

Sermon for the Fifteenth Sunday After Pentecost

The Rev. Brooks Cato

What a week to come home. Lord have mercy! I should begin this morning by naming an elephant that you may not realize is in the room. I'm not going to preach on these readings this morning. We just heard 'em. They have a lot to say. It all makes sense, especially if you squint, but beyond that, if you want to hear more about these particular tidbits, well, you'll just have to come back the next time they come around.

Now, I know you're all just aching to sit down in front of my kodak carousel for a slideshow of pictures from our family bucket list trip. Y'all'd love to plop down in the living room with our best photos and some blurry ones of thumbs inadvertently blocking out the frame - you'd love to see all that projected onto the emptiest wall of the rectory, with only one or two wall hangings distorting the projected shapes of fjords and icebergs and icelandic horses with magnificent hair. And if you're lucky, to round out the night, we might even serve up a tomato aspic. But we can't always get what we want.

Today, I've got some bragging to do. No, that's not entirely right. Today, I've got some witnessing to do. Because in the past month, I have been witness to so many acts of service and kindness that I just gotta do what witnesses gotta do. I gotta tell ya about 'em. The Gospel I'm preaching on today is not this particular Gospel Reading. It's the Gospel writ large, the Good News of Jesus Christ, and that Good News as I've been seeing it lately is a mighty beautiful thing.

Ok, so yes, Iceland was gorgeous. I have seen some wonderful things in my day in many a corner of the world, but I've never seen a place that so regularly invites imagination. Driving along the Ring Road, we saw blue skies, green mountains, sundogs up ahead, and just off to the left, a single mountain blackened by shadow and lava fields. My brain went to dragons or trolls or some evil wizard hiding the precipice amongst the clouds. And that sort of thing happened all the time. The Northern Lights forced me to recalibrate my vocabulary; I thought I'd encountered phenomenal things before. Now I am certain I know what the word "phenomenal" means. But it wasn't just the place. We stopped at a gas station for hot dogs (yes, this was still in Iceland), and the folks behind the counter were so taken with our group that they gave the kids free ice cream and showed me how to mix malt soda and orange soda to make a drink normally reserved for Christmastime. An elderly man danced with my 3-year old niece while we waited for our campsite laundry to dry. Even the sea brought gifts of whales and seals, ice and steam, food and calm.

Lest you think this is just a travelog, before we left town, I was working to prepare the way for the Ukrainian refugee family, and part of my task was to talk to business owners in town. Now, I have talked to a lot of business people in my time on a lot of topics, and political divides usually come into play. Not this time. Nearly every place I entered offered something. One of the few that said no to giving a gift card said no, not because they didn't want to help but because they weren't sure they'd be able to fulfill the promise that comes with a card. Times are hard for everyone. But before I could leave, the owner raised an eyebrow and asked, "would I be able to offer one of them a job?" At Main Moon, the boy at the counter was excited to hear what we were doing with the family, but he didn't have the authority to fill out a gift card. So he called his dad up to the register. But dad couldn't find the gift cards to fill out. So they called mom up, and the three of them nearly tore that building to the ground before offering more than common generosity should produce. When I talked with the folks at Royal India Grill, they said they'd just stopped doing gift cards. I told 'em not to worry, but before I could say much else, the waiter asked me to hold on while he rushed into the kitchen. He came back a couple of minutes later and handed me a fistful of cash and said, "I just asked everyone in the back to pitch in, and this is what we got."

The Colgate Inn, the Bookstore, Oliveri's, FoJo's, the list goes on. Literally, there is a list -- a spreadsheet documenting Hamilton's generosity -- and it is long. And it is filled with moments of grace. The Eatery filled their new fridge with meals, complete with a simple message that reads "Glory to Ukraine" on the plastic lid of a takeout salad. They even sent some fresh-cut flowers to brighten up the house for the family's arrival. Their flight got into Syracuse at 11:59 PM last night, and some generous souls picked them up to bring them here. And what they found when they arrived was a porch framed by mums leading to a house filled with gifts, furniture, artwork, more sunflowers than I've ever seen in my life, and warm beds with long blankets. And more important than anything, what they found when they arrived was Hamilton at its best.

Yesterday, much of Hamilton mourned the loss of one of its best up at Colgate, and in that funeral, I witnessed yet another kind of beauty. The beauty of a life lived so generously, so selflessly, and so lovingly as to inspire such an outpouring of sweetness that the family actually asked people to redirect the love to folks that need it more. It's in that spirit that I lean away from our texts this morning and into the beauty I just keep getting to see. Not everyone living out the beauty I'm telling you about would say it's rooted in faith. That's fine, I have no bones with that. But as a person that is rooted in faith, what I have seen people doing, what I have seen with family and strangers, what I've seen far afield and right at home is an immense amount of patience and kindness and grace and mercy and love and hope and care, the likes of which I'm only accustomed to hearing about in scripture or the lives of the saints. It's almost too much beauty for me to bear. Which I suppose is why I'm telling y'all, so you can bear this burden of beauty with me.

What I've told you, unless you were there, it's secondhand witness. But you witness beauty, too. You see patience and kindness and grace and mercy and love and hope and care on your own. Maybe you see God in those things, or maybe you see the best of what we people have to offer. Or maybe you're just glad to see some good news for a change. However you see it, and I hope you do see it, I ask you one thing. As you witness, remember that the witness's job doesn't end with seeing. Being a witness begins with seeing, and it begs you to tell what you've seen. And that's what Good News is all about. It's good to see and to hear. But it is a delight to tell. So go on, pat yourself on the back, Hamilton. You have some mighty good witnesses in this room. Thank God for that news. Now go tell it.