Nu‘uanu Congregational Church

Fourth Sunday after Epiphany

February 3, 2019

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GOD’S BELOVED COMMUNITY Micah 6:6–8

 Psalm 85:8–13

 2 Corinthians 4:1–12

 John 17:14–21

 Please allow me to begin on a personal note. Today is bitter/sweet for me. Although I am glad that I will have more time to do the things I like to do and to spend more time with the family, it fills me with sadness to realize that I will not be with you and see you on a regular basis. You have come to mean so much to me that it is difficult to say “farewell.” I will miss the relationships that I have come to value and all that goes along with those relationships—the conversations, the surprises, the tears, and yes, the laughter.

 I am truly grateful to have had these two years “plus” with you. Please forgive me for the things I did that I should not have done and the things I should have done but did not do. I may not have been the interim pastor many of you would have preferred, but all of you have been so welcoming and accepting of me. No pastor can be all things to all people, and yet, at my age, I have figured out that I am just who I am, and that has to be OK. Many of you have said that the congregation is calmer and more unified than it was when I arrived on the scene, but I believe that you are the ones who brought about that newness far more than anything I have done. You willed it on behalf of each other. As for my ministry among you, I only want to thank you so much for giving me the opportunity to serve you. I am going to miss you very much.

 I have thought long and hard about what I would like to say this morning, and I guess it comes down to something I believe with all my heart: *you are God’s beloved community*. If you have doubts about your worth as a church community— well, that’s not a terrible thing. Doubt is the flip side of faith. If we think that everything is perfect, there would be no need for faith, for trust. If you are uncertain about the future of Nu‘uanu Congregational Church, that too is OK. Faith is a gift given in the midst of uncertainty. And it is faith that counts when all is said and done. And among you, I have witnessed much faith. *You are God’s beloved community*.

 I chose this morning’s scripture readings intentionally, because they contain truths we will want to remember as we journey into the future. Let me do my best to articulate these truths not only for you but for me as well.

 There is a tendency among us, I think, (and I include myself) to replace the Gospel with the church. The church, especially when we are worried about its future, becomes our all-encompassing concern. I have heard you express your concern in both your observations and questions. “We are an aging congregation.” “Our membership is declining.” “It’s hard to keep up our buildings.” “Where are the youth – I wish we had more of them.” On this last one, I have to say that from my experience, the presence of youth does not guarantee a future for the church. I think your own history has already revealed that to you. And besides, youth do not want to be seen only in terms of the church’s future. They want the church to be a welcoming place for them in the present.

 In all this concern about the church and its future, the Gospel, the Good News in Christ Jesus, can easily be lost or even disappear. I believe we need to remember that the object of God’s mission, *missio dei*, is not the church. The world is the object of the mission of God. God wills wellbeing for the world and the whole of creation. And it’s up to us to support by our words and our deeds that mission. We need to remember that beloved verse from John’s Gospel: “For God so loved the *world* that God gave God’s only Son . . . “ And when Jesus prays on behalf of his disciples at the end of his life, he declares that they do not belong to the world, but that nonetheless he sends them into the world so that all may come to believe. The world rather than the church is the arena for God’s mission. Your New Beginnings process has revealed this truth to you, and I will continue to pray that you will discern ways in which you can become the missional church you seek to be in support of God’s mission in the world. The key is that you all be one in the unity of the Spirit. Jesus prayed for that unity among his followers in his farewell prayer to God.

 As for the church, it is indeed God’s beloved community. But it is a fragile community. As with human beings, it is a community that does things it should not do and leaves undone things it should do. At the same time, it is a community that has been given a treasure, which is the Good News of God revealed in Jesus Christ. Let’s remember, however, that the treasure we have is contained in clay jars, which are fragile. What does this tell us? Taking a cue from St. Paul, it tells us that the power of the Gospel, which is the power of love, does not belong the church; the power of the Gospel belongs to God. Says St. Paul to the Christians in Corinth: “But we have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us.” (2 Corinthians 4:7) My friends, let us never replace the Gospel with the church. Inasmuch as we hold fast to the treasure we have, the Gospel of Jesus Christ and the power of love that accompanies it, we as a church will be acceptable to God, as fragile as we are. In our fragility, we will experience diminishment. We will know perplexity and uncertainty. We will be afflicted, but we will never be forsaken or driven to despair. We are God’s beloved community and will be as long as we seek to hold fast to the Gospel and turn to God with all our heart. God will not abandon us. Not only will God not abandon us, God will speak to us and make a path clear for us. In the words of Psalm 85:

 *Let me hear what God the Sovereign will speak,*

 *for God will speak peace to the people.*

 *God will speak to the faithful,*

 *to those who turn to God in their hearts.*

 *Surely God’s salvation is at hand for those who fear God,*

 *that God’s glory may dwell in our land.*

 *Steadfast love and faithfulness will meet;*

 *righteousness and peace will kiss each other.*

 *Faithfulness will spring up from the ground,*

 *and righteousness will look down from the sky.*

 *God will give what is good,*

 *and our land will yield its increase.*

 *Righteousness will go before God,*

 *and will make a path for God’s steps. —*Psalm 85:8–13

 Let’s believe it. Let us hope for it, knowing that hope is not fulfillment. And until that day comes when the earth shall be filled with the glory of God as the waters cover the sea, let us do what the prophet Micah advised. Let us love kindness, do justice, and walk humbly with God.

My brothers and sisters, never forget that you are God’s beloved community. Your new pastor, when he or she is called, will be privileged to serve such a beloved community as Nu‘uanu Congregational Church.

Please know that you will be in my heart as you journey forth in hope and in faith. By now, you know that I have some favorite sayings, and I close with two that you have heard me say a number of times. The first is from Julian of Norwich, who said:

*All shall be well, and all shall be well,*

 *and all manner of thing shall be well.*

And the second is from the journal of Dag Hammarskjöld:

 *For all that has been: Thanks!*

 *For all that shall be: Yes!*

May God’s grace and peace be with you and abide with you this day and always. Amen.