



ST BART'S

A Sermon by
The Reverend Susan Anderson-Smith,
Associate Rector for Justice & Reconciliation

Mattering

*Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, June 28, 2020
The Fourth Sunday after Pentecost
Based on Matthew 10:40-42*

God of the long reach, giving space for creation to manifest your love: make us apostles of an open table, of a sense of welcome, of a public witness which challenges and overcomes everything that diminishes abundant life. Amen.

Happy Pride! On the night of June 27, 1969, and into the early morning of June 28, the Stonewall Inn witnessed a violent police raid on LGBTQ+ people, a majority of whom was Black or brown. These events led to six days of protests on Christopher Street—what we now know as the Stonewall Uprising. Some of the leading figures fighting for justice were Black and brown transgender and gender nonconforming women, most famously Marsha P. Johnson, Sylvia Rivera, and Storme DeLaverie, performers and activists. Transgender and gender nonconforming people of color raised their voices not only in the name of equality, but also in defense of their own right to live. Today, transgender lives, especially Black and brown lives, remain under constant threat.

Make no mistake about the intersectionality of the LGBTQ+ Movement and Black Lives Matter. We know something about the work of resisting police brutality and violence. We know something about having a breakthrough moment when we refused to accept humiliation and fear as the price of living fully, freely, and authentically. We understand what it means to rise up and push back against a culture that tells us we are less than, that our lives don't matter. This is why we must speak out when hate, violence, and systemic racism claim—too often with impunity—Black Lives.

This is why we are all called to the ministry of “mattering.” The Rt. Rev. Robert Wright, Bishop of Atlanta, said recently in a webinar that when we do not see and appreciate and respond to the divine image in all people, we have “un-mattered” certain people and privileged others. For Bishop Wright, this amounts to being an affront to God, to frustrating God's dream for humanity, to practicing idolatry, and, in the long run, to the “un-mattering” of God. He went on to suggest that mattering is the work of justice, and justice is love resisting and overthrowing all that is not love. This kind of mattering love is not sentimental; it is active and resolute, and settles for nothing less than demonstrable social change.

Today's reading is the end of what has been an entire chapter of instructions from Jesus to his followers in the Gospel of Matthew. In these three short verses, we discover that Jesus' instruction for the disciples and the church in every generation is this: All who come into your presence are to be welcomed. Everyone you encounter, you are to see and to recognize as bearers of wisdom and richness, made in God's own image and deserving of God's own welcome. You embody God's love that works to realize the justice proclaimed by the prophets, upheld by the righteous, and cried out for by the children in need of a cup of cold water.

Jesus was preparing them to be missionaries—to go out into a sometimes-hostile world and make real his love and justice in every encounter. Jesus taught the practice of encounter: the practice of loving one’s neighbor, the practice of coming face-to-face with another human being and seeing the very face of God. He looked into the eyes of, and saw the humanity of, a Roman Centurion, a Samaritan woman, lepers, tax collectors, children, his own disciples. No one was dismissed from his circle of concern. No one remained invisible to him.

In the Bible, the practice of encounter shows up most often as the practice of hospitality. In the Hellenistic world of first-century Palestine, the peculiar way that early Christians practiced hospitality set them apart from the surrounding culture. The dominant culture prized hospitality, but understood it to be discriminate. It was directed toward family, friends and influential social contacts, a self-serving “by invitation only” proposition. Christian hospitality, on the other hand, was notoriously indiscriminate. Not only were all included, but widows, orphans, people who had been cast out and estranged were its primary recipients. Christian hospitality went in search of all who were despised, discounted, dismissed. Christian hospitality cut against the grain of the dominant culture and boldly courted controversy in the ancient world.

Hospitality has lost its edge in the contemporary church. We no longer see it as the weighty moral issue that it is; it is now more about manners than morals, more about being nice than honest, more about comfort than a passion for justice. All too often, the provocative hospitality that marked the mission and ministry of the early church has gone the way of the dominant culture.

The way of today’s dominant culture has largely been the way of indifference, an attitude that is at once emblematic of white, cisgendered, heteronormative privilege and permission for the mattering of some lives over other lives. “If you are neutral in situations of injustice, you have chosen the side of the oppressor.” Written over thirty years ago by Archbishop Desmond Tutu, these words remind us that indifference can never bridge the divide of hate, and today they should serve as a call to action to all of us. This spring has given us stark and stinging reminders that systemic racism, white supremacy, oppression, hatred and brutality are as defining characteristics of the American experience as those ideals upon which we claim to shape our democracy—justice, equity, liberty.

The hospitality of Jesus was controversial. He chafed against the limits of the dominant culture in welcoming and mattering all who had been relegated to the margins of society by virtue of humanly-constructed categories that diminish the dignity and humanity of God’s children. The road to Jerusalem and the cross was paved by his refusal to accommodate the status quo. His hospitality knew no limit, no geographical or economic or political or ethnic boundary. It was not just indiscriminate: it was promiscuous.

Through that promiscuous hospitality, Jesus embodied the life giving, liberating, loving being of the Triune God. The Trinity calls into question everything we assume about the structure of reality, everything we desperately attempt to place into neat, convenient social constructs. We live not in a world of divisions ruled over by a supreme being, but in a universe tightly bound and called into being by the God who infinitely longs for intimacy with and between us, the God who dreams of Beloved Community, the God who demands nothing less than everything in the pursuit of mattering love. Divine hospitality lies at the heart of creation. Divine hospitality is also the source of our redemption.

In the Virtual Pilgrimage for Racial Justice last week, The Very Rev. Dr. Kelly Brown Douglas, Dean of the Episcopal Divinity School at Union Theological Seminary, called us to understand this moment as a *kairos* moment. She reminded us of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.’s belief that the moral arc of history bends toward justice, and added that this arc bends toward justice because it bends toward God.

Now is the time for encountering, seeing, welcoming, mattering. It is the time to take promiscuous Divine hospitality to the public square and the front lines. We are called to reckon with truth telling about history, our participation in systemic racism and white supremacy, the pilgrimage of how we got here, and to act on what we say we believe. We must begin to live as if we occupy a place on that arc toward justice, co-laboring with God and one another to realize the hope and promise of God's dream.

Our continued refusal to respond to this call to mattering in order to preserve privilege and power is simply immoral. Not to bear witness to all who did and still languish and suffer and die because of systemic injustice, hatred, violence and brutality is to turn one's back on the very meaning of Christ. If the essence of the One we claim to follow is summed up in words attributed to him in John's Gospel, "I have come that you (all of you) might have life and have it more abundantly," then the choice is clear. The absence of divine, promiscuous hospitality diminishes life; it does not make it more abundant. It cannot be tolerated even by making it sweeter and less offensive. Compromising truth has never served any cause. We are called to stand and act with and for all who have been for too long despised, rejected, cast out.

On this Pride Sunday, let us rejoice in how far we have come and lament how far we must go. May we be filled with holy anger at injustice, oppression, hatred, and exploitation of people so that we may work tirelessly for justice, freedom, equity and peace. May we welcome all with a mattering love that transforms the world. May we be blessed with enough foolishness to believe that we really can make a difference in this world, so that we are able, with God's grace, to do what others claim cannot be done. AMEN

©2020 St. Bartholomew's Church in The City of New York
For information about St. Bart's and its life of faith and mission
write us at central@stbarts.org, call 212-378-0222, or visit stbarts.org
325 Park Avenue at 51st Street, New York, New York 10022