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Arlington, VA 2207
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"Do you hear that all y'all?"
Sermon for Proper 13, Year A

[Sermon preached on Sunday morning at the Baptism of Rebecca Joy Sullivan]

On of the inadequacies of modern English is that we no longer have a plural for "you." This is remedied in the South with the word "y'all." When I moved to Oklahoma at age 11 from New York, I quickly learned the importance of such a word. "You come back now, y'hear?" is just plain unclear. Who is the speaker talking to? Is the speaker talking to me or to someone else? "Y'all come back" now is clean. It refers to <u>us</u>, to the group, and we all know that we all are included. "Y'all" is a plural, but in case there might be confusion, the rise of the use of "all y'all" to refer to a larger group makes that inclusiveness even cleaner.

All of our readings from scripture today are "y'all" readings. Our translators simply have not caught up.

In the first reading the Israelites, having returned from exile in Babylon where their people have been for almost 150 years, have just re-discovered the law that God, through Moses, had given their ancestors. Ezra, their priest, calls the people of Israel together to read the law to them. Together they wept and lamented their sins and they began to publicly repent. They just had not known the extent of their sin: they were truly repentant. What made it more for them was that they felt as if they had acted without being aware of it just as their ancestors had, they too had "stiffened their necks" and had not obeyed God's commandments. They too had worshipped foreign gods. They were no better than their ancestors who had been unfaithful to God, but now hearing the law again, some for the first time, they felt grief and sadness for the ways in which they had displeased God.

It would have been easy for them as a group to get really down on themselves. But Ezra the priest steps in before this can happen, before that moment when all they will be able to do is feel sorry for themselves and give up in despair. Ezra steps in and reads them of God's compassion for them. He reads them that God is "a God ready to forgive, gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love." God is a God who will not forsake or abandon them.

The idea that the God of the Old Testament is a God of wrath and the God of the New Testament revealed in and through Jesus Christ is a God of love is wholly false. (This characterization of the Old Testament is a misconception foisted upon generations of Christians and it is simply untrue.)

The God of the Israelites as they experienced and wrote about Him was demanding. He was strict. But He, the God of Israel, was always described as a loving father who asks for and expects the best of his children, even when they seem incapable of living up to His expectations. God continues to lavish his love on a people who often fail to return that love. What parent has not been there? Did you always return to your parents the love that they had for you? Do your own children always meet your expectations or do they occasionally disappoint you? But you still love them, don't you? Remember that is how God is described throughout the Old Testament, a God ready to forgive, a God to be sure with high expectations, but always full of understanding and compassion for his children.

"God is always ready to forgive, gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love." [*Nehemiah 9: 17*]

Do you hear that all y'all?

Remember all of our readings are addressed to communities of people. The letter of Paul to the churches in Rome is addressed to people undergoing persecution. Their greatest fear, at that time, was death and so Paul begins there. "Nothing, not even death can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus. Here he really means "y'all" because he is talking directly to them, as he tries to assure them of God's love and compassion for them. He says "us" because he is telling them all the hardships and difficulties he has faced --from his own personal experience-- and reminds them that none of these things are more powerful than God.

"For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."
[*Romans 8: 39]*

Do you hear that all y'all?

Finally, the Gospel of Matthew tells the story of a very large crowd, a hungry crowd of 5,000 men. Notice that the crowd does not count the women and children who might also have been present. So there may have many more than 5000 hungry mouths.

Jesus has just heard of the death by beheading of John the Baptist. He has withdrawn to a deserted place to get away from the crowds, but they follow nonetheless.

And He, the Son of God, looks at them, this great interruption to his work and has compassion on them.

It reminds me of a great professor who one day became quite irritated that students kept interrupting his work, knocking on his office door, until one day he realized that that was his work. The interruptions were his work. I always remembered that when I was on the University faculty and I continue to remember that today.

Jesus saw the crowd and had compassion on them and then he looked to his band of disciples and told them to feed the crowd. Compassion is not something you can keep for yourself – like the bag lunch you brought for yourself (and no one else) to eat.

The disciples don't get it. They don't have enough food. If they are to receive God's compassion they too will have to be compassionate, they too will have to open their hands and also get their hands dirty; they too will have to get involved. And so they gather their meager resources and from them—through the power and mercy of God come abundance.

Today we baptize Rebecca Joy Sullivan. In a few minutes, I will ask all y'all if you will do all in your power to support this child in her life in Christ.

At every baptism here at St. Peter's we promise that we will do everything we can to support the person who is being baptized, his or her parents, siblings, grandparents and family so that they child can grow into the full stature of Christ. In a baptismal community we each resume responsibility for the other. We promise, that is, to be inter-connected, each having compassion for the other. Compassion is not something we can keep for ourselves-- it is something by definition that we have to share. It is something that forces us to reach outside of ourselves.

God loves and forgives each and every one of us and so we in return continually are called to love one another and to continue to forgive one another just as God does for us.

Do you hear that all y'all?

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