



The Cathedral of St. Andrew - Honolulu

Sermon: Year A – Proper 17 – September 3, 2017

Let love be genuine. What is genuine love?

Not long ago I was on the phone with a friend on the Big Island and I was talking about the Cathedral and things I feel like I have to do—proof the bulletins, answer emails, approve invoices, check out the buildings, attend meetings, write sermons, blah, blah, blah. And my friend noted that I had a sense of urgency about it all, like the sky was falling or something. And then he said this, something that I’ve never heard before. He said, “Don’t push the river.”

I’d never heard that before, “don’t push the river”. And because I didn’t want to admit that I didn’t really know what that meant, I looked it up on the Internet and it said this:

Stepping out of the rushing river for a moment is not only difficult to do, but difficult to remember to do. It almost belongs on a “To Do” list – laundry, shopping, sitting still. How do we fit that in to our day? Granted, it’s not really a chore – if it is, we’re not being present – nor is it up there on the list of “Fun Things to Do in My Spare Time.”

And yet, regular practice of sitting still and being present can soften hardship, exhilarate joy. It allows the daily dust to settle, clears the fog of frenzy, so that clarity of thought and pureness of heart can take their rightful places at the table.

Slow down. Invite the best parts of yourself. Welcome each to their place setting. Then quietly sit among them – patience, thoughtfulness, endurance, forgiveness. Offer them nourishment as you feast on silence. Refill their plates when they ask for seconds. Some have come malnourished, some have arrived empty. Dine on dignity, then toss the scraps of doubt.

When you and your guests are full, bid each one farewell. Invite them again – often. They will show their appreciation in ways that will surprise you. (www.sophiasmith.edu).

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Don't push the river. For some reason, to me, that sounds like genuine love.

Every weekday morning I come into the office a little bit early and go onto a Jesuit website called Sacred Space, where you sit at the computer and it takes you through prayerful steps based on Ignatian spirituality. The first step is presence, where you sit and bask in the presence of God. Then the second step is freedom, meaning that when you're fully ensconced in the presence of God, you have total freedom and in that freedom I often ask, "Is it freedom from? Freedom to?" Or maybe it's freedom *with*.

And what I always seem to come up with is that it's freedom from rules, from restrictions, and from expectations; and that might be why Jesus railed against the Pharisees and their rules. Their rules restricted the human spirit, preventing it from being free—being free to be with God. And oftentimes to me it seems like we've taken the church back to that restricting way – a church full of rules and regulations that squelch the freedom of the Spirit and its freedom to be with God.

A good example that I can think of is that, as you know, I've complained a lot about the heat lately. And I also feel this crazy self-imposed expectation that I'm supposed to be here every Sunday in black pants, black shoes, black socks, and a black clergy shirt with a collar that goes around my neck and keeps all the body heat inside – and then on top of that I have to throw on a polyester robe, just because that's what we're supposed to do.

And then we have to leave the windows and side door closed so that we won't burn out the six lights above the altar—lights that aren't supposed to even be lit during the Eucharist, but, then again, we've always done it that way. And then I remembered something that Bishop Fitzpatrick said many years ago when I was here as the Canon Pastor. He said, "It's not really what you wear or what color you wear during church services. God doesn't care about that. The priest could show up in a Speedo and a stole and it would still be a Eucharist."

Now I assure you that I won't subject you to showing up in a Speedo on Sunday morning, but I will confess that for the past couple of weeks I have shown up here in a pair of shorts and a T-shirt and rubber slippers, because I need the freedom of being comfortable enough to do what I need to do for all of you and for the God we come to worship. And, yes, the Eucharist still counts.

People often ask me why I left my life and ministry in Hilo to come back to Honolulu at the Cathedral, and I always say the same thing. I came back because I love this Cathedral and I love the people who come to worship as the Cathedral community. I may grouse. I may complain, I may grumble. But I love this Cathedral. And I know that many of you do too. So given all that, let me ask,

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“What will we give it freedom to do?” What do we have to do to make it free and open enough for God to enter in?”

You know when I was here 10 years ago, I got in the fight with one of the servers at the altar because I went to grab the chalice from him to set it on the table, rather than letting him set it on the table because that's with the customary said?

I'm glad that I've returned to find that that kind of thing is not the case anymore and as we open the windows and let the candles blow out if they need to, what are the things we're called to metaphorically open and free up so that the Spirit of God can enter in?

The other day I got the highest praise I could ever receive here when somebody told me that this place is beginning to thaw out a little bit – and I sarcastically thought how could anything now thaw out, with the heat that we've been having here, but I actually knew what they meant. And so things are happening like people are being fed to the point where they applaud after a sermon, or they close their eyes and smile while we're taking the gospel book down into the altar and singing *This Little Light of Mine* – which is not in the hymnal, by the way. Oops. Broke another rule!

And I love that, because it fits into my vision for the church. Years ago when I was asked to run yet again for secretary of our diocesan convention, I had to fill out yet another nomination form for myself and they asked the question, “What is your vision for this Diocese?” And I figured since I the only one who has stood for this post for many, many years, I will just tell the truth. What have I got to lose?” And so I said, “My vision for this diocese is that I see people smile during worship and that I laughter in church meetings and coffee hours.” Doesn't that sound like a wonderful church community to be in?” And I think if we stop taking ourselves so darned seriously all the time, we could actually get there – and very soon. I don't think that one is in the hymnal either.

So let's commit to lightening up a little bit and not worrying about the rules as much as we worry about focusing on God and asking God to come into our worship and into our lives. Don't you think that that would be the ultimate in genuine love? Thaw out. Lighten up. Become free. And let love be genuine.

Amen.