

August 27, 2017 12th Sunday after Pentecost
Rev. Jen Nagel, University Lutheran Church of Hope

Isaiah 51:1-6, Psalm 138
Romans 12:1-8, Matthew 16:13-20

Grace and peace through our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

It is that time of year: The crickets fill my ears. The garden bounty fills our tables.

How many of you have been to the State Fair? Or plan to go yet?

We claimed a couple nights of camping late this week, it's just... that time of year.

The teachers are busy preparing, psyching themselves up for what is ahead, praying for that fresh start.

The kids, anxious and at once eager for what comes next, often without words, are grieving summer's end.

Our congregation's neighborhood is re-populating.

Next weekend the onslaught as trailers and full-to-the-gills-mini-vans descend, ready to drop their cargo.

It's just that time of year, which is why my memories *this week of last winter* surprised me.

We at University Lutheran Church of Hope are a Sanctuary Congregation.

We're a congregation that back last January publically declared our willingness to offer safe space to an immigrant or an immigrant family facing deportation proceedings.

In this decision, we are in the company of 46 other Sanctuary and Sanctuary Supporting congregation.

This is a way of walking with immigrants in an act of resistance, offering shelter and friendship, but also powerfully together saying "No, we're not going to let our neighbors and friends be taken in the night."

This week Tammi Thompson our new Sanctuary Organizer through ISAIAH came by for a visit.

She wanted to get to know our congregation and asked the obvious perfect question:

"How did your congregation get into Sanctuary? How did this happened?"

All of a sudden, on a quiet late August morning, I was remembering the conversations our congregation had last winter.

One I remember particularly well included our congregation's Executive Committee.

The conversation happened, quite literally, right here, right in this very space.

It was December, Advent, and we had that cool Advent set up with the couch and easy chair and coffee table here in our chancel, a very visual way of reminding us that in the birth of Jesus God comes into the midst of our lives, our world, indeed, our living rooms...and that changes everything.

So here we were, the Executive Committee, sitting in our sanctuary, discussing Sanctuary, how we could stand in resistance, offering safety to those who may be facing deportation and were scared, terrified.

One of our congregational leaders said, "As a believer in Christ, I don't know how we can say no."

And then another said, “It feels like our congregation is on the cusp of transformation.” They went on: “This is about what we can do to help others, but it’s as much about how God is transforming us.”

**As I told Tammi Thompson this story, she was moved by our process and she reflected,
“We figure out who we are in relation to others.”**

That’s what Simon Peter, well, actually Jesus, too...that’s what they are doing in today’s gospel.

Jesus asks, “Who do people say that I am?” and then Jesus presses, “But who do *you* say that I am?”

That’s when Simon Peter confesses his truth: “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.”

That’s when Jesus names him again: Peter, the Rock, the steady one on whom Jesus will build the church.

“We figure out who we are in relation to others.”

Oh, the story will go on, Peter will mess up, he’ll get scared, he’ll deny even knowing Jesus and desert him.

But in that moment Peter confesses what he knows deep in his gut, who Jesus is, and in turn who he is.

“We figure out who we are in relation to others.” These windows of clarity are so important.

Did you notice the verb that the reading from Romans, when Paul says, “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed,” that verb transformed is in the passive?

God transforms us. We make decisions. We act on our beliefs. We are inspired and share our gifts. We dare speak and act for justice. But God does the transforming, we are transformed.

In January, after that period of intentional congregational discernment and listening, our leaders voted to become a Sanctuary Congregation.

By the Spirit’s power, a lot has happened since then...

There were 26 people who gathered for Sanctuary Supper this past Tuesday—fried chicken, a bounty of salads and other sides to share, and a sweet round of introductions as we stumbled together to introduce ourselves in Spanish and then invite the person next to us to introduce themselves.

God is transforming us. God’s love goes before us. God’s love follows our love. God is transforming us.

God is transforming us as individuals. God is transforming us as a community of faith.

In these late August days I remember what happened when someone said with such conviction:

“As a believer in Christ, I don’t know how we can say no.”

As a nation we are again doing vital and painful soul searching.

So often, too often, white folks let ourselves get sucked into isolation.

We think we know who we are, we think we know who others are, when actually I’m just in a vacuum.

Tammi Thompson told me a story of one of her friends, a Latina woman who'd lost a loved one to the immigration process and the violence that surrounds it.

For years that woman had been silent, never sharing this painful experience, this tremendous loss, but then, with encouragement, finally she began to tearfully tell her story.

It was terrifying but each time she dared speak of what had happened, she realized that she felt more free.

Tammi commented, so often we say, We need to walk our talk.

True, but we also need to TALK our walk, to tell our stories and listen deeply to the stories of others.

There is so much that can bind us: immigration status, the color of our skin, addictions, felonies, stigma, self talk, our privilege, our fear, our place in the system, money and debt, our stuff, time, our responsibilities, our grief, an illness, expectations.

I believe that part of what happens in today's Gospel is this unbinding, this freeing.

When we figure out our identity, like Peter gathering his courage and confessing, or Jesus renaming Peter, there is a power: even the gates of hell can't stop God's freeing, forgiving and transforming power.

It's that time of year... really, it's just that time,

time to gather our courage and confess what who we are, and whose we are.

It's so simple, and so profound, truly an act of resistance:

We figure out who we are in relation to others.

I say this knowing that confessing *who we are* and *whose we are*

is vital to our racial justice work as a church, and also as a nation.

but it's also just a good practice... for teachers in their umpteenth year and those just beginning,

for kindergarteners and 4th graders and high school seniors,

for undergrads and research fellows, and all the rest of us:

I am a child of God, created and called to love and serve the Living God. Say it with me:

I am a child of God, created and called to love and serve the Living God.

It's an act of resistance because the winds will blow and life will grow hard and all that binds us will try to clamp down with an unbelievable force.

You are a child of God, created and called to love and serve the Living God.

Find your words, tell your story, and listen closely, deeply to someone else's. Live what you believe.

For God is transforming us and our world, and truly, truly, all the time, that is the good news. Amen.