

**The Church of the Holy Trinity, Rittenhouse Square
August 5, 2007 (10th Sunday after Pentecost)
By the Reverend Meg Buerkel
“Love Letter”**

Letters stuffed in a shoebox... Pieces of paper folded into neat rectangles, little tabs tucked inside. White notebook paper with blue lines. Smudgy pencil writing, decorated with hearts and doodles. From Ardy, Tyler, Lyle, David, and other guys I dated in middle and high school. Yes, I admit it; I kept those letters for years. They were amusing to reread – I remember one – from Tyler – that included a list of all the different kinds of dairy cows there are (Holstein, Guernsey, Jersey, Brown Swiss)... I have no idea why he was writing about cows. Remember teenage love letters? Not terribly scintillating or seductive – except perhaps that cow one... it seems that years later, I’ve graduated to the email love letter – typed pixels on my screen, probably saved in some long-forgotten email account, too impersonal to actually bother printing.... Now it seems even less personal, with text messaging from one number to another. Real love letters seem to be a lost art.

But not so in Holy Scripture, here they abound. They tantalize, they comfort, they chastise, they seduce. Just look at today’s first lesson – it reads like a love letter, a love letter from God. A love letter from God to us. A love letter in which God is like a mother, tucking a note into our lunch bag. “When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt, I called my son... I taught Ephraim to walk, I took them up in my arms... I led them with cords of human kindness, with bands of love...” A love letter from God to us, her rebellious child. A beloved child, who strays, yet is still loved.

God’s love letter is about gathering – gathering Israel from Egypt and gathering them yet again from Assyria. Gathering, to make a whole – and holy – people – God’s people, God’s gathering. The psalmist writes: “God gathered them out of the lands; from the east and from the west, from the north and from the south...God put their feet on a straight path to go to a city where they might dwell.”

God’s gathering in love – from love – for love – of us stands in stark contrast to our more human gathering, as portrayed in Luke’s Gospel. The rich man laid up his crops for himself – he gathered and gathered and gathered for his own good. For his own safety. For his own comfort. And then, he sits back and says, ‘Soul... relax,

eat, drink, be merry!’ or, as Clarence Jones writes, he says, ‘Self: Recline, dine, wine, and shine!’[i] This man gathered with greed his grain and his goods. When we fall short of the glory of God, we can become like this man: we greedily accumulate possessions, we plan for our futures, we overspend and stretch our credit, we box ourselves in and weigh ourselves down with our things.

And, in the parable, God speaks... “You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you.” The Greek for God’s line here is difficult to translate; the literal translation is more like, “Fool! In this night your soul they demand from you.” They – the possessions can, do, and will possess our soul if we are not careful.

My freshmen roommate in college introduced me to a band called Nine Inch Nails – probably not something you think of a priest listening to, but their song ‘Head like a Hole,’ has these insightful lyrics, and could really be part of Luke’s parable:

“God–moneys not looking for the cure.

God–moneys not concerned with the sick among the pure.

God–money lets go dancing on the backs of the bruised.

God–moneys not one to choose.”

In their music, Nine Inch Nails laments our placement of money as the Almighty, as our god, as the pinnacle of power. This keeps us – as humans – isolated and fragmented from the rest of humanity. This keeps us – as Christians – from obeying the most important commandment: Love God and Love Neighbor. When money / possessions are our ruler, we will and do ‘dance on the backs of the bruised.’

Our human gathering seems to focus on my safety, my comfort, my joy –there is nothing wrong with wanting to feel safe, comfortable, joyful – but when my gathering comes at a cost to other people in this world – to my neighbors – I should become concerned. Our greedy gathering can – and often does – fracture the human family. We don’t have to look much further than the newspaper headlines to find evidence of this.

When we compare God's gathering to our own gathering, we see that we leave fragments behind. We pollute the environment. We discard the unwanted. We forget the lonely. We use the poor. We 'dance on the backs of the bruised.' Flora Wuellner writes "The supreme discernment of the health of any group, any relationship, any form of spirituality (is what happens to the fragments). The instant we see throw-away people; unheard, ignored needs: violation of essential personhood, we know this group, this political or ecclesiastical system, this family, this church, this teaching is NOT of Christ's spirit." [ii]

Paul instructs the Colossians (and us) to "seek the things that are above." Don't let your focus be on acquiring, getting, gathering goods... rather, let your focus be on God. God's gathering. God's gathering is one where diversity is unified, where brokenness is healed, where fragments are made whole.

Do you remember the stories of Jesus feeding the thousands? After the meal is over and done with, do you remember what Jesus instructs the disciples to do? Gather up the fragments. Pick up the pieces. Collect the crumbs. Leave nothing behind.

God gathers us all together – God calls us out of our Egypts and out of our Assyrias – God gathers all our fragments and our pieces. God gathers every one of us. Nobody is left behind. Nobody is forgotten. Nobody is alone.

God has gathered us together on this day. And in just a few moments, we will sing (say) the Fraction Anthem after Richard breaks the Communion bread. We will come forward to receive a fragment of a whole. Our bodies will further fragment the bread. And then, the miracle is that that bread becomes a part of us. And we become a part of that Bread, that Body broken for us. We become the ones to gather up the crumbs. We become the ones who share this good news with the world around. We give bread and we give ourselves. We become Holy Eucharist, Christ's Body. In so doing, may we then ever become God's love letter to the world. Amen.

[i] Clarence Jones, as quoted in sermon by the Rev. Dr. J. Barry Vaughn, in *Worship that Works*, ECUSA, 2007.

[ii] Flora Slosson Wuellner, "A Broken Piece of Barley Bread,"
Weavings Nov/Dec 2004

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