**Say “YIGBY!” ~ Yes In God’s Back Yard**

A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Ledlie I. Laughlin

Isaiah 56:1-8 ~ Matthew 15:21-28 ~ August 20, 2023

Every week we proclaim, “all are welcome at God’s table.” Or, as Isaiah just proclaimed, “my house shall be called a house for all people.” We don’t just say it, we believe it; we don’t only believe it, we act upon it. At least we try. And, if we’re honest, we’ll acknowledge – at least to ourselves – that this creates a tension. It is one thing to proclaim inclusion; another thing to live it. Speaking only for myself, I know that my words, beliefs, and intentions can be in one place, but my choices and actions do not always align.

Last I checked, Washington D.C. was the fastest gentrifying city in the nation and, on pace with trends across the nation, has a growing divide between the poorest and the wealthiest. St. Columba’s is in Ward 3 – with the highest per capita income and the fewest units of affordable housing. The mayor and City Council have explicit goals to create affordable housing across the city and in every ward.

St. Columba’s has long felt called to address these disparities - through service, advocacy, and addressing systemic injustice. We’ve partnered with others to create Samaritan Ministry across our diocese, to create Friendship Place to serve the unhoused in North West DC. Through the Water Ministry, Refugee Response Team, Grate Patrol; our partnership with Housing Up and with WIN – Washington Interfaith Network. In the last couple of years, we have a growing team working explicitly on affordable housing in Ward 3.

It is God’s table. All are welcome. (But) it is not a given how this plays out. There are a lot of forces at work, competing values, competing desires – in our city, our neighborhood, within our church, and most importantly, within our selves. Most of us have the privilege of some choice – choice about where and with whom we live.

Speaking about this is tricky. I am really not interested in triggering liberal guilt or inviting us all to feel ashamed about whatever privileges we may enjoy. But I do invite us to acknowledge and accept that we have within ourselves competing desires, so that when we hear calls for justice, we can be centered in our beliefs, and act with integrity.

Today, Isaiah addresses the Hebrew people, just returned home to Jerusalem after generations of exile in Babylon. For them, Jerusalem is temple, home, and neighborhood; there is no distinction. Isaiah calls upon them to welcome and include the foreigner, and to focus on the needs of their neighbors, saying succinctly: “maintain justice and do what is right.” Maintain justice and do what is right: this is code, found in all the prophetic writings, code for a radical torah obligation to live with a covenant of mutuality – to bind together weak and strong, rich and poor.

And then… fabulously, Isaiah couples the charge to the people: maintain justice and do what is right… couples this with a promise from God, that God shall bring salvation and deliverance. Here the word “deliverance” is the same word – *sedeqah –* rendered “to do right” in the first pair. It’s both imperative and promise. As we do our part, God does God’s part.

All summer, we’ve begun our worship with a similar pairing from Psalm 85: “mercy and truth have met; righteousness and peace have kissed each other. Truth shall spring up from the earth, righteousness shall look down from heaven.” Just as the mist rises, the rain falls. Its a beautiful vision. You “do right”; I’ll “bring deliverance.” We are in this together: we are called to conspire with God in bringing about a just society.

It may be stating the obvious but this can get ugly. I live in this neighborhood. I love it. We grow vegetables and some flowers in the back yard, a lovely large maple out front. Recently, a neighbor sought to rebuild his little backyard garage, to create a workshop below with a little apartment above. The project was large enough to require zoning variances. Well! A full-throated battle ensued. The variances were approved, but it was not pretty. There were similar battles when building the family shelter on Idaho Ave, updating the Lisner homes on Western Ave. There’s hotly contested debate today about constructing mixed-income housing at the library near Chevy Chase circle, at the WMATA transit center on Wisconsin, to name just two.

These are not stories of bad guys versus good guys. These are stories of us: people living together with a complicated mixture of values and intentions. We want to do what is right and just. It just gets tricky when it’s in my back yard. Knowing this to be true, how can I resist the NIMBY – “not in my back yard” impulse, and instead cultivate and nourish the YIGBY impulse? YIGBY – “yes in God’s back yard”? From “no, mine” to “yes, God”.

When these battles get heated, we don’t always show up with our best selves. Look at our Gospel. In a stunning – no, distressing – tale, Jesus himself is apparently trashing, denying mercy to a woman because of her outsider status, calls her a dog. We can find a gloss; propose that it’s a set up: Jesus created this scene to make a point. But it reads at face value; “woman, there’s no grace for the likes of you.” This woman takes it. Nevertheless, she persisted. And – what? Changed Jesus’ mind? Widened the circle? Maybe. Regardless, she called forth from him the healing she needed for her daughter.

It would seem that as we conspire with God to bring about a just society, most of the time God needs to call us to task, but now and again, apparently, we’ve got to step up – or kneel down – with some insistent prayers of our own.

The call to inclusion and mutual care is the very heart of the matter: Love God. Love your neighbor as yourself. At this moment, we don’t have a decision, or even a proposal, to debate about how we will or will not include the foreigner in our neighborhood. So, the question for me today – and I invite you to join me in wondering about this: how will I be ready to say yes to the voice of inclusion? When I am torn between competing values, how will I find the courage or the humility, the grace or the clarity, to favor justice and to do what is right?

Poet and pastor Jan Richardson gave voice to the woman who persisted, in a poem called ***“Stubborn Blessing”***:

Don’t tell me no.

I have seen you

feed the thousands,

seen miracles spill

from your hands

like water, like wine,

seen you with circles

and circles of crowds

pressed around you

and not one soul

turned away.

Don’t start with me.

I am saying

you can close the door

but I will keep knocking.

You can go silent

but I will keep shouting.

You can tighten the circle

but I will trace a bigger one

around you,

around the life of my child

who will tell you

no one surpasses a mother

for stubbornness.

I am saying

I know what you

can do with crumbs

and I am claiming mine,

every morsel and scrap

you have up your sleeve.

Unclench your hand,

your heart.

Let the scraps fall

like manna,

like mercy

for the life

of my child,

the life

of the world.

Don’t you tell me no.

Jesus answered her, “Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.” Amen.