

The Little Ones

Last week, our gospel lesson ended with some words by Jesus that made at least a few folks here pretty upset.

You remember the words, about Jesus not bringing peace but actually causing division between children and parents, brothers and sisters, husbands and wives, how we need to love Jesus more than those most intimately connected with us.

More than one person wondered how such language ever made it into the Bible, much less coming from the lips of Jesus.

I start there this morning because what Jesus may be getting at has everything to do with how we are to understand what it is to welcome others, and to be welcomed by others, which is our lesson for today.

Perhaps what Jesus is getting at in his harsh, two by four between the eyes observation about our family life is to help us keep relationships in perspective: meaning, we get in trouble when we ask any human relationship to bear too much weight, to bear the weight that only the ultimate, that only the divine, can carry.

I heard an interview the other day with a singer who had been given up at birth to adoptive parents, parents, who, it turned out, left a lot to be desired.

Dad was an active alcoholic and mom had her own serious issues.

This singer, a woman now 52 years old, was talking about her latest song which, she said, is all about finally learning the lesson that romantic love isn't the answer to her deepest needs.

She says she's felt like a plug in search of a socket throughout her whole life, and for the longest time, kept trying to make romantic love, the love our popular music is enthralled with, the love that really describes, according to this singer, maybe the first 6 months of any relationship, maybe only the first 90 days – she kept trying to make that love the socket that will satisfy her need, her emptiness, to be the love that would save her.

Jesus, in his harsh words last week, is asking us to pay attention to what we seek from each other, because we none of us can be, completely, the socket for anyone's plug.

We are creatures made in the image and likeness of God, and our relationships with each other, if lived with an understanding of their limits, can be and often are deeply fulfilling, deeply enriching.

Yet, at the end of the day, we each of us has an even deeper longing, an even deeper need, an even deeper desire, that only the love of God can fill.

That perspective, I think, is what Jesus is getting at as he cautions us to keep our priorities straight, as he teaches us today about welcoming.

If we see our family and friends as the be all and end all of our relationships, we will welcome only them, and those who look like or talk like or act like them.

But if the true ground of our relationships is God, if God is the source of the love that flows through us and to each other, then all of a sudden a whole new world opens up before us.

Jesus peels away the veil that keeps us from seeing this new world by speaking of the little ones, little ones who, if given even a cup of cold water, have a great blessing to pass on.

And I have to ask, who are these little ones, these disciples, that Jesus is talking about this morning?

When I first read the passage, I figured he's talking about you and I and all Christians in the world who are doing the giving.

But then I began to wonder.

Jesus isn't focusing so much on the one **giving** the water as he is on the little one **receiving** the water - he's not zeroing in on the one **doing** the welcoming, but the little one who **is** welcomed.

We who are gathered here this morning are mostly the ones **doing** the giving; we here are the ones most often **doing** the welcoming.

And here's the question that kept nibbling at me all week long: what if we are not the little ones Jesus is talking about?

What if we are not the disciples he has in mind?

What if people with money and power and who are generally living the good life, a category most Episcopalians fall in, what if we aren't the little ones Jesus has in mind?

What if, instead, the little ones, the disciples Jesus is talking about, are the children from Honduras and Guatemala and El Salvador who are pouring over our borders in Texas?

What if the little ones, the disciples Jesus is talking about, are the refugees from Iraq and Syria?

What if the little ones, the disciples Jesus is talking about, are those in the world who are the most vulnerable, the most at risk, those camping out today in Kakaako Park or down the street sleeping in tents on the sidewalks?

And I wonder this because Jesus says if someone gives a glass of cold water to one of these little ones, they'll get a reward; which sounds very much like the final judgment as Matthew describes it, at the end of time, as all of humanity is divided into two groups, the sheep to one side and the goats to the other.

One group is praised for feeding the hungry and clothing the naked, visiting the sick and imprisoned; the other group is condemned for not doing those things.

And what's always baffled me about that story is why both sides, both the sheep and the goats, are surprised, because, both groups, in shock, ask Jesus when on earth did we see you naked or hungry or in jail?!

Why are they surprised?

There shouldn't be much of a mystery here; after all, isn't Christian discipleship all about reaching out to and taking care of those around us?

So why are both sides surprised?

You'd think both sides would see this coming.

I wonder if there is surprise maybe because those doing the giving and feeding and visiting are not necessarily the disciples of Jesus, if we define "disciple" as Jesus does: becoming like Jesus....

Maybe the true disciples of Jesus, God's emissaries to the rest of us, are the ones **receiving** the food, the drink, the prison visit.

And maybe it's a surprise to both groups, just as it might be a surprise to us, to realize that at some level, the true disciples of Jesus may not be those with much, but those with nothing, and if that's the case, then how we find our salvation may not be by seeing ourselves as good Christians who visit and feed and heal, (important as those things are) but perhaps by changing how we see those whom we welcome, particularly the dirty, the unkempt, the houseless, that guy who's belongings are stuffed in the shopping cart at the back of our church, that, rather than seeing ourselves as Christ's emissaries to them, perhaps we begin to see them as Christ's emissaries to us.

Perhaps it is then that we might see that our relationships, as Christians, cannot be defined or confined to blood or friendship or family, but rather that we are invited to move far beyond those limited arrangements — out into the whole wide world — where every single human being is honored as a being made in the image and likeness of God; where every human being, particularly the little ones, the true disciples of Christ, have a claim upon our time, our talent and our treasure.

Perhaps.

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