

We Belong Together

May 7, 2023

Rev. Bill Eichhorn

Readings

Luke 24:28-31

from *The Message* by Eugene Peterson

They came to the edge of the village where they were headed. He acted as if he were going on but they pressed him: “Stay and have supper with us. It’s nearly evening; the day is done.” So he went in with them. And here is what happened: He sat down at the table with them. Taking the bread, he blessed and broke and gave it to them. At that moment, open-eyed, wide-eyed, they recognized him. And then he disappeared.

The Servant-Girl at Emmaus (*A Painting by Valázquez*)

Denise Levertov

She listens, listens, holding her breath.

Surely that voice

is his—the one

who had looked at her, once,

across the crowd, as no one ever had looked?

Had seen her?

Had spoken as if to her?

Surely those hands were his,

taking the platter of bread from hers just now?

Hands he’d laid on the dying and made them well?

Surely that face—?

The man they’d crucified for sedition and blasphemy.

The man whose body disappeared from its tomb.

The man it was rumored how some women had seen this morning, alive?

Those who had brought this stranger home to their table

don’t recognize yet with whom they sit.

But she in the kitchen, absently touching

the wine jug she’s to take in,

a young Black servant intently listening,

swings round and sees

the light around him

and is sure.



Kitchen Maid with the Supper at Emmaus
Diego Velázquez

Several of us from CCC attended the Marin Interfaith prayer breakfast held at Congregation Kol Shofar last Wednesday. Breakfast treated us to tasty Middle Eastern flavors. From the way people greeted one another with hugs and laughter, it was evident the Marin interfaith community is enriched by deep, long-lasting friendships.

The theme for the gathering this year was “We Belong Together.” Four people gave moving testimonies about the painful impact of not belonging because of one’s gender or race or sexual orientation. Mark Noguci, retiring board president of the Marin Interfaith Council, spoke of the pain of being excluded when he and his parents and siblings were sent to Japanese relocation camps during World War II. Cantor Naomi Watts shared her pain of being bullied all through junior high school because she was Jewish. Rev. C. J. Dunford, a leader in developing the Berkeley Buddhist Temple into an inclusive sangha, told of the physical, emotional, and spiritual violence they have endured as a transgender person. Finally, our beloved Rev. Janie Spahr spoke of the long, hard road of her ministry to educate church people about the oppression gay and lesbian people suffer and why churches should be an open and affirming safe space.

While each speaker spoke of the pain of not belonging, all of them witnessed to how they had fought alongside others against the barriers erected to exclude them and how they helped create communities of radical hospitality – communities where all were truly welcome. Their stories lifted up the fundamental truth embodied in interfaith organizations like Marin Interfaith Council: We all belong.

Their stories reminded us how the ideologies of exclusion and the violence they spawn are on the rise in the United States and around the world. Hopefully, gatherings like the one last week will serve to empower us in the faith community to persevere in the work of creating a society where everyone feels a sense of belonging, to create churches where authentic hospitality is practiced. While maintaining mutual respect for our particular religious and spiritual traditions, interfaith organizations like Marin Interfaith Council can come together to work for justice and healthy communities. We belong together.

Our Sally Mahe is involved with an interfaith, nonprofit organization, United Religious Initiative (URI), that has established 1,127 Cooperation Circles in 110 countries in 14 action areas, including: arts, community building, education, environment, human rights, and interfaith dialogue. Sally will present URI’s important interfaith work in the message on Sunday, June 4th at both services.

In the biblical story we heard this morning, there is this line: “Stay and have supper with us. It’s nearly evening; the day is done.” These disciples, who are grieving over the execution of Jesus and mystified by the reports from women who reported going to the tomb and finding it empty, invite the stranger they’ve been walking with to join them for dinner. The text reads as if inviting a stranger to dinner was the most natural thing in the world for these men, even when their hearts were broken from grief. Remember, those who extended the hospitality were disciples of Jesus, who preached, taught, and exemplified a radical, inclusive hospitality by eating with people who were referred to as “them” and “those people.” He touched people who were considered unclean in order to heal them. These disciples were practicing the gospel message they received from Jesus – “We belong together.”

Denise Levertov’s provocative poem on Diego Velazquez’s painting “Kitchen Maid with the Supper at Emmaus” invites us to see how a Black servant girl, who has just given Jesus a platter of bread, recognizes Jesus because she had heard his voice before – perhaps when he was teaching on a hillside or healing a leper. She recognizes his eyes because he “looked at her, once, across the crowd, as no one ever had looked ... had seen her.”

My friends, when we are seen, really seen, it changes us. When someone sees us as the child of God each of us is, we are blessed with a clarity that enables us to see the Living Presence among us, just as the Black servant girl in the painting did. When we invite people to join us for dinner and raise a glass with them, there is the possibility of transformation where those gathered experience the oneness we were created to enjoy. There is the possibility we will recognize the Living Presence of Christ when bread is broken as the disciples did at Emmaus.

Hopefully, as we move away from the fear of others caused by the pandemic, we will once again invite people to share our table. When Ann and I became your pastors in 2000, the Board brought back “Dinners for Eight” so we could begin to know one another; it was immensely helpful. I would suggest we consider doing that again when our new pastor joins us. We belong together.

Our communion hymn today, “Let Us Break Bread Together,” is an African American spiritual that was formed in the West African Gullah/Geechee slave culture that developed in the coastal areas of South-Eastern colonial America, including South Carolina and the islands off its coast such as Daufuskie Island, where a remnant of the Gullah people lives and preserves their culture. Later, “Let Us Break Bread Together” served as a gathering song, a call to come together to provide cover for those slaves who planned to escape on the Underground Railroad. Beyond what is known about the hymn’s origins, we can see it is a passionate call to community for God’s people. The word “community” is found sixteen times in our English Bibles, mostly in the New Testament. The Greek word for it is *koinonia*, which speaks of something being held in common or shared. It suggests a shared intimacy and companionship. The first time the term is used in the New Testament is in the Book of Acts where it describes what life was like in the early days of the church. “They continued steadfastly in the apostles’ doctrine and “koinonia” or community, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers.

For some of us, the communion ritual is an act of thanksgiving for the life and teachings of Jesus, for showing us the Way of love, for calling us to follow that way. For others of us, our monthly communion is a reminder that we are bound together by a covenant, a covenant that starts with these familiar words:

*To live out the questions together hand in hand,
supporting the fragile,
protecting the wounded,
giving the angered space and time,
dancing with the free,
celebrating moments of balance and
not fearing the unfolding of imbalance.*



Perhaps for all of us, we share the bread and cup to remind ourselves that we belong together and that “we” extends beyond our doors to include all people. The motto of the United Church of Christ, taken from the gospel of John, declares: “That they all may be one” (John 17:21). Let us celebrate that we all belong to the diverse, but amazing human family. May this communion renew our commitment to be an authentic example that all of us belong together.