

# Christ the Lord Episcopal Church      Pinole, CA

The fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost: August 29, 2021

“We are the beloved”

Rev. Dr. Lois Williams

Good morning, and I'm glad to be back. Thank you for allowing me time to get away from it all. Special thanks to Rev. Kate and Christine Nadeau for sharing their reflections while I was away.

Today's reading from the Song of Solomon uses the word “beloved.” And we know that the same word, “beloved” was stated from heaven and directed at Jesus at his baptism. Then, Jesus through his life, passion and resurrection has also called those who recognize his calling (that would be all of us), “beloved.”

We then read the Epistle and hear it being addressed to the beloved, “For if any are hearers of the word and not doers, they are like those who look at themselves in a mirror; for they look at themselves and, on going away, immediately forget what they were like.”

For the Jewish community, the rituals of washing one's hands before eating went beyond just the ordinary need to wash their hands before eating. These were rules that connected people, that justified their kinship/friendship/community in a deeper way. These rules identified who they were, no matter who had rulership over them.

The problem however is two-fold, and this applies to us today, which we will talk about in just a bit. Here comes Jesus who, although Jewish, is not exactly tied to traditional ritual keeping as much as those who were in charge of religious matters would have liked him to be.

It is true that the act of washing, the tactile touching of the body, the movement of water, the moment to breathe, can be (and I believe is) the purpose of such a ritual. Not only does hand washing offer bodily safety from bacteria etc., it also serves to ground and mentally prepare oneself for worship, which includes eating from God's bounty.

Is it absolutely necessary? Will God forgive you should you not perform this washing? If you do it incorrectly, but with the right intention, does it still count? Although possibly helpful questions without real answers, I don't believe the ritual to be ultimately essential to having a good relationship with God.

The second problem enters when the ritual takes the place of the spiritual essentials of one's life. Yes, you could wash your hands, do everything right through tradition and worship, but the transactions you make in life need to be done with truth or good intention – clean choices. If after observing everything traditional you continue to make harmful choices, the ritual has lost its meaning and purpose.

We are Episcopalians. Have you wondered what that means to you today? Has who you thought you were as an Episcopalian changed or grown over the last year of this pandemic? Was the Eucharist your tactile moment of gratitude, the time to just breathe and connect with God through His bounty? And now, has your need or longing or even theology about the Eucharist changed since the pandemic has dictated our ability to worship in our past traditional ways? Does that understanding reflect you as one of God's beloved? Or are you struggling to keep connected to God? To feel you are His beloved.

The world is a very strange place these days. Everything we think we know is suddenly being challenged or possibly considered wrong. People are doing crazy things to other people over misguided information. And all too often it is easy to judge someone, when we ourselves continue to be flawed. This is when we need to remember who we are. We are the beloved.

Through all this we are experiencing as a human being, we need to remember who we are - the beloved - and so are you beloved, and also you beloved, and the guy down the street who may be making your crazy is also beloved. This is who we are. This is what the water washing ritual of our Episcopal/Christian identity says: “We are God’s beloved,” and we will respect the dignity of every human being.

Ritual is important, but it can not become the religion. We run into problems when we focus on whatever we deem the reminder of our connection to God to be, whether ritual, reading the same translation of the Bible, praying a certain way, and then judging others who worship differently. This is when we need to remember we are the beloved.

True faith, true spirituality, true religion is grafted into our hearts and spirits; meaning love is within each one of us for us to tap into. When we do tap into our hearts, we can feel beloved, and therefore act from a place of love, compassion and understanding. Or should I say, listen more, say less, let go of anger and know that God is in the midst of things.

From politics, Afghanistan, climate crisis, the pandemic, natural disasters and fires, (and the list goes on) let us remember we are the beloved, and we will get through this together as a community of the beloved caring for each other as best we can. We are represented by ritual, but we are not only ritual. We are bound by a faith because God loved us first, sacrificed for us first, and redeemed us first, so that we may live as the beloved and bring that mercy and compassion back into the world through our various gifts.

Having just come back from traveling, with the pandemic raging, I am reminded that traveling puts me a little out of my comfort zone. Interestingly enough, it reminds me again who I am, a child of God, because when I am out of my comfort zone I find myself talking to God just a little bit more. Praying even while waiting for an Uber.

Interestingly enough, my Uber driver late Saturday night was a devout Muslim. I cannot express to you what an amazing and joyful theological discussion occurred on the hour-long ride from SFO to Vallejo. But in the end, we both acknowledged the very truth of the situation: we are all beloved children of God. What a wonderful way to end a vacation!

You may or may not be baptized, you may or may not take communion, you may in fact have very similar or differing thoughts on what it is like to be a Christian, Episcopalian, or a Spiritual person. What we want to see when we look in the mirror is a compassionate child of God, we want that to be the same face we represent when we go about our business in the world.

I urge you to reflect this week on where your actions are coming from. Do you do what you do because you are afraid to do something different? Does your faith or belief system get challenged with change? Even though there are bad things happening in the world, do you still hold hope? Do you react out of fear, anger or despair?

I am hoping with some thought and reflection you will see the way that you function in the world as one that comes from feeling like a beloved child of God. As a person who is supported by the rituals, but not completely bound to them. I hope that you truly feel that personal relationship with God and with Christ. I hope you feel still part of the beloved community although we are often separated.

But mostly, I hope you remember this week who you are, and take that out into the world and shine. For you truly are God's beloved. Amen