

“No”
The Reverend Michael L. Delk
St. Luke’s Episcopal Church – Anchorage, Kentucky
2nd Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 6) – 17 & 18 June 2017
Genesis 18:1-15, 21:1-7; Matthew 9:35 – 10:8-23

At this time of year, many people go on vacation. Among the plans and preparation, we make a list and pack, and if you’re anything like me, sometimes, you take more than necessary, finding unworn clean clothes and half-read books in your bag once you get home, and of course, something’s always forgotten, though we find a way to make do.

When Jesus sent out his disciples, not on vacation but on a mission to spread the good news, heal the sick, exorcise demons, and even raise the dead, he ordered them to travel light, leaving behind the barest of necessities: no money; no bag; no staff; only one tunic; and no sandals, so he sent them off barefoot. On top of that, he didn’t give them much in the way of an itinerary, and he offered no clue as to how long they might be gone. He wanted them to wander, to find their way by relying on God alone for guidance and protection.

To simply survive, they would also need to rely on the hospitality of strangers, and as Jesus warned them, there was no guarantee of that. In fact, they should expect people to reject them. So it was an uncertain situation that took courage, but they went anyway into the unknown to harvest the fruit of faith that Jesus had sown by his wise teaching and miracles, and some people did welcome them, accept the good news, and provide for their needs. We know this because later on in Matthew, the disciples return to Jesus full of joy with stories to share of how God’s grace worked through them in wonderful ways.

We look at them with a sense of awe, how they left everything behind except the clothes on their backs, and think “I could never do that,” but maybe we don’t have to. Some people may receive that radical call to abandon everything to go forth and spread the Gospel, but apart from

those rare exceptions, modern-day disciples of Jesus don't need to leave it all behind, at least not literally. However, we carry more baggage than just a bunch of material possessions.

For example, some people suffer from the crushing burden of shame, the sense that they are not and can never be good enough, because they are bad people; not people who do bad things and feel guilty, but people who are inherently and irredeemably bad and feel worthless, undeserving of love. That's a heavy load, and unlike the glut of stuff we buy, shame comes from a lack of compassion and mercy from a society that bullies, that abuses people verbally, emotionally, and physically, and then has the audacity to pile on by telling those it has shamed to buck up and get over it.

Leaving behind the weight of shame can be incredibly difficult, harder than giving away every item you own, because it takes help to get rid of shame, and a person loaded up with shame has a hard time asking for help, because they feel undeserving of it. This creates a dilemma. One wonders how help can be offered, because we often don't know if someone suffers from shame. It's not something people advertise. It's a closely held secret, for some a secret they keep even from themselves. But Jesus has given us power to heal and make whole, and as disciples, we bear the responsibility to exercise that power as best we can, hoping that by sharing the mercy of Jesus with everyone, it will fall upon and be received by those who need it most.

But what does that look like? It comes down to genuine hospitality, which involves much more than just being friendly or tolerant, though that's a good start. Genuine hospitality accepts and honors people for who they are. It doesn't mean you have to agree with everything a person thinks or says or does, far from it. Hospitality is a gracious, gentle, generous response to people in need, and despite the prideful delusion of self-sufficiency adopted by some, all people

are in need, each and every one us. And hospitality is not an option. Jesus reserves his harshest judgment for the cruel and the selfish who withhold genuine hospitality.

But shame and the cruelty that causes it are just a few pieces of luggage that we need to leave behind. We live in a fiercely divided world, where suspicion and mistrust have devolved into paranoia that spawns wild rumors and conspiracy theories that maim the truth, undermine reality, and leave us with no common ground on which stand. So we fall, deeper and deeper into a spiral of arrogance and hatred and hostility that inevitably leads to violence.

Last week, a man opened fire on our elected representatives while they practiced for a baseball game to benefit charity. It's hard to imagine a more un-American or un-Christian thing, until we remember that a few weeks ago a self-proclaimed white supremacist stabbed two people to death on a train. Those people, along with a third who was wounded, were trying to defend other people on the train the man he was threatening with his knife, because they looked like Muslims to him.

These are but a few examples, but they suffice to show that we're on a road that leads to perdition. And the real danger is that these outrages, happening more and more often, will fade into the background. If people getting hurt and killed because of their ethnicity, religion, or political party somehow becomes our nation's new normal, God help us.

Most of us remain silent, sometimes out of complacency, because it's just easier to ignore than engage, but more often we hardly dare whisper, afraid to speak up, because we know that whisper of opinion might be met with shouts of scorn and derision. But the silence of those who want to speak with reason and respect leaves only the loudest and most extreme voices dominating our public discourse, and that, perhaps more than anything else, poses an equally severe threat to the idea of "one nation, under God, indivisible."

If we care the future, about the legacy we hope to leave for our children and grandchildren, if we really mean that we are Christians bound together by the love of Jesus, we need to leave this toxic baggage behind and start on a new journey, on a mission of forgiveness and reconciliation that casts out the demons that plague us, so that we can listen, in the words of Abraham Lincoln, to the “better angels of our nature.” And guess what means? The practice of genuine hospitality, the offering of the olive branch of peace, and the humble acceptance of it with gratitude, so that people can heal and become whole again. To disagree yet accept and honor another person is an act of genuine hospitality. To share responsibility instead of pointing the finger of blame is an act of genuine hospitality.

I know it seems impossible. It’s hard to know where to start. But when Sarah laughed at the idea that a woman her age might bear a child and bring new life into the world, the angel asked, “Is anything too wonderful for the Lord?”

Of course, our immediate response to the angel’s question is “No, nothing is too wonderful for the Lord,” because we know that’s what we’re supposed to say, but the response that really matters is the one lived out day to day through genuine hospitality. When the disciples went out with no baggage to weigh them down, people who showed them hospitality were the ones who chose to put their faith in Jesus, and those who refused them hospitality did not accept Jesus.

“Is there anything too wonderful for the Lord?” Let’s pray hard and offer genuine hospitality, and then we can answer with integrity the angel’s question with a resounding and joyous “No.” Amen.