



A Sermon preached in Christ Church, Grosse Pointe, Michigan
by The Reverend Maureen L. Martin, Associate

The 12th Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 17, Year C)
28 August 2022

In the Name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Let mutual love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it. This line from the Letter to the Hebrews tickles the imagination, does it not? I think we should hear an also between these two lines. Continue in mutual loving care of those who you know, but also, do not neglect the stranger in your midst. Then, as now, when encountering others we have choices to make in how we treat them. For the original audience there was the ongoing threat of persecution which we as Christians in the United States do not face, though many do elsewhere in the world. I think what gets in our way sometimes is that we forget who else is present with us in all our doings. We forget to make space for God in our chance encounters, whether because we feel pressed for time, or because we feel afraid and look down on strangers, aka, those not like ourselves.

Before attending seminary I served as a hospital chaplain for about 18 months. One ordinary day as I was making my rounds I entered a patient's room which was being kept very dark and quiet. As my eyes adjusted to the scene I thought that the guy in the bed looked awfully scruffy, and I made some assumptions about how the encounter would go which turned out to be completely unfair.

He told me that he had had a major heart attack, but it wasn't his first. He said to me, "I am not afraid, see, I already died, 30 years ago, and I learned then that death is not to be feared because when I died I met the Lord. I could die today and that would be ok." He went on to say that when he was revived he was a changed man. He gave up every one of his former habits and has never been the same since. Not because he was fearful, they were just gone. He had dedicated the last thirty years to doing everything he could for his little community, up in Big Bay. He grows an enormous garden every summer for the purpose of feeding everyone he can find who needs a meal. If someone needs anything, he does what he can. Handing out produce might not seem like much, but the true gift was the absolute angelic look in his gaze, which I would have missed if I had been in a rush. He is one of those people who if you take the time to really see them you feel right away that they live their life walking a little closer to the Lord than the rest of us.



His wife and grandson were there and she corroborated his tale, saying that after that first heart attack he was completely changed and never went back to his former ways. His grandson looked somewhat embarrassed, or so I thought. So I asked him if his grandpa's story seemed far fetched and he shook his head and got this big grin on his face and said, "No, ma'am, my grandfather is the most generous person I have ever met. There is no one like him."

I stayed with this family for a little while. Honestly, I had nothing to offer, all the blessings of that encounter came from them and the way in which they humbly testified to God's blessings on their lives.

It was easy to imagine this man watching those around him in a very different way from the way the pharisees and lawyers in today's story watch Jesus. They watch Jesus looking for him to slip up. This man watches his neighbors looking for the child whose winter coat is too small, or the young mother who looks pale and thin and rather than passing judgment he makes sure a box of food is on her porch when she goes out in the morning, and maybe a gentle used jacket for her child on another day.

His watchfulness is holy and filled with the power of the Christian imagination which allows us to walk more closely with the Lord and see the world through his eyes. Nothing is so important that we can't take the time to notice our neighbors and act.

This man, having occupied his every day with sacred watchfulness had learned to keep Sabbath pretty much every day of the week. Holiness can happen anywhere. To experience the fullness of Sabbath we set aside time to fully honor, or glorify, God with intentionality. The pharisees and lawyers would not argue against that. Their struggle is not knowing that they are in God's presence when they are in the presence of Christ. They know all the rules, which were intended to create a sense of stillness so that God's presence may be more keenly experienced, but, being human, they have forgotten that the rules are supposed to point beyond themselves to something greater and so the rules now just obscure the magnificence of God in Christ. And so, rather than seeing their walk with Jesus as the kind that Adam enjoyed when walking with God in the cool of the evening, they just see a breaker of rules, someone to be closely watched.

We honor the Sabbath best when we tend to our own tasks in a way that reflects God's tender attentiveness, just as this scruffy guy in the hospital did. We honor the Sabbath when we allow it to bleed into the other 6 days of the week. We honor, and glorify God when we allow God to restore, re- create, and complete us. When we allow God to feed us so that we may go and do likewise.