

Fourth Sunday after Pentecost ~ June 28<sup>th</sup>, 2020

Rev. Jane McDougale

Genesis 22:1-14; Matthew 10:40-42

**All are welcome!**

*Let us build a house/Where love can dwell/And all can safely live,  
A place where/Saints and children tell/How hearts learn to forgive.  
Built of hopes and dreams and visions/Rock of faith and vault of grace;  
Here the love of Christ shall end divisions;  
All are welcome, all are welcome,/All are welcome in this place.*

That song welled up inside me as I sat with this morning's collect in my head, our gospel passage from Matthew in my hands, and Pride rainbow banners flying in my imagination.

We know so well what 'welcome' looks like. We know what it sounds like, and we know what it feels like. We even know what welcome tastes like. And I'm quite sure that I'm not the only one deeply missing all the pre-pandemic ways of expressing my, our welcome. Ah well, those days will return.

While we deeply understand how to be welcoming and welcomed in our own small spheres, how tragic it is that our society, since its creation has not been able to imagine a way of being where all are indeed truly welcome. How heartbreaking that one group has been able to make the rules about who is welcome at the table of abundance and who is not. Groups have been excluded, or even worse, enslaved by color, country of origin, language, gender, sexual orientation, economic status, physical abilities, the list goes on and on.

How can this be? Are we as a species so limited, deaf and blind? It seems so.

And so I find myself turning to our problematic story of Abraham and Isaac that we heard this morning. It is a huge foundational story, speaking to Abraham's obedience to God's request: that he take his beloved son and sacrifice him. The son that he and Sarah had waited so long for, whose birth was foretold in the story we heard a couple of weeks ago about the three angelic visitors under the Oaks of Mamre.

Okay: if it was a test, Abraham passed it. He clearly would do anything for this God. I don't think I can be the only one horrified by the trauma that Abraham and Isaac had to go through, however.

I have to remind myself that I do not belong to Abraham's context: and that in some ways it is true to say that my God, and the relationship that I have with my God is not the same as Abraham's God and the relationship that that Abraham had with his God.

However, I find myself, in the light of my earlier question about the limitations of our species, wondering if Abraham heard God correctly. Might it be possible that God was asking Abraham a question about Abraham's love for and obedience to God? And the only way that Abraham could respond was by being prepared to sacrifice his son, his heart, his all on that altar? Fortunately God, with whom everything is possible, was able to correct the situation.

Ancient stories are important, but our words should be roomy enough to accommodate the enormity of the love and truth of God's kingdom. It is so much greater than we can ever imagine.

*Let us build a house where prophets speak,/And words are strong and true,  
Where all God's children dare to seek/To dream God's reign anew.  
Here the cross shall stand as witness/And a symbol of God's grace;  
Here as one we claim the faith of Jesus:  
All are welcome, all are welcome,/All are welcome in this place.*

I have no doubt that throughout all ages, God has been and is constantly holding out God's arms in love and welcome to each one of us. And each one of us will respond in our own way.

I remember one clear night, some thirty years ago, looking up at the stars, and realizing for the first time in my life that I could say yes to God without any hesitation or contingency clauses. It was a terrifying moment, and it took about six months for me to realize that that had been the moment of conversion that I had been waiting for all my life.

Sometimes responding to God's invitation will lead to ordained ministry: as joyously it has for Courtney two weeks ago, and AnnaMarie yesterday. There are, however, a myriad of other ministries into which we can live. Each one of us chooses our vocation according to the gifts that God has given us. And as I think of these many ways that we can live our faith out into the world, the concept of welcome, with its threads of

hospitality, inclusion, and all accepting and encompassing love for all, is central to each. And it's not a one way welcome either as our Gospel makes clear: this is not just about our welcoming others. Jesus says:

*Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me.*

This is about each one of us both accepting the welcome of others, indeed all creation, and opening our arms in welcome to all creation in return. As are all of the ways of God, the act of welcome is deeply relational.

As this morning's collect makes clear:

*Welcoming God,  
giving space for creation to return your love:  
make us apostles of the open table,  
a place of hospitality to challenge the world with the gift of eternal life;  
through Jesus Christ, who offered himself for us. Amen*

*Let us build a house where love is found/In water, wine and wheat:  
A banquet hall on holy ground,/Where peace and justice meet.  
Here the love of God, through Jesus,/Is revealed in time and space;  
As we share in Christ the feast that frees us:  
All are welcome, all are welcome,/All are welcome in this place.*

--