Story” today: Their work re-building the walls around Jerusalem is spurred by the history of—indeed, by the presence of—enemies around them. They have good reason to be cautious—and so do we, in some cases...

But there is more going on in this chapter of “The Story”—and this same something undergirds the Schnase study we are about to begin, and here it is: Like our ancestors in faith, we, too, are called to be a light shining in the darkness—you and I are called, by God, to be the kind of people who draw others to us, and to our Lord, in the process...

And how do we do, this?

In two ways: One, we become ambassadors for Jesus Christ, as you and I live in the world, but we also—and now, two—we also create places where we may gather for the

worship of God, and the primary place for this, down the years, has been a building like this—what we call “the Church.”

But isn't it useful—indeed, vital—to remember that this building is not the Church unless we make it a place of welcome—even, a very different place? It is a mark of our difference to have the Cross behind me—as we have here—but, I ask us, how truly different is this place if you and I bring into it the darkness of the outside world? You see, our ancestors in faith were right, years ago, to re-build a wall around Jerusalem because the ways of the outside world can—and often do—invade the places where we seek to live as a holy people—and they did—and we should—keep the doors closed to such things as violence and hatred. Such things should have no place in our life, together—and I like how Malachi—in our excerpts from “The Story” today—lifts up the kind of life that should be lived within Jerusalem if, indeed, the city is to be called a “holy city”:

*Giving God offerings—the gifts of time, talent, treasure--that are worthy of God*

*Relationships—between couples and within families--that are kept honest and faithful*

Do we always succeed in this kind of living?

*No—we fall down—as I mentioned this past Wednesday, on Ash Wednesday—and how appropriate it is that we gather today in the midst of this holy observance---*

*But Lent is not just about looking back upon our failures—our failure to be the kind of individuals—even to be the kind of faith community—God wishes us to be: **Lent is also about looking ahead—and looking ahead to the event we recall, here, at this Table...***

Words of Institution:

For—on the night—Our Lord took bread and broke it—and he gave it to all present. As he did so, he knew that all present would fail him. He knew that one of them would even openly betray him—hand him over to the forces of darkness—to the ways of violence and hatred....

And, yet, he gave them—all of them—the bread, and as he did so, he told them “take and eat, this is body, which is broken—for you.”

In the same manner, he took the cup and as he poured wine into it, he said to them: “This is the New Covenant—the New Relationship—that is now made between God and humanity—and it is made through my blood—through my sacrifice. All of you—all of you—drink from this cup, for, as you do, you proclaim my death on your behalf—until I come again...”

And then, our Lord gave thanks for this special moment of communion—of being present with those we loved—each of them a sinner—as we do now:

“Lord Jesus Christ, present with us now, as you did in an upstairs room, long ago, breathe Your Holy Spirit upon us—and upon these gifts of bread and the fruit of the vine—so that they may become heaven’s food for us—indeed, your body and your blood—and hear us as we pray that this same food will nourish us in all goodness, as you intend it to do.

Amen”

Here at this table, friends, we are offered a meal—but more than this: *We see the radical hospitality of God. It is the welcome, for instance, that is given to us, regardless of whether we are a member of this particular congregation—as I always say—but, perhaps today you and I can see just how different this welcome is—even how radical it is—because it not only accepts us for who we are, but it is also rooted in the hope of who we can become.*

Throughout “The Story”, we have heard—again and again—of God’s “Upper Story” plan—of God’s desire to bring all people to know Him, even to joyfully accept His will for their lives, and—again and again—we have seen how this plan is spurned, breaking the heart of God in the process. But this refusal does not change God’s will: God still desires that every knee should bow—and every tongue confess—that Jesus Christ is Lord. Here is the hope of what all the world may become, some day...

And how will this happen?

*It depends—a great deal—upon us: It depends upon us taking the nourishment this meal provides and making it a part of our daily living—in fact, it rests in our making it so much a part of our daily living that other people will wonder about—even be drawn to--the difference Christ makes in our lives. In short, our worship of God—outside these walls—will be—as God wishes it to be—the best advertising for*

***coming here, around this table, to join with us, in remembering—both with awe and gratitude—the body that was broken—and the blood that was shed....***

And so, my friends—let us take and eat.

*Let us humbly pray to God that whatever darkness resides in us that prevents us from being God's light in the world will be overcome with the light of His love. Let us pray to God to become more of the kind of people God hopes for us to be.*

*And let us begin our time—as a church family—in looking at our hospitality towards others with the eyes that God gives us to us: Eyes that see Christ in every man—women—and child—indeed, let us see those around us with different eyes—and may our hospitality to them be unlike any they have ever seen: May it be the radical hospitality that Jesus showed at the Holy Table, long ago, by feeding all—serving all—sacrificing for all....*

Amen.