



Let No One Be a Stranger

A sermon by the Rev. Susan Bek

Proper 18, Year C

The Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost, September 8, 2019

Good morning and welcome. I'm Susan Bek, and I'm the 27th Rector of St. Paul's, Ventura.

There's a lot going on here at St. Paul's today. It's Homecoming Sunday; a day when we invite everyone to come celebrate the beginning of a new program year in the church. We hope everyone had a great Summer! The choir is back. Exciting new Sunday School programs are in place, and though our construction project isn't finished, we are able to reopen access to Kahler Hall today. The drainage problems have been fixed, new ADA accessible ramps and parking spaces are in. Next new signs, lights and landscaping will also be added to make our entrance even more friendly and welcoming.

Speaking of welcoming, this morning we unveiled a sign above the church door. It says, "Let no one be a stranger."

St. Paul's is celebrating our 130th Anniversary Year. For over 130 years the people of St. Paul's Episcopal Church have been here in Ventura loving and serving God through wonderful mission and ministry. The sign that now hangs above the church door is a piece of that history.

The beginnings of our church date back to 1887 when a handful of people met in the home of Judge Lemuel Clark McKeeby committed to the idea of creating an Episcopal church here in Ventura. The first church building was established in 1889. It was on the southeast corner of Santa Clara and Oak streets. The building was a clapboard, English Gothic style church that would serve as home to St. Paul's for more than half a century.

By 1950, the little church downtown was bursting at the seams. That's when the 23rd rector of St. Paul's was hired. The Rev. William A. Gilbert had an abundant energy, a welcoming nature and a favorite phrase, "Let no one be a stranger." Gilbert wasted no time but got right to work forming a site search committee to find a location appropriate to the needs of this growing congregation.

They broke ground here at the Loma Vista location on March 15, 1953. This campus was built in phases, and in April of 1959 the completed church was dedicated. Above the church doors they placed a redwood sign that read, "Let no one be a stranger." The sign hung there for years and years, but at some point, probably when the building was being painted it was taken down and lost.

About a year ago we found it with some old lumber in the back corner of the workshop. Today, as we gathered around the church doors and prayed the Litany of Thanksgiving remembering the 130th anniversary of this wonderful church, we unveiled the sign which carries the message this congregation has always lived by. We welcome all, no exceptions. No one is a stranger, we are all one big community, one beloved family of God. We are St. Paul's, Ventura. We follow Jesus, nurture ministries and welcome all, and we want to thank you for being a part of this wonderful family of faithful people dedicated to loving God and serving the world in the name of Christ.

Among the many treasures here at St. Paul's are the beautiful needlepoint kneelers and Bishop's chair. They were handstitched by a total of 106 people one third of whom were not members of the congregation but friends who volunteered to help and support St. Paul's in this big and impressive project. In the end, a total of 160 unique and beautiful works of art were created by these generous and talented people. Look around the church, there are lots and lots of treasures to be found.

Another is our amazing organ. It's twenty feet tall, has 1500 pipes ranging from one-half inch to nine feet. It's over 120 years old and had been used by a church in Ohio for eighty of those years. In the late seventies, St. Paul's purchased it, transported, rebuilt, revoiced and installed it. It made its debut on Christmas Eve 1979 to a packed house of worshipers.

We have a long and rich history. So many people have done so many great things to keep the faith and support this congregation. All of them are important. Some of our historical records are on display in Kahler Hall this morning. I encourage you to go take a look and say a prayer of thanksgiving to God for all the members of St. Paul's, past, present and future.

Now, let's turn our attention to today's scripture.

We are in chapter 14 of the gospel according to Luke. Jesus has turned his face toward Jerusalem; he is making his way to the place where he knows he will sacrifice everything. Here we are, in the midst of that journey, tensions are high; time is short; things are heating up. And in this context, Jesus addresses an important question. What does it take to be a disciple, a true follower, of Jesus the Christ? The answer is not simple, not easy. It is, indeed, difficult to hear.

"Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple. Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple. ...none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions."

Jesus seems to be challenging the people to face up to the harsh realities of what was about to happen. He lists these three requirements for those who would be his disciples. Let's take them one by one.

First, Jesus said, *"Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple."*

This is a harsh message, especially as it is understood when presented in English. In the original Greek, the word that we hear translated as "hate" can also mean "to turn away from". It is not that we must loath or despise our family in order to follow Christ, but rather that we must be willing to turn away from our family if and when that's what it takes to follow Jesus.

Jesus was not anti-family. There are plenty of references to the need to respect and honor our parents, and Jesus himself welcomed and blessed the children. So, this is not to be understood as a message against family but, rather, about trusting in God first above all things and a surrendering into God's care all that we hold dear.

Second, Jesus said, “*Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple.*” To those who first heard this message, carrying your cross meant walking the road to your own execution. Today, the idea that we should carry the cross and follow Jesus means that we should be willing to endure the burdens and fulfill the obligations of a life in Christ.

Third, Jesus said, “*...none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions.*”

We must be willing to give for the sake of God’s work in the world. It’s important to ask ourselves, “Do I have my possessions or do my possessions have me?”

In the end, we will all have to turn away from everything in order to follow Jesus. No one can claim the gift of everlasting life without first letting go, turning way from our families, all of our possessions and, yes, our very lives.

What it all this boils down to is trust, trust in the Lord. Follow in the ways of the righteous and not the wicked. Then we will be like trees planted by streams of water. We will not wither but prosper. And when we prosper, all that we will have, we offer to the glory of God. Then we will know that we can safely turn away from all worldly things, entrusting to God those whom we love because God loves them too.

We can trust in that love and be ready to present ourselves as a living sacrifice utterly dedicated to the Lord.

For over 130 years, St. Paul’s, Ventura, has been a faithful community. Committed to following Jesus, willing to wrestle with the challenges that come our way, and ready to welcome all.

We give thanks for everyone who came before us, for everyone who travels this journey of faith with us, and for all who will come after us. All that we have, we offer to God. May St. Paul's continue to live up to the commitment that once again hangs over the door – Let no one be a stranger. May the next 130 years be as amazingly blessed as the last 130 years, and may we all, one day, gather together around the heavenly banquet table in the presence of the Almighty, the good and faithful servants from St. Paul's, Ventura. I look forward to seeing you there!

In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.