April 7th , 2019

Springfield Presbyterian Church

Fourth Sunday In Lent

The Sweet Smell of Hospitality

I. The Case of Two Adams

This morning, I want to share with you an experience that I just had this past Thursday that is a little far fetched from our Scripture reading from the Gospel this morning - but I feel a call to tell you it. I want to share it with you because I believe it was truly God, that led me to a moment of hospitality and ministry that was spontaneous and Spirit driven.

In the warmth of the afternoon sunlight, I was working outside around our house, trying to manage the constant battle of brambles and weeds before the summer would take hold. The firepit was smoking, a sweet smell of burning up random wood. Along the road, I see two men walking side by side, and I find this odd – because our road has no sidewalks and to be honest, it isn’t the safest place you take a walk. So I look up at these men curiously and smile, nod, and keep on gardening. Then I see one of the men walk up our drive and say, “Hi, I’m Adam” and the guy behind him, “I’m Adam too!” and I said, “Hi, I’m Becca. What’s up?”

And as they approach, I see one in a logo’d shirt – oh boy, they are going to try and sell me something. They tell me they’re from a power company and they do free estimates for energy shingles and they want to know if they can talk to me for a few minutes.

Now, I have to admit – on any given day, there’s a 10% chance of me saying yes to these lads – to anyone really – I don’t like to get all caught up in these things. Yet on this day, I needed a break from the gardening and there was something that just drove me to say, “Yeah, sure. But, to do the estimate, I’d rather wait for you to come back when my wife was home. She’s the Scottish one.” And I pointed to the flag and then said, “Oh, hold on, let me take care of the fire.” So they follow me back to the firepit, and they see our hipster seats and ask if they can sit for a moment, as they’ve been working all day. So I take a seat with the lads, complete strangers, the Adams, with Adam H to one side of me and Adam W to the other side of me. There’s a quiet – but it isn’t an awkward quiet – the smell of the fire rolls over us, the view of the brae is clear, and if you listen closely, you can hear the small current of the stream.

All the sudden, we started talking about life rather than shingles. Adam H asked how Lorna and I met, and then asked the gentle, but appropriate, “how did you end up in Carroll County?” And we all know what that means in this context – it’s a question I’ve heard before – how does it feel to be LGBT in a red county? I said, “You know, God called me to the Presbyterian church in Sykesville and while I have many hopes and dreams and visions for the church, one of them is to let all people know that they are welcome. As someone in the LGBT community, I know what it means to live on the outside in some way, so I’m really keen on letting people know that church is a place of welcome and that God abundantly loves.” And then I tried to hop off my proverbial soapbox, wondering if I took this too far.

And then Adam H looks at me with watery eyes and says, “I was an assistant principal near D.C. for six years, and it was soul breaking to watch parents not want their kids to hang out with black kids or LGBT kids – why don’t people understand that we’re all the same in the end? Kids stay in the closet for so long – it’s so damaging – why can’t just love people for who they are?” And I nodded empathetically – you could tell his pain and passion for his work – I knew I was in good company.

I then turned to look at Adam W who is in tears, and I don’t know exactly what to say, but I look at him softly and he says, “I was 19 when I came out, in North Carolina, and my mom is a Southern Baptist and she told me that how I’m living isn’t how God intended. And it hurts, and I had to move away.” And now I’m starting to well up, and I replied, “Adam, the church, as a whole, has really screwed up here and we have a lot of work to do, but I promise you, I promise you, there are places where you are welcomed and loved. Don’t give up quite yet.”

And I took a pause and continued, I said, “Let me share with you something. This Sunday, we’ll have two women who have been together for 33 years, join our church. They came from culture and a system that would not accept them, and here, here in Sykesville, they found a welcome. They bravely walked into sanctuary doors, not knowing if they’d be loved, and found a place they could call home. It happens. Maybe for you, not today, not tomorrow, but I hope you find a safe place to call home.”

And all the vulnerability of the three of our hearts were right out there – right in the midst of the firepit as the smell washed over us. We sat quietly, respectfully, for me – in awe of the Holy Spirit who would grant me the privilege to talk to two power roofing guys about life in Christ. I was in awe that I had the opportunity to take what I knew profoundly within these walls of the sanctuary and say it with authenticity and sensitivity and honesty with these men.

Adam H looks at his clock after some time passes and sighs, saying they need to get on the road, but he looks at me and says, “From the bottom of my heart, I want to thank you for the work that you do. I want to get into activism again, I just needed to take some time for my soul.” And I nodded. “You got it.” And as the lads left, I said, “If you need a cuppa tea or a place to sit, you know where I live.” And we laughed and they asked if they could still come on Monday for a free estimate, and I said, “Yeah, yeah, I think you’ve won me over on this one. I’ll see you then.” And the Adams went back down the road and I knew something profound that I couldn’t encapsulate fully in words happened in that half an hour, but I was grateful for the firepit and the seats and a place of sharing and welcome.

II. How Does This Even Connect

You might now be wondering, what kind of theological acrobatics will I try for to place my story in the context of the Gospel reading. But I don’t think I need to wow you with some gymnastics. What I will say, is like the sweet perfume that Martha had, we had our own sweet perfume of the firepit. Martha welcomed Jesus, I mean – full welcome, perfume, a meal – a hospitality that went above and beyond.

I can’t reasonably place either the Adams or myself in the places of our Gospel figures today, but what I can tell you is that Martha’s example of hospitality is one that I encourage us all to live in our own lives, beyond these four walls. When saying something about God seems scary, do it anyway. When opening up your life in a safe and vulnerable way leads to others vulnerability, do not shy away. When the Spirit offers you a gift, take it. Be careful with your words, but speak your truth – welcome the stranger, befriend the hurting, and know that everyone has their stories that live within them – even the power roofing men.

III. The Road that Comes

Jesus knows what is to come, he knows his story is about to change. He does not tell Martha to not be hospitable, but he accepts it. And as we journey in this fifth week of Advent, the week before palms and passion come face to face, may we speak less and listen more. May we let hospitality be our norm, not knowing what is to come from those conversations. And may we continue to be in awe of a Savior that takes the burden of our sins so that we may have life abundant – life in conversation, in love, in hospitality, life in blessings – may we be in awe of the one who took the road to Calvery. Amen.