

“Life Together”

Rev. Katie Crowe  
Trinity Avenue Presbyterian Church  
Durham, NC  
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Homecoming Sunday

For the past six weeks we have been journeying through the book of Exodus, exploring its lessons as God takes a once disparate and enslaved people and claims them as God’s people, and then moves them from one place to another in their life together and in their relationship with God. Today’s text comes after the account of the golden calf, where God’s anger had burned against the people for their idolatry and lack of faith and the people had been trying to be obedient since. God has just told Moses to move all of Israel from the place where they had set up camp and to go deeper into the wilderness, though God would not travel with them, but send an angel instead. Now we see the leader Moses, perhaps a little weary of the burden of his office as mediator and the mystery surrounding the future of the people entrusted to his care, take issue with the Lord. Hear the Word of God.

“Moses said to the LORD, “See, you have said to me, ‘Bring up this people’; but you have not let me know whom you will send with me. Yet you have said, ‘I know you by name, and you have also found favor in my sight.’ Now if I have found favor in your sight, show me your ways, so that I may know you and find favor in your sight. Consider too that this nation is your people.” God said, “My presence will go with you, and I will give you rest.” And Moses said to him, “If your presence will not go, do not carry us up from here. For how shall it be known that I have found favor in your sight, I and your people, unless you go with us? In this way, we shall be distinct, I and your people, from every people on the face of the earth.”

The LORD said to Moses, “I will do the very thing that you have asked; for you have found favor in my sight, and I know you by name.” Moses said, “Show me your glory, I pray.” And God said, “I will make all my goodness pass before you, and will proclaim before you the name, ‘The LORD’; and I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy. But,” God said, “you cannot see my face; for no one shall see me and live.” And the LORD continued, “See, there is a place by me where you shall stand on the rock;

and while my glory passes by I will put you in a cleft of the rock, and I will cover you with my hand until I have passed by; then I will take away my hand, and you shall see my back; but my face shall not be seen.” Here ends our reading. This is the Word of God for the people of God: Thanks be to God.

Halloween is not for another week and a half, but I’ve already had my first real scare of the season. I opened up my mailbox a few days ago and there waiting for me was a holiday catalogue- or, as this company called it, my “Inspiration Guide” for the season, covered with Christmas trees and photos of festive housewares. Once I regained consciousness, I noticed that the theme was family and home. Anchoring each collection of flatware and furniture was a photo accompanied with a little narrative vignette, like you were peering into the intimate moments of someone’s life. “A young man knows he’s arrived” when he’s invited into his grandfather’s study, I’m told. A rite of passage that would not be complete without this fabulous pair of double old-fashioned glasses, leather wingback chairs, and bronze fire place screen. I could download a video about an engagement party thrown by a young couple for their friends, celebrating their upcoming marriage that would surely be filled with bliss with their graphite, mid-century 2-piece sectional sofa, iconic retro tea light holders, and elegant gold-leaf dinette. This admittedly great marketing campaign is offering one take on what makes a family, what completes a home, and what a life together is about. It is banking on the fact that we hunger to lead lives of significance, to have relationships that are filled with depth and tenderness and meaning, and it is betting a good portion of its profit margin on the wager that our pursuit of substance will cause us to invest in so much style, hoping that it will help us get there.

And so here we are, a family of faith, gathered in this place that disciples of Jesus Christ have called home for ninety-one years, and we’re invited on this homecoming day to give pause and reflect on what makes a family of faith, what completes a spiritual home, on what our life together is about. Is it about the trimmings of so many good deeds? So many beautiful spaces? So many enjoyable people? So many like minds? So little conflict? This is a place where people have gathered for close to a century to find significance, and to have relationships that are filled with depth and tenderness and meaning- is it the collective power of these pursuits that make Trinity Avenue a home worth coming home to?

The cumulative effect of so much substance in this place, after all, is truly immense. Flip through the pages of some of those scrapbooks outside in the Porter Narthex of the Carr Building-each named for saints who found a home here, and you can see the impact of the lives of so many faithful lingering still today. Each Sunday morning the George Mathis class gathers as they have since 1936. In the floor beneath them the George Watts class gathers around a piano to kick off their lesson by singing hymns out of the red hymnal. An undated letter by a gentleman named Lawrence Dixon, a member of First Presbyterian Church, out of which this church began as a mission reads, “My first memory of the George Watts Bible Class must have been about 1899 or 1900. Even before that, I remember seeing Mr. Watts drive his beautiful high stepping horse; each Sunday rain or shine, down Duke Street after having passed the old Washington Duke Home... on by the Duke Factory stable yard at the corner of Randolph and Fuller streets...thence along the Norfolk and Western railroad, pass the old tall wooden warehouse to the trash pile; then cutting through a little clump of plum trees to the present Duke Street...then trotting down the cinder road to the Pearl Mill Chapel at exactly 2:45pm.” I don’t imagine Google Maps would highlight the same landmarks today.

The obituary of another member, John Kirkland, tells of his 12-mile, 4-hour long carriage ride from the north side of town that brought him to Durham, where he lived out his life and faith

attending First Presbyterian, then Pearl Mill, until it was moved and became the congregation of Trinity Avenue Presbyterian Church that would gather in its place, in this sanctuary that sprang forth from a muddy construction site that Perry Sloan, who holds the longest membership at over 80 years, and who is here every Sunday, recalls seeing as a boy. In our pews are the first women to serve on Session under Dr. William Bennett, women who passed on the faith to the children racing through the halls, who as adults, would call pastors Kent Klise and Donovan Drake, and even the first women ministers to lead. The congregation reaches out to serve, reaches in to study, goes forth in mission, sings the faith. On and on the stories of this congregation's faithfulness and activity go- ask one another about them today. So is all of this combined what makes Trinity Avenue a family of faith, and a church home? Is it the power of our collective memory, our shared traditions that makes our life together today possible?

In Moses dialogue, which is more like a wrestling match with God, the leader actually calls God out on the matter of what the essence of a life together for the people is about. The family of faith that is Israel at this point had no place to call home. They had shared truly spectacular common experiences together- being sprung from bondage in Egypt to freedom by God's hand. Walking on dry ground through the Red Sea between walls of water that would soon crush their adversaries who were swiftly closing in to re-enslave them. The people had followed God together, fought and reconciled together, faltered in sin together, and recommitted to devotion together. But when God now tells them that it is time to move to a new place, summons their leadership to rise, calls them to stand on everything they experienced in the past to step forward into the future, Moses calls time on the whole conversation to make sure that he and God are both very clear.

Up to this point, God has been speaking about the faithfulness of he, Moses, God's favor upon he, Moses, and Moses now asks for both a vision of the future, dares to request insight in to the heart and mind and nature of God, and challenges God to expand God's own horizons to encompass granting favor to Israel by remembering what life together for the people was all about. "Now if I have found favor in your sight, (Moses says) show me your ways, so that I may know you and find favor in your sight. Consider too that this nation is your people." To which God replies, "My presence will go with you, and I will give you rest." And Moses said to him, "If your presence will not go, do not carry us up from here. For how shall it be known that I have found favor in your sight, I and your people, unless you go with us? In this way, we shall be distinct, I and your people, from every people on the face of the earth."

For all their merits as a people, there is one thing that grounds Israel's life together. For all their family ties there is one thing that makes them a family of faith together. For all of their shared experiences, all the places seen and as yet unseen that they would go together, there is one thing that defines Israel as a people and makes them into a spiritual home, and that is God's presence with them. It is God's presence with them that allows their actions to have significance, that gives their relationships meaning, that enables them as a diverse array of individuals to have any common identity at all. And so, Moses says, are you with us or not, because if you are not, then the journey is over and we will go no further because it is devoid of meaning and direction, my leadership obsolete, this body just another organization that will hang together as long as interest holds. But if you say that you are with us, than there is a future, because we are a people, and you are our God. And God responds by saying that God is all in- and intimately so, revealing God's goodness and mercy to Moses. God's presence makes Israel a family, God's presence makes their union together a spiritual home. God's presence is what their life together

is all about, and so it is for us, who have come to know God's presence intimately through Jesus Christ, who says I am with you always, even to the close of the age.

In his work "Life Together" (33-35), a book that the Firsthand Faith young adult class is studying together, theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer writes, "Christian community means community through Jesus Christ and in Jesus Christ...whether it be a brief, single encounter or the daily community of many years, Christian community is solely this. We belong to one another only through and in Jesus Christ...I am a brother or sister to another person through what Jesus Christ has done for me and to me; others have become brothers and sisters to me through what Jesus Christ has done for them and to them...Our community consists solely in what Christ has done to both of us...The more genuine and the deeper our community becomes, the more everything else between us will recede, and the more clearly and purely will Jesus Christ and his work become the one and only thing that is alive and between us...We have one another completely and for all eternity."

It is not the accessories, the buildings, the furniture that make this place a home worth coming home to. It is not the traditions, the affections, the commonalities, the history even that make us a family of faith and hold us together as one. It is God's presence with us alone. And so the worship of God, the practice of the presence of God, the persistent commitment to be responsive to God, sharing in the mutual delight of God, and the continual pointing away from ourselves to God is our calling.

A friend of mine once told me that you can tell if God is in something because there is always provision and there is always fruit. All of you here today are the testimony that God is in this church, because you yourselves are both the provision and the fruit. You are the fruit of the faithfulness of generations past, and you are the provision for the faith of generations to come. It is not the way things used to be that we celebrate today, it is the way that God has made a diverse people one in Jesus Christ, and has empowered them through the years and in the midst of the changing landscape of Durham to step forward in faith as a witnessing community time and time and time again. We celebrate how God has nourished disciples by the fruit of the past to invest their hearts and skills and resources and imaginations in the service of God's kingdom in the present, and by doing so, providing for the future faith of those like baby Ross, whose baptismal waters have barley begun to dry on her brow.

Holiday inspiration guides aside, the good news of the gospel is Emmanuel, God with us, and we are a family of faith that is built on this promise of God's presence alone. So if you hunger for significance in your life, if you are seeking relationships that are filled with depth and tenderness and meaning, if you long for substance and connection and a healthy portion of delight, welcome home.