

In the center of our home we have two Ficus trees. It is a small house, and they quite dominate the space. For the last twenty years, one of them has been peripatetic. It would spend about 6 months in our home and then about 6 months in Jill's therapy office, swapping places with another similar tree. Jill's office was quite dark, and even with a grow lamp, the tree would gradually drop its leaves and become more and more bedraggled until it was time to bring it back home to get healthy again. After Jill retired last year, we gave away one tree and now the other tree is permanently home with plenty of light and company and love, and she is flourishing.

Like the prophet's picture of Jerusalem and the people of Israel in the reading from the Hebrew scriptures today, she is a crown of beauty in the hand of the Lord, and a royal diadem in the hand of her God. She is no longer termed Forsaken, and her pot is no more Desolate; but she is called My Delight Is in Her.

The people of Israel had been exiled in Babylon for seventy years. Long enough that most of them no longer remembered their homeland. And now the prophet is almost bursting with joy as he tells them that something new is happening, that they are being given a new name. And this new name, this new beginning, is coming not just because they are returning to their ancestral homes, not because new building is going to happen, not because they will have new leadership, no, but because they are to have a new relationship with God. The old relationship is being transformed: Forsaken is becoming My Delight is in Her and Desolate is becoming Married, because "as the bridegroom rejoices/ over the bride, so shall your God rejoice over you."

This reading made me think, not just of Ficus trees, but of you all here at St. Lukes. For so long you managed without a settled priest. I am sure there were many times when you felt that your name was Forsaken and

your land Desolate. But now a new thing is happening, a new possibility is here – not just because you have a settled priest, a gifted leader and prophet, but because God is offering you a whole new relationship.

Like the Ficus tree, God is inviting you to flourish in the light and love and comfort of a deeper, more intimate relationship. God is inviting you to a whole new way of being.

Over the next few Sundays, the second readings will be from Paul's letter to the Corinthians. This is an important letter as he tries to help the church in Corinth with some of its practical problems and in so doing, teaches us about being the Body of Christ together. Today he talks about the diversity of gifts that are given by the Holy Spirit.

When we accept the invitation that we step into this joyous and astonishing new relationship with God we continue to be individuals. I have been told that the Sufis suggest that we all see a different face of God because each of us relates to God in a different way. The face of God that I see is influenced by the experiences and ideas that I bring to the relationship and the ways that I am open to God moving in my life. Which may be quite different from the way you see God. As God relates to each one of us individually, we experience God's generous love in many different ways.

The catering staff for the wedding in the gospel story saw God's love in the miracle of water turned into wine. And not just 2 and a half buckets, but excellent wine and in huge quantities. The MC and the groom had no idea what had happened. They experienced God's love in the provision of the wine, but they didn't know how it happened. The disciples saw it, saw Jesus reveal his glory and they believed that he was indeed the Messiah. Different people experienced this miracle differently.

God is inviting us into a new relationship, one marked by joy and generous abundance, as the psalmist said, “for with you is the well of life and in your light, we see light.” For some of us there may be a rapid and sudden conversion experience as we enter into this new possibility whereas for others it will be slow, and quietly revealed. What matters is that we open ourselves to the new.

This can be difficult when life is not going the way we want it to. Tomorrow is Martin Luther King Day, and it is also the inauguration of a President whose values seem to be at complete odds with Dr Luther’s. Looking at the darkness of the world, the wars, the over-heating of the planet, the fires, the droughts and the floods it is easy for us to think that God is not paying attention and that I am just being a Pollyanna with all my talk of joy and new relationship.

We only read part of the psalm this morning - just the middle few verses. The psalm itself starts, “I have a message from God in my heart concerning the sinfulness of the wicked.” The joyful words we read are contained within an acknowledgement of the wickedness of the world, of those who “flatter themselves In their own eyes too much to detect or hate their sin.”

That my friends is the reality in which we live. And we are still called to be joyful. Even though there is much darkness, even though we are aging, even though we have sorrows and griefs, we are called into a new and glorious relationship with God who brings light. You will remember the words from the beginning of John’s gospel, “The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.” John 1:5

This is our God. The God who calls us as individuals but also as the Body of Christ in this place to enter into a new relationship, to dare to allow ourselves to be loved by the Beloved. As individuals but also as a faith community. And as we respond to the light, to the love that is

offered to us, so we are in turn given gifts to build up the Body and to minister to the world which longs to be loved.

We become the bearers of the good news of God's generous love, we are the ones who get to take the wine to the guests and to those waiting outside hoping to glimpse the bride and groom. We are both the bride and the wine servers.

Because as the beloved of the Great Lover, as the ones called "My delight is in her" it is our joy and our calling to share the joy of the generosity of the outrageously loving God with every being we meet, every one we touch, every one God sends our way.

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