

“How Will You Be Remembered?”

How will you be remembered? Tomorrow? Next week? When you're gone? Friends – in person and at a physical distance – the Spirit of God has gathered us together on this twelfth of twenty-four Sundays in the long, green, growing season of Ordinary Time in the circle of the church year. Moments ago, we proclaimed with the Psalmist that *“Good people... leave an imperishable memory behind them”* (Ps. 112:5). Our readings from Luke and Hebrews invite us to consider the nature of the impression and impact we make on others as we move along our life journeys. As we enter now into an extended moment of reflection, let's each wonder: how will I be remembered?

Let us pray. God within each of us and connecting us as community; we come to this space and time to be challenged and comforted, empowered by your Spirit. As we wonder about the imperishable memory we might leave behind us (each moment, each day, in our lifetimes), lead us toward hearing and responding to your call in our lives. As you move among us this morning; grant us the serenity to accept the things that are not within our power to change, the courage to change the things we can, and the wisdom to know the difference. Amen.

Do you have a theme Bible verse – one that speaks directly to the core of your spirit? Many of us received Confirmation verses at one time in our lives. Maybe you have discovered a favorite scripture verse or story in some other way. My theme verse for my life as a pastor, parent, daughter, sister and friend comes from Luke chapter seventeen. When asked when the reign of God would come, *“Jesus replied, ‘The reign of God doesn't come in a visible way. You can't say, “See, here it is!” or “There it is!” No—look: the reign of God is already in your midst.’”* (Luke 17:20-21)

I place my trust in a God who co-creates with us a realm of love and justice right now and here, empowering us through all the set-backs and celebrations.

Today, Hebrews 13, verse 1 speaks to me in a way that gives me goosebumps. *“Let mutual love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.”*

I have a favorite story about entertaining angels (that is, messengers of God’s Word of love and justice, messengers who bear God’s image in way we take in with our senses and experience). I first heard this story by Tony Campolo (sociologist, author, pastor and social activist) when working at a Lutheran summer camp in Santa Cruz, CA in the summer of 2002. Campolo has taught at Eastern University, was a conservative evangelical Christian and (through the course of his life experiences) has become a feminist, socially progressive, evangelical Christian. At its heart, evangelical means sharing good news found in the story of Jesus. I hope this story touches you in an affirming way today, encouraging you along the road of discerning what impressions and impacts you long to make among fellow sojourners in this human existence. How will you be remembered from day to day and over the long haul of each of your relationships? I invite you to close your eyes if you wish as this is an extended story and you may find yourself transported to his space and time. A slightly abbreviated story from Tony Campolo in his book, *The Kingdom of God is a Party*, published in 1992. Campolo writes:

“If you live on the East Coast and travel to Hawaii, you know that there is a time difference that makes three o’clock in the morning feel like nine. With that in mind, you will understand that whenever I go out to our fiftieth state I find myself wide awake long before dawn. Not only do I find myself up and ready to go while almost everybody else is still asleep, but I find that I want breakfast when almost everything on the island is still closed—which is why I was wandering up and down the streets of Honolulu at three-thirty in the morning, looking for a place to get something to eat.

Up a side street I found a little place that was still open. I went in, took a seat on one of the stools at the counter, and waited to be served.

This was one of those places that deserves the name 'greasy spoon.' I mean, I did not even touch the menu. I was afraid that if I opened the thing something gruesome would crawl out. But it was the only place I could find.

The guy behind the counter came over and asked me, 'What d'ya want?'

I told him, 'A cup of coffee and a donut.'

He poured a cup of coffee, wiped his grimy hand on his apron, then grabbed a donut off the shelf behind him. As I sat there munching on my donut and sipping my coffee at three-thirty in the morning, the door of the diner suddenly swung open. And to my discomfort, in marched eight or nine prostitutes.

It was a small place and they sat on either side of me. Their talk was loud and crude. I felt completely out of place and was just about to make my getaway when I overheard the woman sitting beside me say, "Tomorrow's my birthday. I'm going to be thirty-nine."

Her 'friend' responded in an ugly tone, 'So what do you want from me? A birthday party? What do you want? Ya want me to get you a cake and sing "Happy Birthday"?''

'Come on!' said the woman next to me. 'Why do you have to be so mean? I was just telling you, that's all. Why do you have to put me down? I was just telling you it was my birthday. I don't want anything from you. I mean, why should you give me a birthday party? I've never had a birthday party my whole life. Why should I have one now?'

When I heard that, I made a decision. I sat and waited until the women had left. Then I called over the guy behind the counter (whose name was Harry) and asked him, 'Do they come in here every night?'

'Yeah!' he answered.

'The one right next to me, does she come here every night?'

'Yeah! That's Agnes. Yeah, she comes in here every night. Why d'ya wanna know?'

'Because I heard her say that tomorrow is her birthday,' I told him. 'What do you think about us throwing a birthday party for her – right here – tomorrow night?'

A smile slowly crossed his face and he answered with measured delight. 'That's great! I like it! That's a great idea!' Calling to his wife who did the cooking in the back room, he shouted, 'Hey! Come out here! This guy's got a great idea. Tomorrow's Agnes's birthday. He wants us to go in with him and throw a birthday party for her – right here – tomorrow night!'

His wife came out of the back room all bright and smiley. She said, 'That's wonderful! You know Agnes is one of those people who is really nice and kind, and nobody ever does anything nice and kind for her.'

'Look,' I told them, 'if it's okay with you, I'll get back here tomorrow morning about two-thirty and decorate the place. I'll get a birthday cake.'

'No way,' said Harry. 'The birthday cake's my thing. I'll make the cake.'

At two-thirty the next morning I was back at the diner. I had picked up some crepe paper decorations and made a sign out of big pieces of cardboard that read, 'Happy Birthday, Agnes!' I decorated the diner from one end to the other.

The woman who did the cooking must have gotten the word out on the street because, by 3:15, it was wall-to-wall prostitutes. . .and me! At 3:30 on the dot, the door of the diner swung open and in came Agnes and her friend. And as they came in we all screamed, 'Happy Birthday!'

Never have I seen a person so flabbergasted. . .so stunned. . .so shaken. Her mouth fell open. Her legs seemed to buckle a bit. Her friend grabbed her arm to steady her. As she was led to one of the stools along the counter we all sang 'Happy Birthday.'

As we came to the end of our singing, ‘Happy birthday, dear Agnes, happy birthday to you,’ her eyes moistened. Then, when the birthday cake with all the candles lit on it was carried out, she lost it and just openly cried.

Harry gruffly mumbled, ‘Blow out the candles, Agnes! Come on! If you don’t blow out the candles, I’m gonna hafta blow out the candles.’ And, after an endless few seconds, he did. Then he handed her a knife and told her, ‘Cut the cake, Agnes. Yo, Agnes, we all want some cake.’

Agnes looked down at the cake. Then without taking her eyes off it, she slowly and softly said, ‘Look, Harry, is it all right with you if I. . .I mean is it okay if I kind of. . .what I want to ask you is. . .is it okay if I keep the cake a little while? Is it all right if we don’t eat it right away?’

Harry shrugged and answered, ‘Sure! It’s okay. If you want to keep the cake, keep the cake. Take it home if you want to.’

‘Can I?’ she asked. Then looking at me she said, ‘I live just down the street a couple of doors. I want to take the cake home and show it to my mother, okay? I’ll be right back. Honest!’

She got off the stool, picked up the cake, and carrying it like it was the Holy Grail, walked slowly toward the door. As we all stood there motionless, she left. When the door closed, there was silence in the place. Not knowing what else to do, I broke the silence by saying, ‘What do you say we pray?’

Looking back on it now, it seems more than strange for a sociologist to be leading a prayer meeting with a group of prostitutes in a diner in Honolulu at three-thirty in the morning. But it just felt like the right thing to do... When I said ‘Amen’ and lifted my eyes, Harry was right in my face.

He said, ‘Hey, Campolo! You told me you were a sociologist. You’re no sociologist. You’re a preacher. You never told me you were a preacher. What kind of church you belong to?’

In one of those moments when just the right words came, I answered, "I belong to a church that throws a birthday party for a prostitute at three-thirty in the morning."

Harry waited a moment, then he answered, 'No you don't. There's no church like that. If there was, I'd join it. I'd join a church like that!'"

I once read these words in a classic novel: a story doesn't need to be true; it just needs to help. Well, this story is definitely true (meaning, factual). Perhaps it is also true that a story doesn't need to be yours in order for it to help you. We could write this story off, recognizing it as the story of an economically privileged white man stooping down to throw a pity party for an underprivileged woman employed as a sex worker. Or we could touch back to Hebrews and recognize the power of God's presence in liminal moments when we step outside our comfort zones. We heard, *"Let mutual love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it"* (Heb. 13:1).

The easy thing would have been for Campolo to notice mild hunger pangs, roll over in his hotel bed, and wait for room service to begin for the day. Instead, he struck out into the city to find a place of hospitality. Feeling quite uncomfortable in the diner he found, what did he do? He listened to the voices in that gathered community. He recognized himself as an outsider – a visitor. He risked dialogue. He was on the look-out for the image of God in Agnes, Harry and Harry's wife, the chef. And he found what the Psalmist knew and what we can find every day: *"Good people... leave an imperishable memory behind them"* (Ps. 112:5).

The work of being a community committed to love and justice requires exactly what Agnes, Harry, Harry's spouse the chef, and Tony embodied – showing up, listening, vulnerable dialogue, and above all caring to know the other better from a place that expects the message of God's love to speak through them.

“Keep in mind” Hebrews’ author wrote, “those who are in prison, as though you were in prison with them. And be mindful of those who are being treated badly, since you know what they are enduring.” (Heb. 13:2)

How can we pray with integrity for people who are in prison and people who are being tortured by oppressive systems unless we show up, listen and engage in dialogue? It’s safe and easy for us to watch the news and grumble defiantly from our comfy living room chair. It’s safe and easy for us to gather here and pray for those who suffer. But Jesus calls us to rise up and follow in his footsteps to a diner at 3:30 in the morning. If we do this hard, unnerving work, we might become Christians who cause our neighbors and colleagues to wonder what kind of church we belong to.

“Let mutual love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.”

May we always be open to an angel - the messenger from God who cries out from each and every person we encounter. Let’s show up, listen, and engage. Let’s make people wonder. Let’s live intentionally in ways we want to be remembered, because Love is counting on us. Amen!

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People’s Congregational Church (Bayport, MN)
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Luke 14: 1-14; Psalm 122; Hebrews 13: 1-8, 15-16