

Pentecost 10 C August 18, 2019 Hebrews 11:29-12:2, Luke 12:49-56

University Lutheran Church of Hope

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(with a bit of help from my friends and other sermon writers)

“Great Cloud Of Witnesses”

Grace to you, and peace from God who is the source of all life
And from Jesus the Christ, the one who came to set the earth on fire... the perfecter of
our faith Amen

I wonder if you saw this TV program. It's one of those “hidden camera” set ups.
The setting was a sandwich shop in a small city in New Jersey, in a neighborhood where
migrant farm workers gathered early each morning on a corner, hoping to be hired as a
day laborer. Most are recruited from south Texas, Mexico and smaller Central American
countries to work on farms in the area.

The TV network hired an actor to work as a server at the lunch counter, taking orders for
sandwiches. The actor was instructed to play the role of one who refused to serve
anyone who could not speak English. And he made disparaging remarks about people
who were not born in the USA. The network also hired two Spanish-speaking actors to
pretend to be migrant workers, who were told to walk in and try to order a sandwich
that server.

The point of the hidden camera was to see how other customers might respond when
they witnessed the Spanish-speaking men being treated disrespectfully.

Would anyone stand up for the two men?

Would anyone align themselves with the server?

It was truly painful to watch. Some of the people just ignored what was going on...
Others openly agreed with the server who was treating the men so poorly.
There WERE people who were appalled by the rude and racist behavior of the server.
Some of them threatened to NEVER buy anything from the shop again.
A few tried to buy sandwiches FOR the men, since the server refused to take their
money. Some of them stood up for the men, and scolded the server for his racist
behavior and remarks.

This scenario played out several times at that shop on that day. Each time, when the
hidden camera was revealed, the unsuspecting customers were interviewed about what
they witnessed and how they felt.

They also interviewed a man who truly was a migrant worker. He wept as he talked
about the pain of being treated like he was less than human, regularly and far too often,
in the time since he has lived in the US.

At the end of the program, the narrator reported that 30% of the people present chose
to ignore what they saw. Around 20% joined in, verbally agreeing with the server's
discrimination. And over 50% of the customers DID, in fact, try to do the right thing by
defending the rights of the men to eat and shop in ANY business in their town.

50 percent of the people stood up and did the right thing.
50 percent.

Yes, the world is divided. Even as we watch and hear about children and families separated in roundups, and at our borders, we are divided on how we think we should deal with our broken immigration system.

In the church, we seem to be making some progress.

The ELCA's recent decision at the churchwide assembly to become a SANCTUARY church body was supported by over 80% of the voting members.

Still, as Christians – among Christians across the US and the world - we remain divided in how we interpret scripture, doctrine, and what we believe are the most important matters of faith.

Some days the divides seem greater than ever.

Although Jesus was not the conquering kind of Messiah, he was certainly the dividing kind –Just by nature of being who he was.

The division he caused was NOT due to his judging ways, but because of his great love and compassion.

When he said “welcome the stranger and feed the poor “ he did NOT say: “Only if they can stand on their own two feet and not be a burden.” He never asked anyone to prove themselves worthy of care.

Throughout Luke's gospel we see Jesus crossing boundaries in order to bring good news. He crossed to the other side of streets – to break down walls of fear and prejudice.

He crossed invisible boundaries to reach out and heal the untouchables of society

He crossed religious lines in order to heal on the Sabbath

He crossed over social lines to eat and drink with drunks and tax collectors.

He associated with women and welcomed children, holding them up as treasured and cherished in the God's world.

He challenged rules that got in the way of loving God and loving the neighbor.

Jesus' love for others was divisive.

Consistently, he brought people to the point of tension, crisis and transformation.

Jesus' proclamation of a God whose love and grace could embrace EVERY PERSON shook the whole system of human relationships to its roots.

And then he called his disciples to do the same.

To use the language of the author of Hebrews, that is the “race” that Jesus set before them to run.

And that continues to be OUR “race to run.”

It's not always easy. To love our family members is one thing.

It might take some measure of patience and forgiveness

But to ALSO love those we don't like,

Those we might identify as “enemies”

Those with whom we openly disagree

To love anyone we might perceive as “hard to love” for any reason
and to love them unconditionally - sacrificially - honorably -
In the way we have been taught to love - as God loves ?

Well, it's never easy

It takes persistence... and perseverance.

It requires courage, humility, a sense of self-awareness,
a willingness to make ourselves vulnerable, and open enough to listen, to learn
to tolerate... to respect ... and eventually – to love.

As often as not – it takes a new set of eyes – a different perspective –
it often takes a confrontation of some kind – in order for us to recognize our privilege –
to acknowledge our own ignorance.

Because that expansive kind of love is not about “a feeling” – it's not about being polite.
It's about being humane – empathetic – putting ourselves into the shoes of the “other.”

THIS is our race to run... it's the race that has been set before us,
and it will NEVER be easy.

The good news in all of this – is that we are never ALONE in our efforts.

Do not forget that we have the great cloud of witnesses - past and present – who
surround us – who run alongside us.

And who whisper in our ears:

“don't give up” “keep going” “don't stop” “You can do this hard thing”

It IS the patriarchs and matriarchs of old,

It IS our loved ones who have lived faithful lives and are no longer physically
present. And it IS - a great cloud of living witnesses as well,
who surround you and I in this place today.

It is our race to run... and it is the race of all the generations who will come after we are
gone.

I share this from one of Steve Garnaas-Holmes' poems this week:

Like artisans building a cathedral,

we are engaged in work that outlives us.

the building of justice will take generations;

knowing this, we do not grow weary or lose heart.

...Sustained by those who have come before,

who endured - so that we may be brought this far, we carry on...

...This is not for us, but for our children's children's children.

Friends, take courage. God is in this

Our little triumphs and failures are ennobled,

not by our successes, but by the immense grace (of God.)

Amen