

***“Who May Dwell on Your Holy Hill?”***

Sermon for First Christian Church of Decatur, Georgia

Season of Pentecost, Sunday, August 29, 2021

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**Holy Scriptures: Psalm 15 James 1: 17-27**

***“O Lord, who may abide in your tent?  
Who may dwell on your holy hill?”***

Charlotte and Jim Ivey were pillars of the Church of Jesus Christ.  
Active in the Beacon Class and many church ministries,  
if they were in town and the doors opened,  
they were present and accounted for.

One Sunday evening we hosted a lovely vespers service.  
I opened worship with a word of welcome,  
nothing out of the ordinary for our congregation,  
inviting folks to make themselves at home,  
saying *“You belong to God, and you belong here, in worship.”*

A gentleman in the front pew was visiting for the first time.  
Hearing an invitation to make himself at home,  
he took off his coat, then his sweater, then his shoes.  
He now had everyone’s full, undivided attention.  
He stood up, removed his shirt, and then dropped his trousers.  
Seeing that he was down to his skivvies,  
I stepped forward and gently suggested that that was enough,  
and to please settle in and listen to the message,  
which he happily did.

Afterward Charlotte Ivey approached me, saying,  
*“Maybe when you say,  
‘You belong, make yourself at home,’ you should qualify it!”*

Charlotte Ivey had a delightful wit and wisdom, and we miss her dearly.  
Her humorous comment reflected an unwritten truth.  
Hers is a common statement and sentiment of the Church,  
which, speaking to and for the Church,  
we’ve posited at some point or another.

We – the Church of Jesus Christ – make a show  
of putting out a warm and fuzzy welcome mat,  
then we add an asterisk with a qualifier.

We qualify our welcome.

Maybe because someone might pull  
a St. Francis of Assisi in the sanctuary...

Or strangers take us at our word  
and happily settle in for healing and hope...

Or we suddenly find ourselves rubbing shoulders  
with those we'd rather not...

Too often and in far too many faith communities we witness a qualifying welcome.

*"Behave as we do / Believe as we do / Then you can Belong as we do."*

Behave

Believe

Belong

However Jesus Christ and the Word of God tell a different story, flipping it on its ear:

Belong

Believe

Behave

You Belong to God in Christ – there is room at the Table for you,  
this holy tent is big enough to embrace and enfold and empower one and all,  
regardless of your belief system or worldly behavior.

When you trust that you truly do Belong,  
you may come to Believe

In time and with the grace of God, a sense of Belonging  
and a firm foundation of a positive, holy Belief system  
may serve to change how you Behave.

Let the Church proclaim and practice an unconditional welcome:  
You belong, and you belong here.

And here is the amazing part:

do so, be so, say so and mean it,  
really, truly mean it,

that there is room for all at the Table, in God's tent,  
by the grace of God we will bear witness  
to such hospitality

coming back to the Church of Jesus Christ  
a tenfold, thirtyfold, a hundredfold.

Psalm 15 asks:

***“O Lord, who may abide in your tent?  
Who may dwell on your holy hill?”***

The Epistle of James teaches:

***“You must understand this, my beloved:  
let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger;  
for your anger does not produce God’s righteousness.”***

Both James and the Psalmist deal directly with our practice of the Faith  
in a hurt and hurting world, hungry for wholeness and healing.

The Psalmist deals with this head on.

***“O Lord, who may abide in your tent?  
Who may dwell on your holy hill?”***

The Lord responds (for God always answers prayers!):

<sup>2</sup> *Those who walk blamelessly, and do what is right,  
and speak the truth from their heart;  
          <sup>3</sup> who do not slander with their tongue,  
and do no evil to their friends,  
          nor take up a reproach against their neighbors;  
          <sup>4</sup> in whose eyes the wicked are despised,  
but who honor those who fear the Lord;  
          who stand by their oath even to their hurt;  
          <sup>5</sup> who do not lend money at interest,  
and do not take a bribe against the innocent.  
Those who do these things shall never be moved.*

We are being schooled on the wideness of God’s mercy.

God does not choose who shall dwell or serve or be allowed into the holy tent  
based on gender, race, ethnicity, social status,  
          whomever you choose to love,  
          residential address or documentation,  
          nationality, practice of religion,  
          beauty, height, weight, hair color,  
          or from what school you attended in 3<sup>rd</sup> Grade (PS 121).

A friend recently returned from Louisiana  
          where he said on Saturday nights grown people, adults,  
          stood in front of their homes

and argued aloud with their neighbors  
about high school football games  
that ended two generations ago.

We draw lines in the sand, creating differences we think matter a whole bunch,  
yet in God's eyes these lines and difference we idolize  
matter not at all.

When it comes to deciding who shall dwell in the holy tent of the Lord.

Psalm 15 prayerfully insists that  
what matters is what is on the heart.

*Do you love the Lord with all your heart, with all your soul,  
with all your mind, and with all your strength, and your neighbor as yourself?*

What matters is how we respond to one another.

*"You must understand this, my beloved:  
let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger;  
for your anger does not produce God's righteousness."*

What matters is our integrity, our morality, our character.

*The day we shall be judged  
not by the color of our skin  
but by the content of our character  
is here, and now, in this holy tent of the Lord.*

Open the holy tent wide, tell the world there's room for you and you and you,  
& there's no predicting the power and passion and promise  
which will enter in to grace the sanctuary of God.

***"O Lord, who may abide in your tent?  
Who may dwell on your holy hill?"***

Robert Grimes served his country in the Army Corps of Engineers.

He was sent to VietNam in the 1960s,

and while there was assigned a Vietnamese interpreter named Minh Nguyen.

They overcame their cultural differences to become fast friends,

yoked by a love of engineering and a common Creator.

Robert Grimes completed his tour of duty and returned home to Dallas, Texas.

Meanwhile, Minh Nguyen and his wife and children

fled terrible oppression in VietNam,

escaped from the Khmer Rouge on an overcrowded boat,

and eventually made it to a refugee camp in the Philippines.

There they lived in tents provided by Church World Service.

25 years after Bob had left Viet Nam,  
a Church World Service employee asked Minh Nguyen  
if he knew of anyone who could help them get out:  
“Bob Grimes, Texas,” he said.

Somehow Church World Service tracked him down.  
When Grimes learned of the Nguyen family’s plight,  
he turned to his Disciples congregation for help.  
Was there room in our holy tent for a refugee family?

East Dallas Christian Church was asked to help support the family,  
to provide shelter and hospitality for several months.  
The congregation said yes, we will help the friends of our friend.  
Sometimes we get it right.  
Sometimes we are on the right side of history, role models for mercy.  
Betty and I were in the midst of the conversation on whether and how to welcome them,  
serving there as Associate Pastors.  
So there we were one evening,  
waiting in the Dallas airport for the Nguyen family to arrive,  
Robert Grimes, Betty and I, our senior pastor Michael Mooty,  
and outreach chairpersons Byron and Yvonne Clark  
Robert was the first to open his arms  
and welcome home Minh & his 6-year-old son, Vy (pronounced Vee).  
They were the only two in their family allowed to leave the refugee camp.  
It would be 3 or 4 years later before the whole family was reunited in Texas.

Meanwhile Vy quickly became adopted by the whole church,  
and before you knew it he was talking English  
and had the full run of the building and grounds.  
He was quite a little rascal, impish and smart and quick with a great smile.  
He did well in school, mastered the flute,  
and got a music scholarship to Texas Christian University.  
After TCU he went to the University of Chicago Divinity School  
because he knew he belonged in God’s holy tent,  
that room had been made for him, so he’d make room for others.

Betty and I and our children were blessed to be a small part  
of his magnificent ordination to the Christian ministry,  
held at East Dallas Christian Church in 2009.  
One summer he served as a Disciples Peace Intern  
and keynoted here in Georgia at Camp Christian.  
He went on to work for Church World Service in Berkeley, California  
as an associate field director.  
We celebrated here in worship when we got the news

that Vy Nguyen  
was called by the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)  
to serve as Executive Director of Week of Compassion.

Week of Compassion is the national and international  
relief and emergency resource arm of the Christian Church.  
A child, a family, a community who had been shown mercy and hospitality  
is teaching us about having compassion and being hospitable.  
Room was made at the Table,  
the flaps to God's holy tent were opened wide,  
and we have been richly blessed tenfold, thirtyfold, a hundredfold.

***"O Lord, who may abide in your tent?  
Who may dwell on your holy hill?"***

Today the world looks to us,  
to our nation and local communities, to the Church of Jesus Christ  
to make room at the Table, to open even wider our doors  
to welcome in God's *"huddled masses, yearning to breathe free."*

My brother-in-law Shane's formal title is Colonel Shane Riza (US Air Force Ret.)  
We spoke about the US withdrawal from Afghanistan.  
He observed that there is no nation in the world  
better equipped to do either of the two things that America is doing right now:  
(1) Pivoting on a dime from waging war to offering humanitarian aid.  
Our military flipped from waging war to waging a peaceful campaign to  
extradite thousands and thousands of families and bring them to safety,  
(2) And two, no other nation has our capacity and resources to make room  
in a tent, to make space and to share, as we do.

Shane shared with me a Facebook post from a Lt. Col. serving in Afghanistan.

The Lt. Col. posts that one day he was waging war in Iraq  
and the next he was in Afghanistan,  
placed in charge of making safe space in tents and in an airport hanger  
for 1,000 Afghani men, women and children.  
He and his fellow soldiers are working 12–14-hour shifts.  
Their mission is to protect his new neighbors from the Taliban,  
keep them healthy,  
and help facilitate their transfers to American soil.  
Listen as he tells his story in his own words:

*"It is impressive to see this installation pivot from a combat and combat support role  
to a humanitarian mission."*

*The Life Support functions are a challenge – food, water, & waste.  
In the interest of getting as many out of Afghanistan  
(the right thing to do, I Might Observe),  
the system is being hit with a bow wave.*

*We're packing a massive number of Afghans into the facilities,  
many of which are barely air conditioned –  
outside temp range here is 110 during the day,  
dropping to 90 or so at night*

*(I feel like I sweat out half my body every night –  
not the “deployed weight loss” plan I envisioned).*

*The amount of waste generated (bodily and otherwise) is incredible.  
The smell of 1,000 unwashed and tired Afghans hits you in the face  
when you walk into your facility –  
after about 15 minutes you don't even notice it  
until a particularly strong one hits you.*

*The Afghans.*

*I had not deployed to Afghanistan in my career (only Iraq)  
so I did not have the opportunity to be around them as a people.*

*Those that step up to serve as impromptu interpreters are lifesavers –  
communication is a challenge despite a good bit of them  
speaking at least some form of broken English.*

*I'm struck by how they resolve conflicts.*

*I've seen many arguments/raised voices  
but very few acts of violence against each other.*

*They argue, yell a bit, and then usually one or another man  
will intervene and diffuse the situation.*

*Most have ended up with pats on the shoulder and shaking of hands.*

*I often wonder how we Americans would handle it if in their position.*

*I suspect not as graciously.....*

*Us.*

*In a word – wow.*

*The Airman, Soldiers, Seamen, Marines and our civilian employees  
are giving it their all.*

*I'm continually impressed by the selflessness and sacrifice (time, effort, and sweat)  
of my military brothers and sisters.*

*They do get tired and frustrated with the Afghans*

*(as do I after answering the same SIV question 30 times*

*or I see the same guy come up to me asking the same question every hour  
– some are very persistent).*

*When I hear comments or see the frustration coming out,*

*I usually pull the young Airman or Soldier aside*

*and (gently) ask them to put themselves in the Afghans' position –*

*fleeing from your homeland*

*often with only 1-2 suitcases or the clothes on their backs*

*(not an exaggeration).*

*When I ask them to look at it from this perspective,  
it's almost like a light comes on  
and I see a change in their whole demeanor.  
Very proud and humbled to serve alongside these men and women.*

*Please do not bother posting any political commentaries in the comments –  
they will be deleted as I don't give a damn about who you think is to blame  
(I think they are one of the biggest problems with Facebook anyway –  
as my wife says, Facebook should just be pictures of your kids and vacations.)  
If you do want to help, contact your representative and ask them  
to give any and all assistance the Dept. of Defense and State ask for.”*

***Who shall dwell in thy holy hill, O Lord?***

Do not be afraid; be bold in your response.

All around us and deep within is proof positive  
that we can pivot, change, be transformed and transform the world,  
if and when we put our mind and will and resources to it,  
pivoting from waging war to waging peace.

Together we can pivot  
from qualifying our welcome  
to making room at the Table,  
opening wide the flaps to God's holy tent,  
and then discovering what a delight it is  
to be richly blessed tenfold, thirtyfold, a hundredfold.

*All power be to the Creator, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen!*