

St. Andrew's Episcopal Church
The Rev. Barbara Hutchinson

Proper 22 Year B
September 20, 2015

Watching the progression of Jesus as he moves closer to the cross is most interesting and actually very understandable. Over the past few weeks, as we have read portions of the gospel of Mark and our readings have naturally followed the progression of the story, we have moved from a cranky Jesus, to a downright rude Jesus, and now to Jesus who states with great clarity his purpose and our mission, to welcome the ones whom the world considers the "lesser". We see that Jesus exhibits little patience with those, who happen to be his closest friends, who seem to obstinately refuse to embrace this invitation to radical hospitality, and Jesus's intensity means that we too are to pay attention to this invitation.

Jesus' challenge to radical hospitality is strong and deep. When Jesus is telling us to welcome the child, the other, the one with no apparent worth to society, he isn't telling us to do this work at arms-length, nor wait until they come to us. Rather Jesus is saying, seek them out, call them toward you, move toward them, embrace and empower them, work diligently and faithfully to welcome them, which means meeting their needs as well as to allow them to make changes within our own hearts.

Sadly our world gives us multiple and new opportunities daily to offer care for those who are rejected, despised, and discarded. These can be the millions of Syrian refugees looking for a safe harbor onto which to land, or the victims of the annual and global \$32 million dollar industry of human trafficking, or they can be the children in our area who go to bed hungry most evenings, or it can be this person I saw being released from the Franklin County Jail several weeks ago, who had no ability to communicate with the officer releasing him, who had no one whom to call to meet him, had no idea where to go, and could only vaguely follow the directions of how to walk out the front door and go to a place he doesn't know how to find, for help. These are the children we are called to welcome.

In Jesus' time, this call to welcome the lowly in status was radical, and it is for us today. In Jesus' time, one's honor was connected to one's social status, and a high social status was coveted and sought after. Honor and status could be gained by displays of valor, by the giving of gifts, and by being a respected leader. However, consequently, one's identity and worth was attached to what one possessed. In this view, to have less was to be less, less worthy, less real, less important. Honor was something to be acquired, and the system encouraged those to work to accumulate power and control over those of a lesser status. And whatever status you could acquire, could be temporary, as one could lose honor by being insulted, associating with the wrong kind of people, and by being physically beaten. God's voice, through Jesus was calling the world into some other way of being.

There's obvious tension in the gospel between the disciples' arguing about who is the greatest, who will have a higher status, and Jesus' teaching. The disciples want to be known as the special ones, the ones whom Jesus has given power to heal others, the ones people looked up to, the ones who had Jesus' attention when they went into the house and were brought into private conversations. They liked being within the inner circle. Jesus is turning that mindset all upside down by saying they must be servants to the ones the disciples thought should be serving them. That's pretty radical.

Jesus' challenge to us is a strong mandate that the will of God is today, and always has been, to care for the weak, the poor, the needy, the orphaned, the widowed the challenged, the discarded and this is the work around which we must order our lives.

Jesus calls us to be servants to those whom we may initially believe are the "lowly" and offers us a chance to see the gift within that reversal.

We are called to be servants. Servants who put food in the mouths of the hungry, servants who provide what the school children need to engage in and thrive in school, servants who sit with and lay hands on those in need, servants who answer the call to help each other, servants who can make the love of God real by our very actions. This is an essential part of our faith, validated and affirmed by the words of the letter of James, which speak to us of living our faith out in action.

However, interwoven into our call to action, to physically and actively nourish, empower, raise up, and respect the dignity of all people, is inherently a call to allow the condition of those considered the "less than" to reverberate within our souls and bring us into and through what some term "the dark night of the soul", so that we can welcome these "others" within our hearts and soul, at real depth, so that we may be changed. This expected transformation is part of God's plan too, seeded within this call for radical hospitality.

This means, that when we see someone living in desperate poverty, of whatever kind, we are to allow God to sift through our soul and show us our own places of poverty, of whatever kind. Poverty of generosity; poverty of hope; poverty of faith; poverty of openness to the new life Jesus offers us, poverty of whatever kind, and then to allow God to heal that place, and effect change that within us.

This means, that when we see someone who has been discarded by society, we need to look at the wounds deep within us of when we have felt discarded or have dismissed others based on their social status or any other reason, and allow God's forgiveness to settle in and offer us a healing balm.

This is the message of the mission of Jesus offered to us today –that to welcome the least among us means that we are to welcome the least within us. This is often the more difficult work.

Do you remember after Mo. Theresa died and her autobiography was released and the world was horrified that her writings revealed she largely lived in the “dark place of the soul”. We had all imagined her to be filled with joy of purpose, nourished her hourly meeting the needs of others, and yet she was tormented with her own poverty, with her own darkness. My sense is that she allowed the depth of the poverty she saw around her to permeate within her soul, and through that found humility, the state of her own pure and true poverty, which was not always comfortable.

We each only know what God will find within our own soul to probe around with as we radically welcome the least among us and the least within us. And let us not be afraid to do this work.

My interesting life experiences often lead me to this work, and I imagine that is true for you as well.

For me personally, it can mean that when I sit in a circle with people each week at Roxbury treatment center, and see their bondage to their addiction, or hear their hardened hearts to the hope that they can become something other than what they are in that moment, I need to also look within me and see what is holding me in bondage – a feeling, a resentment, an expectation that can never really be fulfilled, and then allow God to break the chains of that within me.

Or for me, it may be as I see the shadow of that man who walked out of jail two weeks ago, in the midst of bewilderment, and with a lack of direction, that I must look for those parts within myself, places where I am bewildered by someone’s uncharitable response and I need to look at what that’s bringing up in me, or to root out those parts within me to weed out that which may distract me from even more completely claiming God as the direction of my life.

This is hard work and uncomfortable work. This can be one reason why the disciples may be pretending a bit in today’s story to not comprehend Jesus’ teachings, and why they adapt his teachings to meet their own direction, fully figuring that if they do this servant-thing for a bit, someday people will realize their greater worth and they will be rewarded, here on earth or in heaven. They may do this rather than fully following this complete reorientation of their mindset and heart Jesus is inviting them into. We may not blame them. We may be them. We may not desire to remove our masks within ourselves to find the vulnerable, true self, which feels the pain of the world and responds, by making ourselves open to the divine and loving energy of God which will turn our lives around, and make the world a better place.

Now I do need to tell you, it can go the other way too. In addition to seeing someone else's poverty, or if and when we are feeling in the midst of poverty of joy or love or hope, we can also see someone else's sense of abundance, grace, and generosity and allow that to reverberate within our souls too, and change ourselves for the better. That's the gift of community: when we truly experience the other, God can take both, the lessor or the more situation, and bring about holy change within us.

On the second mission trip I took, I saw the classic example of us going down to help others, from a position of "those with more" helping "those with less", only to be radically and completely changed by the kindness and generosity of those our society would term those with "less", which of course showed us with clarity our own poverty. One of our young boys was so taken by the complete reversal of this status that he responded with surprising generosity to our bus driver, Ameilkar, by giving him his brand new highly prized designer sunglasses, and that act, I believe, surprised most especially him.

Either way, by taking someone's poverty or generosity into our soul and allowing God to sort through it, by this interior work, we can come face to face to our true self and to the Common Source of all. This is what is beautiful in the world.

We can train our spiritual muscles to do this faithful work by being a servant to others, not expecting reward or recognition, but to quietly and faithfully showing up wherever there's a need. And also we are given the opportunity every time we stretch out our hands to receive the communion bread, to be in union with the Jesus who put his arms around that child, of no value to his community, and become like Jesus and also like the child. We are invited to be the best of our humanity, and within that, find the gift of divinity.

Jesus' directive to welcome the child, the lowly one, the unimportant one, the one easily discarded, is an invitation to life in a strangely intimate, uncomfortable, vulnerable, and a bit awkward place, for it is there that we will always find God. This is an invitation to offer radical hospitality to those among us and to those parts within us that need to be stretched, healed, and made new. Let us say yes to this invitation so that we may enter into the saving grace of the God who loves us without measure. Amen.