

2023 09 10 – A Two-Edged Sword

Scripture: Psalm 149 (*Voices United*, pg. 873)

During the next four Sundays, as we move towards Thanksgiving, our Stewardship Committee will be expressing our gratitude to those in our church who share their gifts and skills in the ministry of this congregation. We, of course, have a mission statement and within that statement we express what God is calling us to do and to be. This morning Brenda Gruetzner expressed our gratitude to those who live out our call to be a “caring community of faith.”

As Brenda invited particular groups to stand and be recognized, you may have felt that others could or should have been included. And you are correct. It was difficult to divide the groups in our church into specific ministries because so much of the work of the church overlaps. Yes, Outreach is about caring for others, yes, the Creation Station is also a caring ministry and yes we do a lot of caring for others that takes place before worship, in Sunday School, during book studies and even in committee meetings. We could argue that every person in this congregation has a role in living out our call to be a caring community of faith.

Today, on Welcome Back Sunday, we celebrate who we are as a congregation, as a community of faith, as a part of the family of God. We do this with the hymns that we sing, the prayers that we say and even the scriptures that we read. In fact, today’s scripture reading, Psalm 149, begins with the line, “Sing to God a new song: give praise in the assembly of the faithful.” The psalms were,

of course, the hymns of the Hebrew people. These psalms have been chanted or sung for over three thousand years. This particular psalm is a song of praise, like the hymns that we sing at the beginning of our worship services. Psalm 149 is inviting the congregation to rejoice in their Maker, to praise God's name not just with words or singing but also with dancing, with the tambourine and the harp. We sometimes do that too, don't we? But maybe not often enough... maybe we need to bring our tambourines and our shakers and our hips into worship more frequently.

The other thing that is mentioned in the psalm is food: "Let the faithful exult in their glory; let them sing for joy as they feast." I've always thought that that's something we do pretty well in the United Church. With potlucks and fowl suppers, beef dinners and summer picnics we do manage to celebrate both God and each other with food.

Up to this point, this psalm is a wonderful song of praise and thanksgiving. It would be great if the psalm ended there, wouldn't it? We could have just sang, danced, ate and praised God all morning. The problem is that this psalm is not finished there. In fact, the final verse goes like this,

Let God's praise be on their lips,
the two-edged sword in their hands.
to bring the nations to justice,
and call to account the peoples,
to bind their rulers with fetters,
their great ones with bonds of iron,

to execute on them the sentence decreed.

Yikes, what ever happened to being a caring community of faith? What on earth does a two-edged sword have to do with the assembly of the faithful?

Nadia Bolz-Weber, a Lutheran Pastor and celebrated author, once wrote an article based on this particular psalm and she chose the title, *Can we just keep the nice bits?* I'll be honest, I have been known to do this on occasion, to leave out the part of the scripture reading that doesn't really fit with my message, to leave out the parts that have images of conflict and war. But I'm sure that's not what Nadia is suggesting. Even though I wasn't able to find the rest of Nadia's article, I know that her answer to her own question would have been, "No, we can't just keep the nice bits" I know that because I have read other things that Nadia has written and I have heard her talk in person.

Nadia Bolz-Weber is the founding pastor of a congregation called *House for all Sinners and Saints* in Denver, Colorado. She has a very realistic and often irreverent take on life. In one of her books Nadia recalls some of the things that she would say at a gathering of those who are new to her congregation. She writes:

I wanted them to hear me: This community will disappoint them. It's a matter of when, not if. We will let them down or I'll say something stupid and hurt their feelings. I then invite them on this side of their inevitable disappointment to decide if they'll stick around after it happens. If they choose to leave when we don't meet their expectations, they won't get to see how the grace of God can come in and fill the holes left by our

community's failure, and that's just too beautiful and too real to miss.

Welcome to House for All Sinners and Saints. We will disappoint you.

N. Bolz-Weber, *Patrix: The Cranky, Beautiful Faith of a Sinner & Saint* (Nashville, TN: FaithWords, 2013), 54–55.

That's quite the sales pitch isn't it? But what it highlights is God's two-edged sword that we all wield. This paradoxical sword that is both care and pain, both compassion and integrity, mercy and justice, love and honesty. The reality is that being a caring community of faith means acknowledging the imperfections that exist within each one of us and within the organization that is the church and recognizing that this is where God's mercy and grace are found.

The reality is that sometimes we do need to be called to account. We do need to hear the painful truth and even be brought to justice. We do need to live from integrity even if it could hurt someone else's feelings. We've all heard of tough love or being cruel to be kind and a community of faith, like any family will have those moments. Moments where we will need to acknowledge that we didn't get it right. Moments that will require hard conversations and difficult decisions.

One of the ways that we have equipped ourselves to be an imperfect, caring community of faith is through our use and understanding of Holy Manners. Some of you who are new to the congregation, may not be familiar with this term, but it is a way of being together that was implemented in our committees even before I arrived and our Leadership Team just recently agreed that it would continue to be an integral part of their meetings.

In our Policy and Procedures manual we have a section that contains our Statement of Holy Manners. Here's the introduction to the section:

Our holy manners create an environment where we are freed and empowered:

- to take risks
- to think creatively
- to be fully ourselves

knowing that we are valued, loved and upheld in community.

Our policies also include a statement that we have asked each committee to remind themselves of before each meeting. I invite you to read it with me now.

We commit ourselves and will hold each other accountable to:

1. Keep God at the center of everything we do;
2. Respect the worth of each individual;
3. Affirm people's right to hold and express differing opinions, assume best intentions, listen carefully to each other, without interrupting;
4. Strive for equal opportunity and encouragement of participation of all;
5. Affirm the wisdom of silence, pausing from time to time to ponder what others have said and to discern the Spirit's movement;
6. Seek to understand what others are saying;
7. Be open to new ideas;
8. Respect the confidentiality of individual members and their stories;
9. Uphold and honor decisions that have been made;
10. Keep life in perspective by preserving a sense of humour; and
11. Hold one another in prayer.

As our mission statement states, we are called to be a caring community of faith.

As we live out this call, we do have many reasons to celebrate, to give thanks and to praise our Creator. At the same time, let us acknowledge the reality of our humanity and remember that there will always be a need for God's love and grace in our lives and in the life of our community. Let us give thanks to the Holy Mystery whose love is both unconditional and everlasting. May we strive to live

our lives wielding God's two-edged sword and centred in that love.

Amen. May it be so.