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Holy Faith, Santa Fe  
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Proper 19 – Year C  
Exodus 32.7-14  
Psalm 51.1-11  
1 Timothy 1.12-17  
Luke 15.1-10

In the name of the one, true, and living God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

As I was reading an ecumenical listing of upcoming Santa Fe events, I noticed a couple of churches were promoting the kick-off of the fall season as “Rally Day.” In many churches, today seems to be called “Rally Day,” but I’ve never really liked the term “Rally Day.” It sounds too much like rallying the troops for one last futile charge – like we have to shake off our slothfulness of summer before we become embroiled by the frenetic pace of fall. Stocks can rally, troops can rally, students can rally, but do churches really rally?

I much prefer the term “Homecoming Sunday.” Today happens to be Homecoming Sunday at the last parish I served, St. David’s in Washington, D.C. We’d invite parishioners to come home to St. David’s after summer trips and vacations. We’d invite parishioners to come home to St. David’s after a self-imposed summer break from church (after all, the church had been there all along) to resume the usual pace of Sunday School, Youth Group, and all the other ministries of St. David’s that geared up (dare I say, rally?) in the fall. We’d invite parishioners to come home to St. David’s after a long absence away, when perhaps they decided that they didn’t need God or didn’t need a church or didn’t need St. David’s, but something in their life – a crisis, an emptiness, a longing for, literally, God knows what – drew them back home.

Holy Faith doesn’t really have a Homecoming Sunday. I suppose the closest we come is the Feast of St. Francis, our patron, coming up in three weeks. That’s because

Holy Faith doesn't go on hiatus during the summer; in fact, we have some of our largest attendance in the summer because of so many visitors. But people do come home to Holy Faith after an absence away when something in their life – a crisis, an emptiness, a longing for, literally, God knows what – draws them back home.

Some people who profess to know something about evangelism and church growth frown on using the term "Homecoming." To them it suggests giving permission to stay away from church. To me it just seems like recognizing the reality of what happens to all of us at some time or another in our lives. Some think the term "Homecoming" is too closely associated with "family," and for those who come from broken families the association can be off-putting. We're no longer supposed to refer to the church as a family, but rather as a community. Families too often can be dysfunctional, and the model of the church as a family can be seen as hierarchical and oppressive. A community, on the other hand, is seen as strong and supportive and caring for one another.

Regardless of family or community, the events of the last week have shown that a family, a community, a church, yes our country, has to be a safe space for the exchange of different viewpoints without the threat that exchange will be met with violence. A church family or community, Holy Faith, The Episcopal Church should have the expectation that one can express an opinion, be genuinely heard, be respectfully disagreed with, and not be vilified, demonized, or retaliated against, because we all are beloved children of God.

Now I see a difference between community and family – and it revolves around how easy it is to break into the group. A community is sometimes hard to break into if

you're not already part of the community. How do you become part of a community? Who extends the invitation? Who shows you how to belong? It may be a little easier with a family – a bit more organic and less structured. By virtue of you're being here, you're family – you're family. I could make great theological pronouncements about being beloved children of God, brothers and sisters in Christ, under the Sonship of Jesus – but by virtue of our being here today, we're family. We do what families do – we share our family stories in the hearing of Scripture; we show our concern for one another in the Prayers; we ask forgiveness of each other in the Confession; we share a family meal together in Communion.

Who was it that defined family as “those who have to take you in”? Well, we're here as family to take in all comers. We have a Christian duty to extend radical hospitality to everyone who walks through these doors and make them feel like family. They're not strangers – they're just family members we haven't met yet. But the Holy Spirit is stirring in the life of every newcomer who walks through these doors. God has already planted the seed in them to make the huge effort to get up on a Sunday morning, get dressed, and walk into a place they have never been before, and chances are where they don't know a soul. The least we can do is welcome them like family – good members of the family – and embrace them with our love in Christ Jesus.

And guess what? We'll find that we share a lot in common. We'll discover that we're all sinners and we all need the redeeming love, mercy, and grace of Jesus Christ. Take St. Paul – a self-proclaimed blasphemer, persecutor, and person of violence. But, in his own words to his friend Timothy, he acted ignorantly in unbelief, and the grace of our Lord overflowed for him with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. And so it is

with us! Why? Because “[t]he saying is sure and worthy of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners.” We hear it at every Rite I Eucharist as part of the “Comfortable Words” after our confession and absolution: “This is a true saying, and worthy of all...to be received, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners.” And, in the words of St. Paul, for that very reason we receive mercy. The Church isn’t a hotel for saints, but a hospital for sinners!

As a hospital for sinners, we have a great physician and model. We know that Jesus welcomed sinners and ate with sinners and tax collectors, which made the religious leaders of his day grumble. What would they say about us, whose sins are probably greater than just collecting taxes! And we know that God rejoices when a sinner repents of sin and returns to the fold, for Jesus tells us so. The church as a family also rejoices when one of its own, after being lost, repents and returns to the fold. Even when that one person gets all the attention and the rest are wondering where their reward is for being righteous. Hopefully the day will come in the family when, after being lost, we are that one repent – and come home, and come home, and come home again.

So home is where they have to take you in. Who was it also who said, “Home is where the heart is”? If home is where the heart is, then the church as home is something we long for. The Christian writer Anne LaMotte tells the story of the little girl who became lost and couldn’t find her way home. She ran into a police officer who took the child in the squad car to drive around the town looking for a familiar neighborhood. When the girl saw her church she asked the police officer to stop and let her out. The police officer was reluctant to do so because it wasn’t the little girl’s home. But she

said, “Don’t you understand – that’s my church, and I can always find my way home from there.”

I would change the point just a bit. Once we’ve found the church, we are home. That’s where we find that God knows what we’re longing for. That’s where we find our faith in Jesus Christ. That’s where we find the redeeming love, mercy, and grace of Jesus Christ. That’s where we find our way after being lost. And that’s where we find our family who rejoices and takes us in.

Do churches ever really rally? Well, we’re called to rally around those who were lost and now are found. So, welcome home!