

# “Your Invitation”

*Valley Presbyterian Church – May 16, 2010*

Seventh Sunday of Easter

John 17:20-26

Ascension Sunday

Revelation 22:14-21

Giving food to the hungry. Opening your door to the stranger. Visiting the sick and the imprisoned. These are the things that, according to Matthew’s Gospel, we can be doing to show our love for Christ through the love of others. But, how about doing laundry; is that really a blessed undertaking?

Our reading opened today with these words: “Blessed are those that wash their robes for they will have the right to the tree of life and may enter the city.” (v. 14) Doing laundry is not glamorous or exciting. It can be mundane and tedious labor – and if we consider it a chore, remember how time and energy consuming it was for generations that preceded us in the days before tumble-dry permanent press and front-loading Maytags.

But doing laundry is necessary. Whether we do it for ourselves or for others, the clothes that get dirty during the course of our work and play require cleaning. And so it is with our lives. We trust in the grace of God that allows us to truly become clean but we know also that there is also work for us to do; work that we can do and – for the good of our communities, our neighbors, our families, and our own souls – work which God relies upon us to get done.

One of the things that I have been witnessing and hearing stories about recently in this community is the gift this congregation seems to have of welcoming the stranger. The opening chapters of Revelation confirm – as John of Patmos, the book’s author writes to seven Christian churches – that each congregation has particular spiritual gifts. This is the same claim made by Diana Butler Bass in her book *Christianity for the Rest of Us*; that every particular church has a particular gift – a “best practice” – to share with each other and the world. Some offer the gift of music and worship, some have a call to justice, others for testimony or hospitality or creativity. Most churches do most of these things but some of them stand out and truly are “best practices.” God is best served, therefore, when a people recognize the gifts they have been given and match it to the greatest needs in the community.

Where are these strangers in our midst, you might be asking? The Old Testament prophets defined a stranger as anyone who was not included; who was not presumed to be a member of an inside circle. Their society was grouped by

clans comprised of extended families. But, others could be adopted into the clan as well. Orphans, widows and even slaves came to be accepted as full family members. Home, food and hospitality were to be shared among them all. This became the foundation of a community that could live, travel, work and worship together. And so, when Christian communities began to form, often entire households – whether blood related or not – would join together as brothers and sisters in the faith.

These days, our family units and our households are generally smaller in number. And yet, we see this same type of adoption taking place in our midst. For all the formal adoptions that take place, it happens even more informally. Welcoming someone into your home, or to your family celebrations; offering yourself to do take them shopping, or help them make medical decisions, or even do their laundry – these are the ways I see the stranger being welcomed within this congregation – time and time again.

The invitation that we repeatedly hear from Christ in these closing verses in Revelation is: “come.” If you want to enter into the city of life, then Jesus opens up the gates for you. If you thirst, then Christ offers you the gift of the water of life.

There is, of course, a great deal of speculation and excitement about what it means when Jesus says: “surely, I am coming soon.” (v. 20) This has created, in every generation since Christ’s ascension, calculations and predictions about what the date will be for Christ’s return. Is there some clue within the pages of Revelation that can tell us what that date will be? Can we look at world events and predict from them the exact date when it will happen? Can we add up the numerical values for each letter of a particular Greek word and use this as a crystal ball to see into the future?

But, time is a funny thing in the Bible. Israel being in the desert for forty years has roughly the same meaning as Jesus being in the wilderness for forty days. Christ’s three – or so – years of ministry is punctuated by three – by their count – days in the tomb. Maybe, it is not so much chronological, linear time that is important as it is the sense that Christ is never far away from us. We are told that Christ is the Alpha and Omega – the beginning and the end. There is next week and then there is next year. Time can, at times, move ever so slowly and at other times it moves so very fast.

Just ask one of our teenagers who is one month away from a driver's license how the days are moving along and she will tell you it is agonizingly slow. And

yet, if you talk to one of their parents, they will be shocked when a "Golden Oldie" comes on the radio and he thought it was a hit song from just a couple years ago.<sup>1</sup>

The promise of Christ almost two thousand years ago was that he would come soon. It was true then and it is true now. Christ is coming soon. He is never far away from us. He is both the Alpha and the Omega. Soon is not a matter of chronological time, but of the "nearness" of time. It was an eternity in terms of mortal time from the promise of the prophets that a Savior would come until Jesus was born. But it was a blink of the eye in spiritual time until Christ was born. How long is too long for God's vision for the redemption of the world to take its course?

In these closing verses of Revelation, Jesus announces his return and provides instructions. Wash your robes clean and, where it is possible, help others to be cleansed as well. We listen to this promise not as passive receivers, but as active participants who are asked to be prepared to enter into this new realm, this new age in God's time. "This is an invitation to ministry, not to sit in a stadium and watch as a spectacle unfolds. It is," as Paul Johnson writes, "a reminder that being a Christian assumes an active disposition and an attitude of grace-filled practice with the community of faith."<sup>2</sup>

The Book of Revelation stands not only at the end of the New Testament but at the end of the biblical story. Its focus is on Jesus as the key to understanding the fulfillment of God's justice. Revelation looks back over the whole biblical story and reminds us that the demands made upon us are by a God who regards every action as significant. Christ is not only global, but also very local and personal. He takes notice of every time that we share a meal, or a kind word, or a hand of compassion – not because he is an accountant and needs to keep good records, but because they contribute to the ultimate fulfillment of the realm he announced. Christ desires to see grace and truth and peace enter into every community, every relationship and every family.

"Amen, come Lord Jesus!" (v. 20) In Christ, God offered to us evidence of the joining of the human and the divine. The truth – in both a human and divine sense – is that when we come to Christ, Christ comes to us. When we act in the name and spirit of Christ – by welcoming the stranger, by feeding the hungry and clothing the naked – we more fully understand how Christ is already with us. As we envision the new realm of Christ – not as a time and a place far away and only beyond this life, but as what is coming into being around us – then we invest ourselves more fully in God's work. Some of that may take place within the walls

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<sup>1</sup> John Jewell, "The Fullness of Time"

<sup>2</sup> Paul Johnson in *Feasting on the Word*, Year C, vol. 2

of this holy house, but even more will occur outside of the church: in our homes, in classrooms, in hospital waiting rooms or at the soccer field. We come to Christ and Christ comes to us. We seek peace in our midst and are granted peace in our souls. We invite others and the invitation comes our way.

“Amen, come Lord Jesus!”