St. Andrew’s Episcopal Church

Proper 8 – June 26, 2016

We’ve just heard that Jesus and the disciples are headed toward Jerusalem and that they stopped in a Samaritan village where they may well have expected to be welcomed, although Samaritans and Jews didn’t get along too well. There were a group of Samaritans who had heard about Jesus, so he might have expected hospitality when he got there. But as soon as they heard that he was headed to Jerusalem, where their high regard was not placed, they turned him away. And so the disciples asked him if they should command heaven to rain down fire to consume the village, and Jesus rebuked them. That’s a really nice way of saying that he said, “Are you out of your mind? Are you crazy? That’s not what we do. That’s not what we do.”

In my life and in my experience, that is sometimes what we do. When we don’t receive the welcome we want—when things aren’t going as we think they should be—sometimes our first response is to blast out—to do our best to rain down fire on whoever’s offended us. We do that—not all the time—but sometimes we do.

Last week—those of you who were here might remember and those of you who weren’t here will now hear the story—our prayers of the people were a litany around the event in Orlando. The phrase “gun violence” occurred several times in that litany. For some people that phrase felt like lack of hospitality—felt like their perspective was being dishonored—or ignored. And a marvelous thing happened. No one rained down fire on me. No one. Two people approached me directly and talked with me—kindly—helping me hear their perspective. Two other people emailed me—carefully worded, thoughtful and loving emails. These were love letters explaining their perspective, and I was so grateful for all four of those people, because I know that if four people have a feeling in a group this large, that there are some more, and so I was grateful for those persons who spoke—who wrote—who let me know what they were experiencing—and who didn’t attack me. There have been times in my life and in my ministry when I have been attacked. We have all been attacked in our lives, and we know that it doesn’t help the situation very much. But these folks did what they could to help us move toward common ground. And I am grateful.

Yesterday, we had our very own Living Room Conversation right here at Saint Andrew’s. We had thirty people—five tables of six—over in the Center. People from Saint Andrew’s, people from Saint Jude’s and Saint Thomas, people from Carmel who came to be part of this experience. I will tell you that I was a little bit nervous going into this thing, because it had been fabulous in Salinas back in May when the six of us from Saint Andrew’s went. But this was here, and this was under my watch, and I really wanted it to be good, and I really didn’t know if it would be or not. We had two conversations. One was a conversation about having conversations: how have we talked with people in the past, what has that been like, what did we bring to those conversations, what made it difficult, what made it easy. And then we had a choice about sitting in conversations about Orlando or about talking politics in church. So we had three tables of people dealing with the politics issue and two tables with Orlando, and the buzz in the room was fabulous. There was talking and there was listening. There was talking and there was listening. At the tables at which I participated, I was so impressed by the way people listened. They didn’t interrupt. They told what they needed to say, and then they listened and sometimes asked clarifying questions to help them understand the other person’s perspective.

After the first round of conversation, Ann Marie Burger popped up and said, “After all, we’re just walking each other home.” We’re just walking each other home. We’re all going to the same place, and we’re all on a path. And sometimes our paths converge. Sometimes they separate, and we can hardly see each other, much less hear each other. But on the good days, we’re walking on the same path, close together, and we’re walking each other home. I think that will always stay with me. I get goose bumps every time I say it, and it feels like the work of the Spirit happening right now—right here. And I am so grateful that Ann Marie just popped up and said that because it brought a special something to our time together. We all heard what she said.

We know that the path isn’t always easy. Jesus said we don’t build the kingdom of heaven by putting our hands to the plow and then turning back. All of us put our hands to the plow when we made our baptismal covenant promises. And some days we’re hanging on for dear life to the handles of that plow. Some days we have smooth going, and some days there are rocks. Some days there are trees. Some days we can hardly make it an inch further, but when we’re together, it’s a little bit easier to do. When we’re walking with each other, everything is easier. When we’re looking for the common ground that we share, we can all find hospitality. And wherever we go on this path, wherever we go with these plows of ours, there’s really good news, because the really good news is that Jesus said, “I am with you always, even to the end of the age.” Not just on Sundays, not just on Mondays, not just on Thursdays, always. When the path is rough and when the path is smooth. Always. He is with us, and God’s Holy Spirit moves among us—changing us—molding us—making us more the persons that God creates us to be.

So for all of that—for all of this week—I say thanks be to God.