

Fourth Sunday after Pentecost – Proper 8 – Year A – The Rev. Canon Joan Anthony – 6.28.2020
Jeremiah 28:5-9, Psalm 89:1-4,15-18, Romans 6:12-23, Matthew 10:40-42

When I realize that we are at the end of the month of June, half way through this year, I am amazed. It hardly seems possible, and yet as the saying goes, life is what happens when one is making other plans. And certainly we had other plans which did not include the pandemic, masks, or social distancing. A friend recently put it rather succinctly and well. “What a strange life we are living.” That is so true in so many ways.

I have renewed empathy for the twelve disciples that Jesus called to follow him. Fishermen, a tax collector, a physician were the occupations of at least 6 of the 12. We are less sure of the work of the other disciples, but it hardly matters. They left it all to follow this rabbi, this teacher who was calling them to a new way of living. This new way of living must of seemed strange to them. I wonder if some days after they had impulsively left their old life behind they wondered what they had been thinking. They must have questioned their actions, it would only be human to do so.

The twelve were living in a liminal space, a transitional place. Jesus called them, and gathering them together, formed them and then sent them out into the world to transform that world one encounter at a time.

What we read in Matthew’s gospel this morning is the end of their induction as disciples. Think of it as a sort of boot camp. They were moving from what they had always known into a new and unknown future. What Jesus tells them in these few words marks the change from transition to transformation. The twelve were no longer a band of individuals but rather a community.

Almost a year ago, when I came among you to be your interim, a word I heard often was the word transition. It is the word used to describe a period of some impermanence, the word used to describe the state of moving from what was to what will be. Transition is not, or at least should not be a permanent state. By definition to be in transition is to leave something behind in order to achieve something new. The hoped for result of transition is transformation. The change takes time and the danger lies in being suspended between the past which is gone and the future which is not yet realized. The danger is in getting stuck between.

Because much of our common life has been deferred while we await the control of the pandemic, the movement from transition to transformation has been put on hold. We are forced to pause. What we do now brings to mind a rather trite saying but even trite sayings can point to the truth. The saying I have in mind concerns lemons and lemonade. We have been handed a bushel basket of lemons, sour and bitter to the taste. We cannot move forward in the way we had planned.

Yet, like those disciple that Jesus chose, we are if we choose to recognize it, in a liminal space a peculiarly blessed space. It is a place where we have paused in the move toward who we will become as a community and congregation. This pause is a blessing in that it gives us the opportunity to consider choices, to imagine different ways of being community in this place.

My favorite definition of liminal is turning point, or boundary. We are entering into a new chapter in the life of St Augustine’s. We are on the edge and about to step across that invisible line from before, through now to what is to come. And, because we have been forced to pause we have the time to see unexplored possibility. The place where we can focus less on

the end result and more on what we need to prepare ourselves for that next step. For what do we want to be known by our neighbors? We have the chance to recreate ourselves into a place that is more: More is larger than simply friendly to those who chance to come through our doors, more is seeking out those who are in pain or any kind of need. More larger than simply a beautiful place for ourselves more is a place where we share not only our facility but ourselves. We have the chance to recreate St. Augustine's to be more.

Jesus sent his disciples out with final words that defined hospitality and welcome. As is so often the case, what seems to be a new teaching really is the recollection of what had always been. Hospitality and welcome, especially the welcome of the stranger, the alien was a bedrock teaching of Judaism. In Genesis we hear of Abraham and Sarah welcoming 3 strangers who turn out to be angels and who declare God's promise of a son and of many descendants. In Leviticus, the book in which God amplifies his requirements and law we are told to love the alien (the stranger) as ourselves. My favorite a few centuries later is when the writer of the letter to the Hebrews admonishes readers not to neglect showing hospitality to strangers because by doing so some have entertained angels. Simple, basic acts of compassion, mercy, and kindness that we can do are all that God really asks of us. But God does ask that of us.

And so the disciples set out on their first missionary journey. They are no longer in transition. Out of the willingness to go and tell, came transformation, of the disciples themselves and of those they met, one person, one encounter at a time. It is the message of welcome and hospitality, deep welcome and deep hospitality that we are charged with offering to the world. Deep, sincere, even sacrificial welcome and hospitality are what the world sorely needs now. And this same welcome and hospitality are our gifts to give because we are a community of faith.

Deep welcome and hospitality, but what does that mean? It means I think, going outside of the boundaries, crossing the threshold that is before us. Welcome for not only those who are like us and who are hurting, but welcome for the stranger, the person who is not like us and who is also a beloved child of God.

Another word that is often spoken of in church circles, is stewardship. I believe that stewardship, deep real stewardship is tied tightly to hospitality and welcome. That deep tie is the call to share what we have been given. Stewards are the caregivers of the land and the animals, the resources of the one who owns them. God rightfully owns all that we have and so we are called to be stewards, to care for all that we have been given and to use it to exercise compassion, mercy and kindness. God has given us what we have as gift and calls us to share what we have been given as gift as well. We are called to share what we have with those nearest us certainly, but also with the stranger, the alien, the one we do not understand. And we are to treat those strangers, aliens and those we do not understand as equals. So that when we share what we have we do so with brothers and sisters, siblings in the human family.

The disciples brought about amazing change in their world, simply by welcoming the stranger, providing for those they met and sharing what they had. And what they had in abundance was good news, a new way of living that transformed the world. As we move out of transition and into the community that we are called to become our transformation will come about as we live more faithfully, more fully into the challenge of God. The challenge to welcome the stranger, give hospitality to whomever we meet and to choose kindness,

compassion and mercy in our response to the world. Who knows what unexpected angels we may meet.