

SUNDAY, November 3, 2024 Welcome to the Circle

Psalm 146 Ruth 1:1-18 and Mark 12:28-34

How many of you are up to a challenge in the next few weeks? You probably won't agree to these challenges until and unless you know what they are. But for most of you the challenges of the next few weeks focuses on Faith Challenges! Actions we take and should take on for ourselves as followers, believers and people who believe in Christ's teachings!

Today and on Nov 17 our focus will be on challenges which help or hinder our faith as we strive to live out each day. On the Sunday Nov 10, we will take time to remember veterans and also the sacrifices others have made which enable us to gather freely to worship God in the ways of tradition and honour.

So our focus right now is on how we "welcome others to the circle"; a metaphorical phrase which encompasses who we are as a church family, a community of faith and brothers and sisters in Christ Jesus. Who is in this circle of this community of faith?

Our Psalm reading points us to God who does amazing things always - God is the Maker of Heaven and earth, the sea and all that is therein. God is the one who keeps faith, gives justice and food. But there are others ways in which God leads and we learn as this Psalm reflects on what we are called to do as faithful followers. God sets prisoners free, restores sight to the blind, heals and loves. God cares for strangers, and those in need and most importantly, God reigns. God reigns- God is in control of all things and God still calls us to follow, listen and be faithful to what He has taught us all these generations later!

Our challenge for today is to ask several questions? Who is in the circle of our faith community? Who is welcome to come in? Who is not sure about this? And just who does the welcoming? If any of these questions don't have any clear answers then we as a community of faith need to review who we are.

In the story of Ruth and Naomi, we encounter a family who has faced tragedies. The mother and two daughters-in-law have experienced the deaths of husbands/sons, key family leaders and members to whom these women are dependent upon for their basic necessities of life. These women had no legal status without a husband, and as this story unfolds we learn that the husband and his family had moved from Bethlehem in Judah to Moab in search of food. Then the husband and his two sons each die in time leaving the mother and two daughters in law with uncertain futures. But what is foundational to this story is that Ruth and her daughters in law were left without anything nor a future. So Naomi's recourse was to return to Judah from

where she had come but she told her daughters' in law to stay in Moab. But Ruth said no, she had been welcomed into the family of Naomi and Elimelech and said that she would go with her. "Where you go, I will go, where you lodge I will lodge, your people will be my people and your God my God". Your people will be my people and your God my God.

Therefore one of the questions we need to ask is- who are 'your people' and your God?

Who do you call on when life is difficult, when someone undermines you, when you are hurt by the words of others, when you are grieving and mourning or when you are celebrating! Who are 'your people' and do your people believe and have faith like Naomi and Ruth?

In many communities of faith we find that there are different groups based upon interests and what is shared in common, special experiences, training and expertise are also considered as church families grow and change and evolve. Because we have to remember that churches are living organisms which change almost weekly. The needs of people are as great as the number of people within the community, but how these needs are met make up what is priority in the church.

And it is difficult to discern because what is a priority? Yes we 'need' money to function, but we also share our gifts to help others here in the city and around the world. Yes we need to do upkeep on the buildings, but we also have to prioritize what gets done when according to task and funding. Yes we need to share our learning time together and do what is required, but we also need to be one with each other and one in Christ as we sit around the table and share our joys, sorrows, and concerns for ourselves and for others too

The faith challenge that we focus on today is about the question asked by one of the scribes to Jesus in Mark 12. Which commandment is the first of all? Here O Israel: the Lord our God the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength. Then Jesus added a bonus commandment: You shall love your neighbour as yourself.

The scribe then responds: you are right Teacher! You have truly said that 'he is one and besides him there is no other' and 'to love him all the heart and with all the understanding and with all the strength and to love one's neighbour as oneself this is much more important than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices. Jesus answered him and said, "You are not far from the kingdom of God."

As followers believers of Jesus our faith challenge is not easy-- "This is my commandment-- that you love one another; as I have taught you-- with heart, soul, mind and strength" . Jesus also commands us to love one's neighbour as one self. So how do we put this all in balance? How might we rise to the challenge of faith and love others? How might we know who we are as people of faith and hope? By accepting the challenge of faith and acting as God intends in and through love. By sharing the connections we have-- yes we will disagree; yes we will cry together yes we will laugh and yes we will love one another. All for the betterment of this community of faith, for the people involved and we will love others out of hearing Jesus' commandment to do so.

Faith challenge Part 1-- who do you love? And how are you welcoming those whom you love in the circle of faith; the community of faith we call the church. How does knowing who Jesus is lead and guide us to growing in our understanding of hope and faith? How might you step up to the challenge of faith and love others as you love yourself? Let us remember this as we seek God's guidance and learn more about who we are and what God calls us to be and become. Let us pray:

God of grace and hope be with us we pray as we renew the challenge of faith; as we live out this faith challenge to love others with our hearts, minds, soul and strength. Help us to see you and know you in as we grow in faith and with hope. We ask for this as we share and show love one for another in the name of Jesus. Amen.