

21st Sunday after Pentecost  
October 29, 2017  
Matthew 22:34-46  
The Rev. Carenda Baker

They keep coming to our door. No, not trick or treaters – but those strangers with one need or another. Each time it happens is an invitation to recall that it is Christ who stands before us in the face and form of our neighbor.

A few weeks ago a woman called and left a message on the church answering machine. She didn't give her name, but she said she had heard we had a blessing of the animals service scheduled and wanted to know when it was. She called a week after we'd held the service, and the other churches in the area had already held their blessing of the animals, too. It was a Monday morning when I listened to the message, and I'm not usually in the office on Mondays, but I called her back. Yes, she said, a bit timidly, she had a pet for which she would like to have a blessing. She has taken her dog every year for the blessing of the animals service held at Trinity Lutheran Church here in town. But since Pastor Neal Hively retired this past December, the service was not held at Trinity this year. Someone from Corpus Christi Church had told her about our service. I asked if she had transportation and could she come to the church later that afternoon. I would be happy to offer a blessing for her pet.

The woman, Lilly, arrived right on time at 3:00, holding in her arms a small, rust colored, 13 yr.-old partially blind toy poodle named Penny. I asked if she wanted us to do the blessing outside. No, she preferred that we do it inside the church.

Lilly had never visited Trinity before, though she is a longtime Chambersburg resident. She seemed to enjoy taking her time to look around the church, and pronounced it a "pretty place". We chatted for awhile, about Penny of course and her days as a therapy dog, about pets we've loved and lost, about life in general. After the prayer and blessing, she asked if she could light a candle in the back. Of course that was fine. She insisted on making a contribution to the church. I could sense that for Lilly, as is true for many, especially those of us who live alone, our pets become lifelines. They are our family, beloved companions that help keep us grounded in the goodness of God and give us a living presence to touch, handle, see, hear, and smell. Lilly doesn't worship regularly with any particular faith community, so I invited her to come worship with us any time. A few days later I received a lovely handwritten thank you note from Lilly. I can tell you that does not happen very often, especially a written thank you from someone who has no formal connection with Trinity. Her thank you note suggested that she is probably lonely and looking for connection, for meaningful relationship, perhaps even a place where she feels she belongs. Her note said she would like to consider me

a “new friend”. Interesting how that works when we are open to the Holy One. We move quickly from being strangers to friends.

The second recent appearance of Christ in disguise came when a neighbor of Trinity who needed some assistance came to the office. I spent maybe twenty minutes with Joe, listening mostly to a concern that was weighing heavily on his heart. He had a plan for dealing with his particular dilemma, but he was worried about possible negative outcomes. I did my best to encourage him, and offered a bit of unsolicited advice. I asked him if we could pray together before he left. He said yes, and after we had finished the prayer, he was sniffing because he had begun to cry. He said, “This is why I don’t like going to church. Every time I go to church I cry.” “I think that’s a good thing,” I said. “That says to me your heart is open to meeting God. Lots of us cry in church. Church is not a place for people who have it all together. It’s a place for people who need God”. I thought to myself afterwards, our tears are God-given gifts. They flow from the heart of God’s love for us. It’s taken me a really long time to learn this. And I still struggle with it sometimes. There is no shame in needing God or in shedding tears in the midst of that need. In fact, there is holy healing in tears.

Both of these neighbors were looking for caring connection. It’s a beautiful thing when those moments of caring connection happen, because it is God the Holy Spirit who is at work forming those connections. God and neighbor cannot be disconnected from one another.

In today’s gospel reading, the controversy narratives we have been hearing in Matthew are winding down. Those confounding parables about the kingdom of God. The questions posed to Jesus about paying taxes to Caesar and whether or not there is a resurrection. The question Jesus fields in today’s gospel reading, about “which commandment in the law is the greatest” takes place in Matthew’s gospel on Tuesday of Holy Week. Jesus has made his entrance into the city on Palm Sunday and overturned the tables of the money changers in the temple. The tension is building. The stakes are getting higher. Jesus is nearing the completion of his mission. He sums up the “agenda” of his mission in his response to that question about which one of the 613 commandments of the law is the greatest: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.” This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.”

For the Jews, and for us as Christians, this is Discipleship Basics 101. Anyone who truly loves God with all his or her being must and will love others. You can’t have one without the other. If we love our neighbor, then we are loving God. And if we love God,

then we are in some measure coming to see our neighbor as God sees them and loves them. Basic. Simple enough to remember. Incredibly difficult to live out.

There is good reason that this is the 500<sup>th</sup> year anniversary of the Protestant Reformation. Christ's Church has not done all that well living out these two basics. We still need "re-formation", individually and communally. If we're serious about being disciples, then we can expect the call to some serious re-formation.

Now, re-formation can be both exciting and exhausting. It's exciting when we witness change and newness and hope, in ourselves and in the church, sometimes even in the world. But it's exhausting when we find in ourselves personally, and amongst each other here, and in the larger church – those places of resistance, suspicion, or rejection. God knows we can't re-form ourselves. That's why "the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth." Jesus is the model for loving God and neighbor, as one and the same.

Our pilgrimage group's upcoming trip to Israel is now only a week away. Mary, a friend from St. Andrew's in Shippensburg who went on pilgrimage to the Holy Land last November was telling me about her experience. Do you know what was her big take-away from that trip? **"Jesus is trouble"**. She did not say this in jest and she said it repeatedly. This truth became real for her when she actually walked the land where Jesus was born, where he walked and prayed and taught and healed. Where he lived, died, and was resurrected from the dead.

Our Holy Land pilgrimage group has talked about our personal expectations for the upcoming trip. I have not said this to the group, but the primary expectation I have for myself on this pilgrimage is that I will reconnect with Jesus' living Spirit, the Holy Spirit, so that I will return and live with more holy boldness, more courage to take risks for the sake of love and the gospel. That I will find my place of resurrection. Following in Jesus' footsteps is about learning to love God and neighbor equally. And I'll be honest: I both want this and am afraid at the same time that it will happen. I know it will cost me something. It will require me to change, to be re-formed. It will break my heart open to enlarge the space for God's love to flow through me to others.

But could it be that to love God and neighbor as we love ourselves will set us free? Free from self-absorption and ego, free from loneliness and disconnection, free from self-sufficiency and self-reliance, free from the pain of not belonging and not being known, free from the fear of dying and giving ourselves away for something greater than ourselves and our own desires?

Being set free in this way comes only by being in relationship – with God and our neighbor. And if we want to live like Jesus, loving God and neighbor, then we have to spend time abiding in Christ to be loosed from all that binds us and keeps us from becoming like Jesus - full of grace and truth.

No one can answer for you or me where God is calling us to take that next small step to put love for our neighbor into action. Maybe it will be participating in some anti-racism training. Or perhaps joining efforts to address homelessness in this community. Or taking steps to more completely “go green” to help the planet. The free breakfast program now going for three years here at Trinity was born from one person’s passion to reach out to those who are hungry and food insecure. There are those in our congregation who are already following God’s tug on their hearts to roll up their sleeves and love God by putting their love into specific action for their neighbors. When we ask for God’s guidance, I believe God will lead each of us to the “next steps” to love our neighbors more like we love ourselves.

As I have reflected on my own early formation as a Christian, from child, through teen years, to young adulthood, I see that I learned very well how to live a life devoted to God. I learned how to honor and praise, to give thanks, to pray for myself and the needs of others, to ask for forgiveness, to study Scripture. I even was taught how to tithe, to give 10% back to God before spending the other 90%. I learned how to worship. And worship came pretty naturally to me and brought so much joy. It was and is like breathing for me.

However, my formation as a growing Christian lacked an emphasis on learning *how* to follow Jesus’ way of loving others, *how* to put love in action – and not just by avoiding doing “bad” things or contributing to charities. I learned well to live by the rules. But slavishly following the rules – the shoulds and oughts – this doesn’t transform our wills and hearts so that we are choosing day to day to love in our actions toward others. I can see now there was a distinct disconnect between learning to love God and love my neighbor. Avoiding doing intentional harm to another person is one thing. But to act for my neighbor as I would stand up and act for myself? That’s quite different.

Learning to love our neighbor as our self requires great persistence and much patience with ourselves because we will fall down, and need to get back up, fall down and get back up again. St. Benedict’s words are so very encouraging: “Always we begin again”.

Loving God by loving neighbor. This is the crux of the journey to generosity. It is more than just doing kind deeds for others because that’s what we’re supposed to do. It is believing that God intends to change us through all the ways we give, including taking

the time to develop relationships that turn strangers into friends. The journey to generosity will re-form and transform us to reflect more and more of God's love. We will begin to look more like the people God has intended us to be - apprentices of Jesus' way, disciples of the Holy One, the risen Christ.

So we can count on it, brothers and sisters. Like my friend Mary said –“Jesus IS trouble”. Following his way will change us. But our world surely needs a whole lot more of this holy trouble.

Let us pray together "A Prayer of Self-Dedication" (BCP, p. 832, #61):

"Almighty and eternal God, so draw our hearts to thee, so guide our minds, so fill our imaginations, so control our wills, that we may be wholly thine, utterly dedicated unto thee; and then use us, we pray thee, as thou wilt, and always to thy glory and the welfare of thy people; through our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.