



Saint John the Baptist Episcopal Church  
The Rev. Michael Carroccino, Priest-in-charge

Rev. Carroccino's sermon for Sunday, August 9, 2015 – The Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost

Readings: 1 Kings 19:4-8 ▪ Psalm 34:1-8 ▪ Ephesians 4:25-5:2 ▪ John 6:35, 41-51

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For someone who grew up in the south, Seattle culture can be really disorienting. First, there's the rain. What we call rain in the Pacific Northwest barely registers as precipitation in the south. About 90% of the rain I've seen in the Pacific Northwest, southerners would refer to as a 'sprinkle.' As in: "Did it rain yet?" "No, it's just sprinkling a little right now." 'Rain' in my childhood experience was generally a downpour so thick that it would hurt to stand out in it, and it usually involved thunder and lightning. 'Rain' was the kind of thing that would easily accumulate an inch or two in a small parking lot in a matter of minutes, and fill the roadside ditches to overflowing in an hour or less. When southerners hear that it rains all the time in Seattle, they think it must be a fairly horrible place to live. And like all good Northwesterners, I don't try to correct them.

Which brings me to something else which has been far more disorienting in my gradual incorporation to Washington culture: a subtle, invisible dynamic that all the non-natives in this room will probably recognize immediately. When Kristin and I moved here in 2003, we were pleasantly surprised at how friendly everyone was. People would say hello to us on trails as we hiked, folks in coffee shops would greet us warmly and even total strangers would welcome us into their conversations. After spending a year in New England, this was like a breath of fresh air. But then we began to notice something: people held us at arm's length. Though we met lots of people, it was several years before we finally felt like we had made a few friends.

In Alabama, you can sit beside someone on an airplane in the afternoon and be invited to dinner before the flight lands. It's a little different herein the Northwest. As cordial and welcoming as people were when we arrived - and even though we got involved in a church the week we moved into town, it took us a really long time to cross the barrier from 'acquaintance' to 'friend' with people here. I'm talking about what people call the 'Seattle Freeze,' though it happens all over this region of the country. It's the sense that, even as people are made to feel welcome, they are held at arm's length, they are not integral to the community, they are somehow 'other'.

For the last two weeks I've been exploring the virtues of community. This is the third of five Sundays in a row in which the gospel of John quotes Jesus at length as he identifies himself as the bread of life. This week, the phrase that jumped off the page for me was "everyone who has heard and learned from the Father comes to me." "No one can come to me unless drawn by the father who sent me." I hear a challenge in those words - not an easy tolerant all-encompassing welcome so much as an intentional incorporation of those who show up in our midst. Not because we're a church and we really really want more people but because we understand that - in their showing up - they are being drawn by God, that they have heard and learned from God, that we are not whole without them. In this third week of the series, I think perhaps we've hit upon the biggest challenge we have as a Seattle church: how to be truly inclusive.

You can find a lot on the internet about what it takes to be an inclusive church - in fact it's very similar to what I talked about two weeks ago with being a welcoming community. There are lots of very visible signs that a church is inclusive, and Episcopal churches especially have these signals down: we march in the Pride Parade every year, we extend more and more benefits towards same-gender couples every year at our national convention, and even here at St. John's we have a paragraph in the bulletin every week stating our values regarding people of different ethnicities or sexual preferences. All of this talk has of course made inclusivity synonymous with welcoming the LGBTQ community into churches, but I'm talking about something larger.

Because when you're the one frozen out - and for so many years this *has* been the LGBTQ community - all of these signs of inclusivity look like so much window dressing. No matter if you are categorically different in some way or you blend in seamlessly, when you are the rootless wanderer in the wilderness, one of two things seems to happen in every community: either you become the novelty that attracts everyone's attention, or you become invisible. When you've had both experiences enough times, they start to feel like more or less the same thing. You are not integral to the community, you are somehow 'other'.

Someone I know was visiting a friend's church, and during the service a young boy got up out of his pew and began walking in the center aisle. No one in the church really batted an eye - clearly this was not out of the ordinary for this community. That is, until the boy walked a little closer to the front. A man sitting right on the aisle - clearly another visitor - reached out a hand to restrain the boy and quietly told him that he should return to his seat. Something quite amazing happened next: a parishioner - not one of his parents, mind you, just a member of the community - in the pew behind the man stood up and leaned over to him and said - clearly, but not unkindly - "excuse me sir, but that young man there is a baptized member of this church, and we don't interfere with one another's worship during the service." I don't know if the visitor ever came back, but I guarantee you that kid knows what it's like to be in an inclusive church.

Inclusion is at the heart of our faith. Abraham and Sarah welcomed the three strangers into their tent and fed them, and became the mother and father of nations. Jacob wrestled a stranger through the night and became Israel. Elijah - wandering the wilderness in despair - heard voices, and ate food that appeared from nowhere and proceeded to have a transformational encounter with God. Jesus opened his arms and welcomed all of humanity into the heart of God. These are not the hospitality of window dressings, not the kind of inclusiveness that any of them were necessarily looking for, but their acceptance, their welcome of what actually was, became the transformation that defined their lives. Inclusivity is more than a buzzword, more than a line in the bulletin: it is a commitment that we will see one another - and everyone who wanders in - as someone we can welcome and bless, or wrestle until they bless us, or follow toward our own transformation. It is a commitment that we will stick out our necks on one another's behalf, that we will go the distance with each other in our shared walk of faith.