

LIFE IN COLOR
Sermon by Audette Fulbright
Sunday, September 9, 2018
All Souls Church, New York City

Welcome home.

Whoever you are, whatever you hold sacred, whomever you love - we are glad you are here.

We often use the metaphor of “home” for our church. Those of us who devote our lives to it want you to feel welcome, we want you to feel included, uplifted, nurtured, cared for and about. As your ministers, as the people who serve the beating heart of this congregation, sometimes we do this well, and sometimes we falter at it. I hope we’re always willing to listen and learn and grow deeper with you.

We do what we can. We take up our part; we’re often the most easily seen or heard people who take up the work of creating beloved community. We give our lives to this service, hold it as sacred.

But there’s a bigger truth to ministry, to the creation of Beloved Community, and that is that we, as your ministers, really, at the end of the day, only have a small part. It may seem oversized, since we stand before you and our voices are amplified. But ours is only a part of what makes this a spiritual home, a genuinely Beloved Community. The bigger part is you.

When I say you, in this case I am not speaking of the congregational you. I am speaking to you, specifically. You, as an individual here today or tomorrow or last week or a year from now. You, who have been here fifty years or fifty minutes. Each one of you. It is your effort, and your care, which makes All Souls into a Beloved Community, a place of radical welcome and a force for good in a world that needs our loving hearts and hands - or, into a bastion for certain kinds of privilege, chilly to newcomers, and indifferent to the voices that have historically been on the margins.

Let me tell you a strange experience I had recently. As you know, I’ve spent most of the past year dealing with breast cancer. After I healed up from surgery, I had daily radiation at a center about 17 blocks from the church. During the summer, as I was not preaching, I was at the church most weekdays, and in the afternoon, no matter what else was happening, I had to stop what I was doing, pack up, and walk those 17 blocks to the radiation center, where I would wait anywhere from 20 minutes to a couple of hours for my radiation treatment. Every single day, the same thing: the same streets - I learned how to keep in the shade over the hot summer days. The same staff - a team of about seven people who worked the front desk, a team of five who handled my treatment. The same doctor, once a week. For six weeks, the same thing, every day.

Outside the treatment center, the United States remained in turmoil - norms and historical precedent, even standards of decency and the law were in upheaval. The rest of the day might swing wildly from one thing to the next, inside that larger turmoil - a person in grief, a celebration of a book release, the hassle of needing a dinner ingredient that was missing, the disappointment of not being able to do much with my daughter as my energy was low. You know - life.

But that walk was the same every day. And the walls of the waiting room, the voices of the staff, the feel of the machine during treatment. I began to find that it relaxed and comforted me. I began to love the walk, the reading time while I waited, the simple knowing that there was nowhere else I could be, and that I was allowed that regularity, that scheduled “time apart.” It’s

something I have not had since I was in school. It was a strange blessing, and in an equally strange way, I miss it.

The point is this: I understand - I think we all understand - the longing for stability, for things that stay the same. My grandparent's house has been largely unchanged since they built it the year I was born. But they lived in other houses before that. All Souls has been in New York City for 199 years. But it has been housed in other places, and it has been compromised of other people, other ways of worship, other ministers and leaders. Things change. There is a through line, but change is the nature of the world.

It is the most delicate of human balances, then, to craft a home of worship, a Beloved Community, that honors what is best about the past, offers stability and a sense of security, while also being a place of vitality and deep welcome - sure-footed enough to adapt as new wisdom and insight emerges, and openhearted enough to open the door wider still.

If I am a child, how will you welcome me? Not just send me to teachers and bid me be quiet - but teach me what church and community is? How will you welcome me into worship and into leadership? What will you *learn* from me?

If I am an immigrant, newly arrived, with experience I bring from my culture, and ideas about community that are new to this place, how will you welcome me? Will you listen to the music or poetry of my people? Will you consider a new way of holding power together? Or must we do it "the way it has always been done, the way so-and-so did it back in the day?" Do we have the courage to be uncomfortable for a while, if it leads to a more inclusive and genuinely welcoming community?

To balance the welcome of comfort and familiarity with the welcome that comes with an open-hearted, open-minded willingness to change some of the how we are - this is the work of the church. It is the work of the people. It is your work, just as it is mine.

Let's not wait. Make some time today, or soon, to talk to someone here that you do not yet know. Every time you come on a Sunday, know that it is **your** part of **our** work to welcome those whom you have not yet met, and that *you* may be the person they needed to see this week. It is a shared ministry we serve, being the peace, the stability, the open-hearted welcome in the turbulence of every age.

All Souls is the place where you are loved, seen, your voice and wisdom is wanted. You matter here. You deserve comfort and care, and you are welcome here. In closing, I want to share with you my very favorite poem in all the world - the one that also, for me, expresses deep welcome and offers comfort and safe harbor. It's called "Offerings," and it's by Kendra Ford:

Offerings

For those who are shy but resolute, almonds and milk
and carry a smooth striped stone in your pocket.
For those who are first to speak, crisp green apples
and wear well worn hiking boots.
For those who refuse to believe even what they see, tart stewed rhubarb,
then greet each living thing you meet by its name.

For those whose minds will not empty, a full samovar of tea,
and watch the waves till the tide turns, then sleep.
For those who find the faces of other inscrutable, hot pepper jam
and sit in the front row at the movies and watch the audience.
For those who get lost in their own freedom, slow rising bread
then write on birch bark all that you believe.
For those surprised by their own needing, grits and molasses
then sit in the dim auditorium during every choir practice.
For those who are afraid to listen, thick simmering stew
and sit in the park, until, among the bird calls you hear your name.
For those who are afraid of what they must do, wild berry pie
and walk everywhere you go.

Amen, ashe, blessed be.