

Homily
The Twelfth Sunday After Pentecost
Church of the Ascension, Ottawa
Sunday, August 28th, 2022
The Rev. Victoria Scott

Readings: [JEREMIAH 2:4-13](#); [PSALM 81:1, 10-16](#); [HEBREWS 13:1-8, 15-16](#); [LUKE 14:1, 7-14](#)

You've probably heard the phrase "Let me see if I can pull some strings."

We can influence situations and people with those "strings" – with those connections that are tied to ideas like "I did this for them, now it's time for them to do something for me", or "I'll give this gift, but this is what has to happen with it...there are strings attached...".

The gospel passage we've just heard is full of strings. Strings pulling to seats of honour or away from those seats at the banquet. What does Jesus say about this? He begins by saying "Let the host pull the strings...". These "strings" are what kept the honour system that was so embedded in first century culture going. Strings with honour at one end and shame at the other. Strings that those with honour and power had access to pull on, while others were left dangling, detached, powerless. This was quid pro quo living: "something for something". It was transactional living.

Jesus goes on though, in his words to the host, to speak out against that kind of string pulling. To speak out against transactional living. Jesus says, in this parable, that quid pro quo – something for something – quid pro quo is not Kingdom living. This is living word for us in this passage!

Walter Brueggeman suggests that we take on the character of the God we follow. Scripture tells us again and again that the God we follow is a God of love – that God *is* love. Today's Gospel story gives us a vivid example of God's character. When Jesus says to the host not to invite relatives and rich friends to the banquet, but instead to invite those who cannot return the invitation – repay the favour, and function in a "something for something" or "this for that" way – he is giving us a glimpse of the character of God.

Inviting those who are not able to reciprocate – not able to give anything in return – this cuts the strings of the honour system. It cuts the strings of transactional living and frees us from the constant “counting” – the measuring, qualifying and quantifying based on outside measures – that is part of that perspective and way of life. It lets us know that God is not counting and measuring *something for something* when relating to us.

Our society today is still full of those strings, but Jesus invites us to see that strings that measure, judge, control and manipulate are not what connect us to God and lead us to fullest living. Jesus invites us to see that God’s expectations are not in exchange for God’s love, but only so that we might more fully live the lives God so desires for us and envisions for us.

There *are* connections everywhere. There is a great web of connecting all people, connecting all of creation. These are not strings of control, of “something for something” that connect us all. It’s not a web of judgement and control.

This great web is one of *heartstrings*. Sometimes “heartstrings” is used facetiously. Sometimes it’s used in reference to pity or sadness, but I invite you to think of heartstrings as strings of compassion. As strings that reverberate with love and care.

Jesus invites us to feel the tug of our heartstrings and to live our lives in response to that pull with our actions, and attitudes and perspectives – in our relationships: with God, with one another, and with our world.

Heartstrings aren’t just about connections in this earthly realm. Our heartstrings are our connection to God. Those heartstrings tether us to God.

Those heartstrings are long enough that we sometimes drift away from God. Sometimes, in this life, the pull of those other strings of control, and manipulation is strong. The tug of ego, of individualism, of self-centeredness tugs us every which way, taking us to places where we are not our best selves. God is always there, though, on the other end of those heartstrings. Waiting, loving us, inviting us to tune into that love.

The passage we heard from Jeremiah is about that drifting. It’s about being pulled by the strings that convince us that we can take care of ourselves, that we can “go it alone”. These words are hard to hear, but they are an important reminder to

disentangle ourselves from the strings that pull us away from God and from each other, and to tune into our heartstrings instead...

I mentioned theologian and author Bruce Epperly to you in the newsletter this week, referring to his suggestion that we are “living a holy adventure”. Bruce Epperly also says that God wants “partners not puppets”. God wants companions and co-creators. This is a heartstring perspective. This is about heartstring connections of love and care and compassion reverberating and energizing us as we participate in life *with* God and one another and our world.

Our reading from Hebrews is all about the heartstrings. We hear “Let mutual love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.” (Hebrews 13:1) I love these verses. In “The Message” Eugene Peterson translates this mutual love as “held together by love”. These are the heartstrings! Can you think of an encounter that left you thinking that you’d entertained an angel without knowing it in the moment? An experience that was Spirit-filled? These are heartstring moments...

Actions of love, kindness, compassion, and hospitality: these make visible the great web of love and compassion – those heartstrings! – woven throughout all of creation connecting everyone and everything. Acts of solidarity are another way that we make that web of compassion – those heartstrings – visible.

In his book “A Nazareth Manifesto”, Sam Wells says this about solidarity:

“Solidarity means every attempt to make concrete the intangible links between people, links based on love and trust and dignity and understanding and respect....Solidarity is the word “with” turned into practical action, the word “understanding” turned into genuine support, the word “identification” turned into courageous acts of witness.” (A Nazareth Manifesto, 78)

Strings of fear, harsh judgement, control, and exclusion have harmed, and continue to harm, our LGBTQ2+ sisters, brothers, and siblings in Christ. I give thanks for the Ottawa Pride Parade. I give thanks that our Diocese and Ascension participate in this event. I give thanks for the opportunity it creates to cut those strings of judgement and exclusion, and the space it creates to make those heartstrings – connecting all of us – visible. I give thanks for the opportunity it creates for me to act in solidarity with this beloved community.

I invite you to think about the strings in your lives. Think about the strings that are attached to your perspective, to your attitude, to your actions. Are there strings of control, of manipulation, or of judgement tangling up your life? Are strings of fear pulling you away from God, and away from others?

Whenever we gather in community (whether it's on Zoom, or in-person) we have an opportunity to think about how we can untangle those strings of control, or manipulation or harsh judgement in our lives. We have an opportunity to think about which strings are guiding our attitudes and actions.

We also have an opportunity to feel the tug of our heartstrings connecting us to God, and to each other and to our world. Close your eyes, and feel that pull of love and care, and compassion here, now. Keep that feeling with you when you leave this place. Pause throughout the week and ask yourself which strings are tugging at you. May the strings of our hearts be the ones that pull, and guide us, today, and always. In Jesus name. Amen.