

Ps. 84

Hebrews 11:1, 29-31; 12:1-2, 12-13; 13:1-2 By faith; cloud of witnesses; hospitality

Luke 10:25-37 The Law; Good Samaritan

During Lent we tried to collect written memories of Crossroads, thinking that we could make a little book and give everyone copies. But it morphed into a process of oral story-telling, some planned, some brought to mind by the story just told, and so I don't really have much on paper that hasn't been spoken aloud. But Kristi offered a written list of what she called "Crossroads Highlights," that says a lot.

She highlighted the times that we invited our members to think systematically about what gifts they bring to this community, and noted that it is always a good idea to promote one's gifts, to be mindful of them and how they can be shared. She also made a simple list:

Easter Sunrise Service at the Singers  
Retreat at the UCC camp [Pilgrim Heights]  
Bryan's apple pie made in a 13X9 glass casserole dish.  
Stenciling tablecloths at the Singer's building  
Considering the purchase of a brick and mortar building  
Dinner at Ron and Carl's to hear Dr. May's story  
Dutch Oven cooking with Patti  
Pine Ridge Reservation  
The Caterpillar in the Indianola parade.  
Passing out pencils in a parade with the wrong website address!  
Julia's Ukrainian eggs.

I have another memory, also connected with our esteemed moderator, which is the week we collaborated to host Chinese high school exchange students. Several of us hosted, including the Porters, and a lively time was had by all, but especially, apparently, by their student, who went off back to China and came back several years later having graduated from college, and made Indianola one of his destinations so as to see Dan and Kristi again. And of course they turned it into a potluck and the whole church went and heard what he'd been doing since last we met.

The whole exchange student story speaks volumes to me about why this is such fertile ground for personal and community growth. We leapt into hosting, not because we were well prepared, but because there was a need, and we are utterly confident that God will give us exactly what we need to do what must be done. We are also utterly confident that the rest of the congregation will support us; we're never alone in trying to respond to God's call. This church is strong because people honestly look to God for life and meaning, and care about this church, its people, and its ministries. (I learned early on not to worry about having enough money or enough anything else. We never once ran out of food at the Table of Plenty.)

So when I thought about appropriate scripture readings for my last day of being the minister at Crossroads UCC, I thought of Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan. "What must I do?" asks the lawyer, and Jesus refers him to Torah: Love God, love your neighbor. It's not rocket science. There's no need to make it more complicated. It's hard, for sure, as is illustrated by the parable, in which the exemplar of faithfulness turns out to be someone who doesn't have the correct beliefs, doesn't worship correctly, and doesn't even belong to the faith community. It's *hard* to love your neighbor and to love God all the time, but it's not complicated. It's our North Star. It's what we refer to when we're wondering which way to go.

Remember years ago when the owner of a mobile home park in Des Moines abruptly sold it to be demolished, leaving the residents with nowhere to go and no time in which to go there? We were alarmed and angry, but didn't have the tools to do legal or housing work in Des Moines. So we quickly collected \$500 and I went and bought Hy-Vee gift cards to distribute to the residents. Everybody needs groceries. I was told they were relieved to have the help, but also deeply touched that strangers saw them and cared about what was happening to them. It

took no committee meetings, no complex operations—we just thought about loving God and loving neighbor, and did it.

Things have changed. We're all older, people have moved or died, our children have grown up. The social conditions in which we exist have changed; toxic politics and the corrosive effects of money have made our society more cruel and our helping institutions less effective. The long decline of the institutional church has sharpened. But our mandate does not change: love God, love neighbor.

The letter to the Hebrews was also written for people in the midst of a change too big for them to see comprehensively. It's anonymous, written sometime after the first generation of church leaders, so 60-90 CE. The people who had known Jesus personally are gone, Jesus hasn't returned, and many Christians are unsure what to expect or how to live in a time of indefinite expectation. The writer of Hebrews wants them to know that none of this means that God has lost the thread, or that they're drifting aimlessly, dislocated from the promises of the kingdom. He uses several metaphors, which unfortunately have been misused to suggest that Christianity supersedes Judaism and Judaism should be abandoned, but the metaphor we heard today is not that one. This is the metaphor of all our ancestors in faith, now having run their races and gone to their reward, assembled in the seats of the stadium to cheer us on in our race.

I included only a tiny portion of the specific ancestors the author name-checks, for the sake of time, but he gives us a couple pages of predecessors, all of whom have in common with his audience the fact that they did not know what was happening. "Faith is the assurance of things *hoped for*, the conviction of things *not seen*. . . . By faith the people passed through the Red Sea . . . by faith Rahab the prostitute did not perish . . . because she had received Joshua's

spies in peace.

“And what more should I say? For time would fail me to tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets . . .” You get the point. They lived as faithfully as they knew how, never having a clue what their place was in the big cosmic Maypole dance that is the bringing in of the kingdom. Now they’re cheering for us, as we do the exact same thing.

But when the author finishes with his /census/ of all the faithful ancestors, he gets down to specific, concrete instructions for this current community. Practice hospitality. “Let mutual love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.” Boom. Love God, love neighbor, and what that looks like when it’s concrete is caring for one another in the church AND caring for strangers as if they were messengers from God which they probably are.

What we have found out about hospitality, again and again, is that it is its own reward. It keeps us from dragging. When we find ourselves dragging, it’s often when we feel invisible, when we haven’t had visitors for a while, or we haven’t been out mixing it up with people as a congregation. We do drag when we’re ignored/left alone/don’t get visitors. My charge to you is to bear in mind that even when we think nobody knows about us, we are bearing witness and making a difference. We’re making loans to Kiva. We’re equipping each other to lead with kindness out in the community. We’re leaping into the breach for nine Ugandan LGBTQ sisters and brothers because they are our neighbors; we see them and we care.

Nobody knows what’s happening to the church writ large. I’ve been listening to a four-part series by Diana Butler Bass, sort of commenting on her 2012 book *Christianity After*

*Religion* and what's happened since then. It's super-interesting, but the short answer is, we just can't know what the institutional church or the spiritualities of wider society are going to look like even in another ten years, let alone 100 or 200. So my take on this is, I guess we just keep loving God and loving neighbor.

I made this Ordinary Time parament for Crossroads as a visual celebration. It's not at all comprehensive, but it's suggestive of all the ways we bear witness. Our ministry together is capacious and it generates joy. It reveals the kingdom of God. It has nourished *me*.

Thank you thank you thank you for hospitality. For generosity of spirit. For being open to every moment's gift. For being a community that accepts us as we are AND helps each one be our best self. For being a slice of the kingdom. God's richest blessings be upon this community and upon each individual here, previously here, not yet here, connected to us. Thanks be to God.

Let us pray:

O Lord of hosts, happy is everyone who trusts in you. Even not knowing the future, we trust in you and we are happy. You are so good, and when we love you and love our neighbors, we are happy. Bless this church and every soul connected with it, that we may run the race you have set before us, passionately but not too seriously, with lots of pie and books and singing, until our part is completed and we rest in you. Amen.