

A8 - A Sermon of Gratitude and Farewell
Rev. Denise Muller

When I began my ministry at St. Luke's, the very first sermon I preached was on the theme of hospitality. I expressed my gratitude for the warm welcome I had received at St. Luke's as I began serving here. It seems fitting that, as I conclude my time of ministering at St. Luke's, today's gospel reading also focuses on the theme of hospitality and welcome. And once again, I would like to express my gratitude to all of you for the ways in which you've welcomed me into your community these past two years.

When we welcome one another, we are welcoming Christ. That's what Jesus teaches us in today's gospel reading. Each of us is encouraged to extend hospitality to the messenger of Christ. In receiving the message of the Kingdom of God, and the messenger who bears it, a person receives the presence of Christ. And for Matthew, this applies not only to the communities who received the disciples, but also to those of every generation who welcome the presence of Christ.

I thank you, the people of St. Luke's, for the ways you have welcomed me. I'm grateful for everyone who played a role in planning and being a part of my ordination to the priesthood. I've enjoyed collaboratively serving with the Adult Formation Commission, developing a more expansive range of small groups this past year. I'm grateful to Pat Anderson for launching Nos Hablamos, a fun group of people who gather regularly to hone their Spanish-speaking skills in order to build relationships with our Latino neighbors in the Quad Cities community. I'm grateful to everyone who contributed to the Lenten meditation booklet this year, and I was inspired by the creativity of each author. I'm grateful to everyone with whom I've been able to co-labor in the Kingdom of God.

I thank you, the people of St. Luke's, for the ways you reveal the presence of Christ. You've done this in the conversations and activities we've shared during my time here. From visits in the hospital or in your homes, to the occasions when someone met with me at the office to express concern about something I had said in a sermon. I'm grateful for each encounter and conversation that grew and strengthened our relationships as members of the Body of Christ. From small group studies to outreach ministries, from choir members practicing each Wednesday to people bringing food to Coffee Hour each week, from the many ways you serve—whether it's here at the parish or in the broader Quad Cities community— I've seen the presence of Christ in your care for one another and our neighbors beyond St. Luke's.

Each of us has the capacity to both receive and bear the message and presence of Christ as we extend and accept hospitality. As we do this, we open ourselves to discovering the ways in which we are welcoming Christ. God witnesses the ways - both big and small - in which we welcome others. Just like the passage says, "*...whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones...*" Such an apparently simple act matters deeply to God. Providing water to a thirsty person traveling across a hot, dusty desert. Thanking someone who works in a job that ensures people's access to food, health care, and other essentials for life.

One's treatment towards others who have entered into their community will not be forgotten by God. God sees the moments when we welcome as well as the moments when we exclude.

Mutual support and provision is foundational for a community, especially one that gathers in the name of Jesus. And all the more now, as so many people in our community, our country, and our world are groaning to be treated with respect and dignity, followers of Jesus have a critical responsibility to bring hope and love into the world, and a role to play in building and sustaining the beloved community of God, to which everyone belongs.

There's one particular conversation from my time at St. Luke's that continues to speak into my life and vocation. One Sunday after the 8am service in the chapel, I was talking with Robin Borok, the head of the altar guild. I thanked her for her service and for everyone who serves in this important behind the scenes ministry. I'll never forget her response. With a warm countenance and a smile, she said, "It's a labor of love." A labor of love. Her words have stayed with me for over a year now as I reflect on ministry. Whether one is lay or ordained, young or old, a longtime parishioner or a newcomer, the ministry we are each called to is a labor of love. It's not about accolades. It's not about obligation. It's about love.

The word "labor" carries powerful and evocative imagery. It's used to refer to work as well as child birthing. Just like Mary, companioned by Joseph, laboring to birth the Christ child. It was messy with blood and sweat. With tears of both pain and joy. And then there is the miracle of new life that emerges from her womb.

Akin to child birthing, serving in ministry is messy and painful at times. There can be misunderstandings and disagreements. There can be efforts that seem fruitless. There can be resistance to Jesus' message and example of generous, compassionate, loving welcome. And despite all that, the miracle of new life emerges. Hungry people are fed through a food pantry. Widows and widowers are companioned as they grieve the death of a spouse. Cries for justice are heard and unjust systems are dismantled. In these and many other ways, people come to know the love of Christ. In our labor of love, together, we incarnate the mission of St. Luke's... to know Christ and to make Christ known.

Dear people of St. Luke's, thank you for the many ways in which you have welcomed me into your community. May you continue to live into this labor of love to which you are called. May you continue to grow more deeply in knowing Christ and making Christ known. AMEN.