

“The Rabbi Walks in the Woods”

Matthew 25.31-40 & Galatians 5.22 – 6.10

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When was it that you had a first-hand encounter with Christ but didn't even know it? When was it that you saw Christ in the face of a homeless mom? When was it that Christ appeared to you in the guise of a fellow parishioner asking for help at Plymouth or in the eyes of someone who is worshipping with us for the first time?

As the writer of the letter to the Hebrews records, “Let mutual love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.”¹ Strange as it seems, that sort of thing happens in this community every day when we push beyond our comfort zones and think of someone else instead of just ourselves.

Thinking beyond oneself is one of the elements of Beloved Community. As I said last Sunday, creating Beloved Community is at the heart of our new strategic plan, and it is the very first thing in the Purpose Statement of our Strategic Plan. And I hope you heard in the story of “The Rabbi's Gift” what can happen to a

¹ Heb. 13.1-2

community when it is transformed by seeing the divine within one another.



While we have a lot going for us, there is no doubt about that. But I think I know the reason...and I'm looking at it. Plymouth's laypeople have a tradition of giving a damn and getting involved. It goes back even beyond the construction of this building, when members of this congregation built this church by the sweat of their brow. That was in the 1950s, and things have changed a lot. We've all become busier, seeming to work harder, and we have a lot more opportunities to amuse and distract ourselves. If our national politics and low vaccination rate tell us nothing else, they tell us that we Americans are more concerned about ourselves than we are about our neighbors.

One of the hungers among all generations in our society is for true community, and it is especially true among young adults. You probably know someone right now wanting to find a progressive faith community, and it wouldn't hurt for you to give them an invitation to Plymouth. You never know what kind of angel you might be showing hospitality to with an invitation!

One of the most important books about modern America is by Robert Putnam, called *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of*

American Community.² In it, Putnam describes the decline of what he calls “social capital,” which concerns our community and civic connections and the value they provide to society as a whole. The overall outlook isn’t so rosy, but here is the good news: Putnam writes, “Faith-based communities remain such a crucial reservoir of social capital in America that is hard to see how we could redress the erosion of the last several decades without a major religious contribution.”³ And Plymouth is the type of socially and spiritually connected community that many of us have been looking for...and that our society desperately needs.

But just as it took a whole community to raise a barn ...just as it takes a village to raise a child...it takes every member of a congregation coming together, working side-by-side, sharing their time, their gifts, their assets, to make a difference and keep a community like ours vital.

Yet, it takes more than that. It takes us looking beyond ourselves: beyond our busyness, beyond our need to be entertained, beyond all of the “wants” Madison Avenue tells us we need. When was the last time you saw a TV ad espousing “love, joy, peace, whole-heartedness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness,

² Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000)

³ *ibid.*, p. 408

and self-control?” **It takes looking beyond ourselves to see the face of Christ in the other. And there are many occasions when I see our members doing that!**

Every week, I see trustees who mow our lawn and I see members who trim branches and pull weeds during the week. I see deacons who reconfigure the sanctuary to keep you safe and offer you a welcome every Sunday. I see a wonderful volunteer who buys and delivers a loaf of Great Harvest bread to every guest in worship who leaves their address. I see members helping international and low-income students provide essential apartment furnishings. I see our members visit the homebound and bring them joy. I see someone with two teenagers who teaches at CSU find time to be a moderator and even play Dvorak in worship! I see volunteers who staff our telephones and stuff envelopes. I hear a search committee meet for untold hours to find our next Christian Formation Director. And I see a small group learning about our new sound and livestream system. Maybe none of those people alter the world singly, but altogether, their efforts change lives.

Why do they do it? Certainly not because it is glamorous work! It takes looking beyond ourselves to see the face of Christ in the other. Sure, you could be spending another hour on Facebook or playing tennis or bridge, but if you looked right into the eyes of

Christ, could you look the other way when he asked you for help?
I don't think so.

You have an opportunity to step up and help. To be spiritually mature. To change lives. To embody Beloved Community.

I know that many of us are feeling anxious about the Delta variant, and it's making some of us feel reluctant to get involved. Last week I saw a video from Harvard detailing the global mental-health crisis spawned by the pandemic, and I know that is at play here in Colorado and at Plymouth. I see it in shorter fuses, turning inward, and living life with a deep sense of fear.

Even in a pandemic it doesn't have to be that way: there is an alternative path, and that's why I chose this morning's texts and the story of "The Rabbi's Gift." Seeing Christ in the face of another and creating Beloved Community won't happen automatically or without your participation. Listen again to this list fruits of the Spirit; what one quality on this list you would like to see yourself delving further into: love, joy, peace, whole-heartedness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control.

You don't have to do this on your own! You are surrounded by a community that loves you, and you have God in your corner. Choose one of those wonderful states of being...got one? Now,

close your eyes if you wish, and take a slow, deep breath. Ask God to be present with you, and ask for help in living into that one, wonderful way of living. Take another deep breath. Try to imagine what Plymouth would look like if we embodied that one wonderful characteristic. Imagine that way of being starting with you, spreading to Plymouth, and extending into the community from this congregation. Offer thanks to God for this vision of what will come. Take another deep breath, and open your eyes when you are ready.

May we walk together and discover new ways of continuing to embody Beloved Community for one another and for God's world.

And I have one more thing to tell you...and I'll say this only once: "The Messiah is among you."

Amen.