

A Place for Us All!

When you're a Jet, you're a Jet all the way, from your first cigarette to your last dying day. When you're a Jet, let them do what they can. You've got brothers around. You're a family man. The Jets are in gear. Our cylinders are clicking. You're home with your own. When company's expected, you're well-protected.

A little over thirty-five years ago I took a break from what was then a pretty busy part-time job at Lauer's Food Market to learn those words. For the most part I still remember them all these years later. Prior to starting to work quite a bit in the summer of my fifteenth year, I had participated in all of my school's plays and musicals. I decided to get back in on the action one final time when my senior year came round. And so, I greatly reduced my hours at work to learn the words I just sang for you. If you didn't recognize them, they come straight out of the Broadway musical "West Side Story" Thanks to our opening song "Somewhere," we've already heard some of the other great music to be found in that production. There's much more of it for those who wish to explore further and it's all fitting for this fifth weekend in Lent.

To refresh your memory, if it needs refreshing, "West Side Story" is a musical about outsiders and insiders. Can people from different straits and with different stories come together and find a good and meaningful place for everybody? Or shall it continue to be the haves and the have nots; the accepted and the unaccepted; the entitled and the unentitled? It's no wonder that such a production was written by two Jews—Leonard Bernstein and Stephen Sondheim. Throughout its history, Israel has often struggled to find a place at the center of society; a place to fit in; a place truly to call home. And of course this has never been Israel's quest alone. It's long been a very human quest. Talk of ugly ducklings and black sheep, talk of America First and Brexit, talk of MeToo and Black Lives Matter, talk of fathers and sons and of the Hatfields and the McCoys—it's all talk which reveals each of us wants a piece of the pie and a slice of the apple and sometimes don't feel as if we get a fair shake. It's no different today than it was close to sixty-fifty years ago when West Side Story was first released. In fact, one could very easily argue that feelings of exclusion are the engine that's driving the bus all over the world today. Maybe our country and others will figure out how to overcome the division and the resentment that run so rampant these days. Then again maybe they won't. What's certain is that Jesus has made a place for all of us.

A couple chapters after today's reading from John Jesus says this quite explicitly. With the Last Supper in full swing and the fourteenth chapter of John's gospel beginning, Jesus says very matter of factly, "In my Father's house there are many rooms and I go to prepare a place for you." It's a prime indication that in the Kingdom of God there shall be a piece of the pie and a slice of the apple for all. And the language of all is certainly prominent in today's collection of biblical readings. Two chapters prior to the verses about Jesus making a place for us all in his Father's house, today's reading from John finds our Lord and Savior saying, "When I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw all people to myself." There it is again. In the Kingdom of God, there shall be a place for all; a piece of the pie and a slice of the apple for all interested parties. And speaking of interested parties, our reading from Hebrews says that Jesus is the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him. There it is yet again. The Kingdom of God isn't like the kingdoms of this world. Everyone hits paydirt. There's more than enough pie and apple to go around. Everyone who aspires to be in, shall be in. In the Kingdom, we'll be able to have our cake and eat it too because there shall be no shortage of cake with which to contend. It all sounds

too good to be true. How can we come to lessen the suspicion that the Church has been sold a bill of goods? How can we come to trust more and more that there are green pastures and still waters for all in the Kingdom of God?

“Look to the cross! Look to the cross! Look to the cross,” says our reading from John. In today’s reading from John we’re exposed on multiple occasions to the evangelist’s unique description of the cross as the glorification of God. To be sure, the empty tomb is responsible for this language of glorification as well. But let’s be clear. For John there shall be no glorification of God without the blood and the suffering and the shame of the cross. The blood, suffering, and shame elevate God over all others who aspire to power and authority. The blood and the suffering and the shame of the cross glorify God more than any public relations campaign could ever glorify any company or candidate. And it has everything to do with God making a place for us; with God reserving a piece of the pie and a slice of the apple for all.

Think about it by what of negative comparison! If Wall Street has one dollar, who’s going to get it—Wall Street or you? The answer is Wall Street. If you’re not a fortunate son, who’s going to be sent off to war—you or the senator’s son? The answer is you. If you’re a pauper, who lives in the palace—you or the prince? The answer is the prince. But not God. The cross elevates God high above all other aspirants to power and authority, the cross glorifies all others gods and governments out of business, because the cross finds God leading the charge rather than remaining in the rear. In and through the cross, God doesn’t stay above the fray. God gets down and dirty for all, even if it means emptying God’s pockets and abandoning every divine privilege, honor, and prerogative we can imagine. How can we heighten the sense, deepen the trust and belief, that there is a place for us all in the Kingdom of God? Look to the cross! Look to the cross! Look to the cross! In and through the cross, God has forever made it clear that our place in the Kingdom of God is more important to him than his own. As Jesus also says during John’s version of the Last Supper, “No one has greater love than to lay down their life for their friends.”

And yet, as we look to the cross for reassurance about our place in God’s plan, the hope is that we’ll also be able to look to one another for the same reassurance. One of the many members of this congregation I have come to respect and admire has more than once said to me, “It’s not going to be all kum ba yah.” They’re right. As long as the Church remains a hospital for sinners, and that will be until Christ returns to judge the living and the dead, we’re going to doubt, and sometimes simply not believe, that there’s a place for all of us. When this happens, and it will happen, tensions and disagreements and hard feelings will follow. Again, on this side of the hereafter, it’s never going to be all kum ba yah. But it shall be precisely when we’ve proven ourselves to be lifelong sinners all over again that we shall have a profound opportunity to reassure one another that there is a place for all of us in the Kingdom of God.

In today’s reading from Jeremiah, it’s promised that God shall one day eliminate all the go-betweens that can and have confused the knowledge of God; instead coming to us directly and writing “I love you” and “I know what’s best for you” straight on to our hearts. In and through the gift of the Holy Spirit, this has now happened. Though we can for a time act as if it’s not true, the Holy Spirit has now taught our hearts how to forgive; how to love one another as Christ first loved us. And in a hospital for sinners like this one, if the cross doesn’t reassure us that there’s a place for us all in the Kingdom of God, then our love for one another, our willingness to forgive one another when there’s evidence of repentance, surely will. During this season of Lent, and well after it too, may the Holy Spirit equip and empower us to be more like the Lord our God who is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love.

Like the cross, it's a witness that shall proclaim there's a place for us all in the Kingdom of God.
Amen!