

A Sermon by the Reverend Elizabeth Bonforte Gardner  
The Tenth Sunday after Pentecost  
Sunday, August 18, 2019

Jeremiah 23:23-29

Psalm 82

Hebrews 11:29-12:2

Luke 12:49-56

“No one person can make a difference.”

That is what my friend said to me while I was in San Diego a couple of weeks ago.

Annie, our 18 year old, was doing a program at UCLA this summer so when it came time to see her capstone project, I thought I could spend a couple of days with my mom while I was in California.

While I was excited to see my high school buddies, visit my old haunts, and eat real Mexican food...

I was NOT expecting to have to work.

But that is exactly what it felt like when I sat with Jane and listened to her tell me how she felt about the world and her inability to do anything about it.

It caught me off guard, I have to admit.

And I was tempted to stop being her friend and start being her priest.

Because all I really wanted to do was invite her to experience the unconditional love of God.

I wanted her to know that she isn't alone - or helpless.

I wanted her to rejoin a community, an ekklesia, where people gather to be inspired and feel renewed and restored.

I wanted her to be a part of something special where the hands and heart of God go out into the world spreading the good news.

I wanted her to take her place again in our Christian family.

Because while you can't pick your family of origin, you absolutely can pick your family.

That is what is happening today when Max Wang is baptized at the 11:15 service.

Max is choosing to become part of a family - a big one.

It is larger than Christ Church; larger than the Episcopal Church.

Max is choosing to become part of that great cloud of witnesses whose roots go back more than 4000 years...

But just like my family of origin, our Christian family is messy and complicated and dysfunctional.

Which, unlike many families of origin, we as Christians know and accept from the outset.

Our confession says it best -

We don't love God with our whole heart.

We don't love our neighbor as ourselves.

We don't do those things we ought to do;

We do those things we ought not to do.

The truth is, the church is packed with people who don't deserve to be here.

Which is exactly why we come, I think.

We're looking for an authentic experience with others who want the same.

By choosing to be baptized we are choosing to be a part of that experience.

Part of something bigger.

Where WHY we are together is so much more important than HOW.

Let's take the water for baptism, for example...

The How is Baptism is having water, in some way, touch your body in the name of the Trinity.

The How of Baptism in being submersed, immersed, affused or sprinkled with water.

But why...

Well, water was there in the very beginning and God said it was good.

I love how Rachel Held Evans says, "God spoke the language of water."

God turned rivers into blood.

He used it to carry Moses to Pharaoh's daughter.

He had it spring forth from rocks.

He separated it so the Israelites could escape.

Water is also part of our creation as people of God.

It brings babies into the world... even a baby who was also a savior.

And this savior spent time at a well...

Walked on water...

Used water to fish, and teach.

Changed water into wine.

He washed the feet of his disciples with water.

His feet were washed with the water of tears.

This savior was also baptized with it...

Water was used with Jesus as it was for all ancient Jews...

To purify them from sin, and impurity, and sex, and death, and so much more.

This is the same water we use today.

We drink it.

We bathe in it.

We grow things with it.

We play in it.

We surf on it.

But we also pollute it.

And torture with it.

That is the water we use for baptism.

Not because it is holy or special or unique... but in many ways because it is not.

Despite the prayers and the motions with our hands and the silver we use, the water of baptism isn't holy because of what we do or do not do to it.

It is holy because of what God does.

Water is holy because of what God does with and through it.

What God does with and through Max.

And like all of those who went before us and all of those who will come after, we become part of a family where our Father calls us Beloved.

Even if other families call us something else.

Or look to us to be someone else.

Or treat us poorly, unfairly, even cruelly.

Because rather than casting out those who embody and embrace things that make us human - we call them sin - we want them to be a part of our Christian family.

We welcome them, we kneel next to them, we pray with them, and we love them.

But I'm not going to lie... it takes courage to be a part of this family.

And perseverance.

And forgiveness.

And patience.

Because even though we promise to respect the dignity of every human being - sometimes we don't.

A lot like our other families might.

Is it really our fault?

After all, there are fallen Christians who have lost their way.

But they haven't lost the power to be restored.

There are mean Christians.

Their power isn't in their mean words or hypocritical ways.

Their power isn't how they try to make others feel small by trying to make themselves feel big.

No, their power lies in the ability to be transformed.

To renounce their evil ways and turn to Jesus.

You see, their power is our power.

To love God.

To love one another.

To forgive.

And to be forgiven.

Choosing to be a part of this crazy, dysfunctional, wacky family is so powerful... especially in this post-Christian world in which we find ourselves.

That is why I applaud anyone who chooses to be a part of our Christian family.

I know they will not take it for granted.

I feel blessed to be a part of this special day.

And this unique ekklesia - this community of believers.

I feel blessed to know the love of God through Jesus never ends.

Even when we don't deserve it.

Which is why Jesus's words in Luke's gospel are so powerful, "I have a baptism with which to be baptized, and what stress I am under until it is completed!"

There is work to do.

For us all.

God sends each of us into the world, today and everyday,

with strength and courage,

to love and to serve

with gladness and singleness of heart.

Basically to make a difference-one person at a time.