

Title: What Does Our Best Look Like?
Date: 8/28/2022 (Proper 17, Year C)
Location: St. Alban's Episcopal Church
Service: 10am Holy Eucharist (Hybrid)
Readings: [Jeremiah 2:4-13](#); [Psalm 81:1, 10-16](#); [Hebrews 13:1-8, 15-16](#); [Luke 14:1, 7-14](#)
Video Link: <https://youtu.be/2det4ky6tos?t=1108>

O God, help us always remember to do good
and to share what we have,
for such sacrifices are pleasing to God.
Amen.

Yesterday was a great day. Thank you to everyone who came and watched and prayed. I am grateful and honored y'all have not only called me,
but want to keep me,
here at St. Alban's.
I've said it and I'll keep saying it, I'm really excited to see how this next stage in the life of this parish will unfold. I can't wait to see what all of us will dream and do together as we figure out what it means to follow in the footsteps of Jesus,
here and now.

Since I'm the seventh rector, I wonder if this makes me the Sabbath rector. By that I don't mean that I will be perpetually on vacation. Though maybe sometimes we all need a little reminder of what a healthy relationship with work and rest might look like. That's my plug for Adult Education today and the next couple of weeks after the service.

I was blessed that my mentor and friend, the Rev. Matt Heyd, agreed to preach yesterday.¹ He is at the Church of Heavenly Rest in New York,² and he was my first supervisor back when I was a seminarian.

In his time at Heavenly Rest, he has focused on working with the parish to overhaul their buildings and their programs so that they are a 7-days-a-week church, similar to how the vestry here talks about our call to be 365-day Christians.

Over the years, he and I have had many conversations about leadership and strategic planning and the hopes and challenges facing The Episcopal Church and its parishes. So, I was curious which one he might pick.

Instead, he asked a new question.

He asked, "What does the best of us look like?"

What does the best of us look like?

It's tempting to look to another church, or to another successful non-profit, or perhaps to what St. Alban's was like five or ten years ago, to say, "**That's** what the best look like." But we aren't that church, or that non-profit, and while we may see their best on Facebook and their shiny glossy side on Instagram, every group has their own problems. As for St. Alban's, we are different from what we were like five or ten years ago. There

are new people, and the old, I mean long-time, members who are still here are different, too.

In the face of all those possibilities, Matt said,

“The best of us looks like ALL of us.

It looks like all of us bringing our gifts.”

Then he referenced the words of Bishop Vicentia Kgabe of South Africa. She had the hard task of preaching the opening sermon at the Lambeth Conference, a gathering of 650+ bishops from all over the world.

Not only were they coming from places of serious pain and strife,
they themselves were so divided

that some of them refused to receive Communion
alongside their fellow bishops.

She reminded them that as a church that seeks first God’s kingdom and righteousness, “[We] can, and we have it in us to, heal and serve the world.”³

So, Matt concluded his sermon by proclaiming that our best looks like “all of us bringing our gifts to heal the world.”

It sounds like a pretty tall order, to heal the world. Doesn’t it?

Fortunately, the readings for today

give us some concrete examples of how we might do that.

Drawing on Paul’s letter to the Hebrews, healing the world looks like mutual love.

Mutual love looks like showing hospitality to strangers, for we might be entertaining angels without knowing it.

Mutual love looks like remembering those who are in prison and who are being tortured, as though we ourselves were in prison and are being tortured alongside them.

If Paul were writing today, he might write:

Mutual love looks like remembering those in middle class and working-class families who are paying student loans, as though we ourselves were paying the principal and interest on those loans.

Mutual love looks like remembering those whose reproductive rights are being taken away when they are at their most vulnerable, as though we ourselves are dealing with the physical and emotional fallout of having those kinds of decisions taken away from us.

Mutual love looks like remembering our teacher and librarians, as though we ourselves are underpaid and overworked and having our curriculum and our collection of books constantly challenged.

Healing the world looks like showing mutual love for these folks, and others who might be on our hearts and minds.

Mutual love starts with remembering,
being aware,

and then being in relationship.
By walking alongside them and listening to them,
we can avoid making assumptions
about what **they** need or what **they** should do.

Yes, we are called to love our neighbors as ourselves. AND it is important to love them as they would like to be loved.

Oftentimes, I think about pastoral care as visiting and bringing Communion. Sometimes it looks like picking up dry cleaning or giving someone a ride. If we are not self-aware,
we might do good and share what we have
in a way that they find burdensome,
instead of helpful and healing.

The people we show mutual love to as a parish, and the ways in which we show our love, depends on the gifts all of us bring. Folks at St. Alban's have had a passion for refugees, for early readers in a nearby elementary school, for those who are caregivers for a loved one.

Who else is on your heart and mind?

Drawing on the gospel,
healing the world looks like asking why we do what we do
and, if necessary,
making the proper adjustments.

In the parable, Jesus comes across like Miss Manners.

It's practical advice, similar to a teaching found in Proverbs 25:6-7, "Do not put yourself forward in the king's presence or stand in the place of the great; for it is better to be told, 'Come up here,' than to be put lower in the presence of a noble."

Wait a second, is this why y'all usually leave these front pews vacant? I don't think that's what Jesus meant by this parable.

Back to the parable,

Jesus puts what sounds like practical advice in a different light by extending the parable. He tells his host that he shouldn't invite his neighbors or brothers or relatives to dinner because then they would invite him to dinner and he would be repaid. Instead, he should invite the poor, the crippled the lame, and the blind.

Because they cannot repay him in this life,
he will be blessed

because he will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.

Let's be very clear. Jesus is talking to people who have a habit of putting themselves forward, people who have a hard time being humble. For, as God brings down the powerful from their thrones, God lifts up the lowly. So, if you are already self-effacing, you might hear this as a call to step forward

rather than to lean back even more,
to share **your** opinions and **your** gifts.

Jesus is also talking to people who have a habit of staying in their own circles, who think of mutual love as caring for people they already know and love. He is inviting us to see think about why we share what we have with some but not others.

Is it because we're more comfortable with people we know,
with people we can easily relate to?

Is it because we're afraid that we'll be challenged and questioned
if we listen instead of give direction?

Jesus is also inviting us to look around and see who is missing from our pews, who is missing from God's table, since this is an earthly preview of the heavenly banquet.

As we launch our Stewardship Campaign in the coming month, Jesus might well be reminding us
to invite and share what we have
with those who cannot make a pledge,
those who don't have time or energy to volunteer for church ministries,
those in whom the seed we plant may not take root and grow for many years to come.

If he were telling this parable now, who else would he add to the list?

When we **all** bring our gifts, we help each other ask and answer these questions. We encourage each other to see and build bridges across the distance and divisions we ourselves have a hard time seeing and healing.

I wonder what spiritual gifts you will bring to our common life.
I wonder what kind of mutual love we will practice, and who we will invite to our table, to God's table.

There is so much pain and trauma in the world around us, so much strife and division.
So much need and opportunity for healing.

What will the best of St. Alban's look like?

Let's find out.

Amen.

¹ Matt's sermon <https://youtu.be/AlBugeQ8Om4?t=2325>

² <https://www.heavenlyrest.org/>

³ <https://livingchurch.org/2022/07/31/lambeth-opening-service-marked-by-praise-division/>