

Our Dreams Are on the Other Side of Fear
Sunday, September 18, 2022, 10:00 a.m., All Saints Church, Pasadena
The Rev. Susan Russell

It is always an honor to bring a word as a preacher from this pulpit –
to stand where Desmond Tutu, Maya Angelou, George Regas,
Barbara Harris, Michael Curry, Ed Bacon,
and countless others have stood down through the years
is a privilege I always carry with me when
I step into this holy space.

And I carry all those feels with me this morning –
along with a little bit of what I imagine
it might feel like to get the call to come out of the bullpen
to pitch for Kershaw on Opening Day –
on this All Saints Homecoming Sunday 2022.

*If you think you can't-go-home-again
Because the might-haves and
the should-haves and the
didn't-quites
have taken hold,
Then think again.*

And here we are ... home again.

This is the twenty-first year I've heard those words read
from that lectern by the inimitable Anne Peterson
on an All Saints Homecoming Sunday –
and **every single time** I feel a little catch in my throat
and a little sweat in my eyeballs
at the unconditional love and welcome they embody.
At the radical inclusion they preach.
At the core Gospel they proclaim.

And if I've *ever* been tempted in the twenty years I've been on staff
here at All Saints to take them for granted –
well, the changes, chances and challenges of the recent past
have utterly knocked that out of my system.

We have come through so much together
since the last time we gathered for an
everybody back in church, tent on the lawn,
party after the service,
everything but the kitchen sink All Saints Homecoming Sunday back in 2019.

We have weathered a pandemic
which continues to infect and affect our daily lives,
we have survived both a general election and an armed insurrection,
we have provided a safe haven
for siblings experiencing homelessness on our campus
and we have mourned the loss of family, community,
and congregation members who we love but see no more.

We have shared the collective grief and outrage
at the senseless death of George Floyd
and the systemic racism that continues to infect our nation,
marched together in protest at the stripping
of constitutional rights to bodily autonomy
for people who can become pregnant
and wondered together if our country can survive
the ongoing assault on this fragile experiment
we call constitutional democracy –
all under the shadow of the existential climate crisis,
ongoing scourge of gun violence
and the threat of global war in general and Ukraine in specific.

Nevertheless, we persist.
As we gather on this Homecoming 2022
we celebrate the resilience of a community of faith
living out its commitment to courageous justice and radical inclusion
in our generation as those who came before us did in theirs.

For we inherit a legacy of what it is to be home –
not only for each other but for all those who come seeking
the love, justice and compassion so tragically lacking
in so much of our beautiful and broken world.
And we also inherit a legacy of changing and being changed
by those who make All Saints their home
as they join in that work and witness we share
as we continue to move forward into God's future.

In our home, my wife Lori and I have dedicated a wall to family photos.
Maybe you have one of those, too.
Hanging in the center of ours is piece of calligraphy that reads:

*Our family is a circle of strength and love.
With every birth and every union, the circle grows.
Every joy shared adds more love.
Every crisis faced together makes the circle stronger.*

It is a reminder that nothing is static;
that families change and grow as the circle grows;
and that both shared joys and shared challenges
are part of what it means to build a home together –
whether that home is a family home or a church home.

So welcome home!
Whoever you are and wherever you find yourself
on this 18th day of September in the year of our Lord 2022 ...
whether you're here at 132 Euclid
in your favorite pew or choir seat or chancel chair;
out on the quad lawn in our outdoor seating area
or streaming from afar due to the marvels of modern technology;
whether it is your first or twenty-first or forty-first Homecoming Sunday –
or if you just wandered in the door
or clicked on a streaming link
and are wondering what this is all about –

Welcome Home to All Saints Church

as we celebrate one of the great parish feast days of our big fat parish family.

And as the lectionary roulette wheel would have it,
our opening prayer gave us a head start on setting the table for that feast.

Grant us, Loving God, not to be anxious about earthly things, but to love things heavenly; and even now, while we are placed among things that are passing away, to hold fast to those that shall endure ...

Am I the only one who heard Chase/Sally read the words “not be anxious” and thought “Are you kidding? Have you **seen** the news lately?”

No. Not kidding.

Yes – there’s a lot to be anxious about.
I’ve got a whole list of the things and I’ll bet you do, too.

But the good news is the very fact that there’s a prayer in the prayer book
that explicitly calls us **out** of that anxiety
means we’re not the first generation to work our way *through* that anxiety.

The good news is that we have a whole balcony full of cheerleaders
in the host of heaven supporting us

as we grapple with the challenges of our time
as they did with the challenges of theirs ...

The good news is that when the ongoing deluge
of what my father used to call “the news of fresh disasters”
threatens to discourage, exhaust, and immobilize us
we’ve got an app for that.

And that app is not pie in the sky when you die theology ...
It is God is with us here on the ground theology
which is as ancient as these words of the Psalmist:

*Who is like our God? Enthroned so high, you need to stoop to see the sky and the earth! You
raise the poor from the dust and lift the needy from the dust to give them a place at the table
with rulers, with the leaders of your people.*

And it is present in the Gospel appointed for today ...
which is hard to understand and harder to preach –
or at least it was for me until I encountered
my friend and brilliant colleague Miquel Escobar’s new book
“*The Unjust Steward: Wealth, Poverty and the Church Today.*”

Miguel reminds us that throughout the Gospels,
stewards are the foils to Jesus’ scandalous generosity –
and that they are closely linked with domination, exploitation, and injustice:
this morning’s Gospel being a key case in point.

For context, what we hear is a story that takes place
on a vast agricultural estate,
one in which a landowner and his property manager -- the steward –
had pressed workers into forms of debt bondage.
Biblical scholars have noted that the steward here was likely a “first servant”
who had been freed from enslavement
for the purpose of serving as manager and overseer
of the others in bondage to the landowner.

When the landowner fires the steward,
he panics and comes up with a curious plan for survival.
After years of extracting wealth from those he had overseen,
the steward now begins to send his master’s wealth flowing in reverse
by remitting the debts of those indebted to the master.

In the end, the steward gains new life
by releasing his master’s ill-begotten wealth

for the remittance of debts;
and he gains refuge by serving those he'd formerly exploited.
In other words, he chooses which master to serve –
and Jesus concludes the parable
by appearing to praise the actions of the steward
who alleviated debts in an act of economic jubilee –
contrary to the ways of the world
but in alignment with the heavenly values
of love, justice, and compassion.

Also in alignment with these words from a Johnny Cash tune:

*If you're holding heaven, then spread it around
There's hungry hands reaching up here from the ground
Move over and share the high ground where you stood
You're so heavenly minded, you're no earthly good*

To be saved from being so heavenly minded you're no earthly good
liberates us to love things heavenly
in a way that empowers us to *engage* in earthly things –
to be the change we want to see in the world –
to live out God's heavenly dream of love, justice, and compassion
in the spite of the epidemic of hate, judgement, and condemnation
spreading like another kind of viral variant throughout our human family.

Just this week we watched in disbelief
as members of our human family were used as pawns
in a game of partisan politics for exercising their legal right
to seek asylum in our nation.
It's literally enough to give Baby Jesus colic ...
and yet we have the example of the good people
of St. Martha's Episcopal Church on Martha's Vineyard
who opened their arms, hearts, and parish hall –
holding heaven and spreading it around.

Their Gospel witness is but one example
of how we hold onto things heavenly
not as an escape from all that's broken in our world
but as a lifeline to the grace and power
we need to repair that what is broken –
to move over and share the high ground
with those who hunger for hope and home –
to continually widen the circle of strength and love –
to make this world once again

into the dream God dreamed for all
rather than the nightmare it has become for so many.
To make the garden of Eden grow green again.

I watched an interview with Viola Davis this weekend
about her new film “The Woman King” –
which I may or may not have seen
while scrolling through Instagram
procrastinating writing this sermon ... but I digress.

In the interview, Ms. Davis described both the process of making the film
and its core message with these words:

“All your dreams are on the other side of fear.”

All your dreams are on the other side of fear.

And immediately I thought of these words
from biblical scholar Verna Dozier:
words I’ve quoted many times over the last 20 years from this pulpit:

“Doubt is not the opposite of faith.

Fear is.

Fear will not risk that even if I am wrong,

I will trust that if I move today

by the light that is given to me,

knowing it is only finite and partial,

I will know more and different things tomorrow

than I know today,

and I can be open to the new possibility

I cannot even imagine today.”

All Saints Church, all OUR dreams are on the other side of fear.
Possibilities we can’t even imagine are on the other side of fear.
All our dreams of all that we’re called to be as a community of faith,
as a parish family,
as an outward and visible sign of the Body of Christ in the world ...
the work ahead of us building on the legacy behind us ...
the privilege of continuing to imagine All Saints into being ...
the gift of growing back not to what was,
but instead toward what we can become.

On this Homecoming Sunday 2022
let us claim that vision and that promise together.

Let us resolve to be heavenly minded in order to do earthly good.

Let us dare to dream together of the day
when all will be restored;
a day when that kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven
we pray for every time we gather
becomes not just a prayer we pray but a reality we live –
a day captured for me in these words by poet Brother Tobias Haller:

*My beloved in Christ,
I give you this word:
now is the time for the children to grow up,
now is the time for the heirs to inherit.
Nothing will be lost.
All will be restored.
And now is the time.
The whole world is waiting,
the stars hold their breath,
the wild beasts and cattle
regard us with growing impatience,
the birds hover over us, the fish all tread water,
the trees shrug in wonder, or stand limbs akimbo,
and deep in our hearts
God's Spirit is groaning:
"Be reborn, beloved, become what you are
and the world will be free."
The Spirit is crying:
"Look up to the light, your hearts will be whole
and the wound will be healed."
The Spirit is singing:
"My children, my children are home!"*

Amen.