

Sunday, July 7, 2019

Proper 9C

Isaiah 66:10-14 - Galatians 6:7-16 - Luke 10:1-11,16-20

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In this morning's gospel passage, Jesus sends 70 disciples on their first evangelical mission. His instructions were specific and clear. Approach the world with innocent, gentle and trusting grace, as if it's a friendly universe – even though you will meet those who reject and wish you harm. Do not allow possessions or pretenses to get in your way. Trust God to provide what you need. There's an urgency to this mission, so don't get sidetracked, diverted or distracted, but go where you are sent. When you get to your assigned location, knock on the door, and bid "shalom" to its occupants.

Shalom is a wonderful Hebrew word - far more than a friendly greeting. *Shalom* is a biblical vision of a world with a place of welcome for everybody and enough food and shelter to go around. *Shalom* God's dream for a world where there is no disease, and where there are no prisons, violence, oppression or war. *Shalom* is a commonwealth where everybody gets to enjoy Sabbath rest, including those who put food on our table, make clothes for our bodies, and clean up our mess. *Shalom* is the divine hope for human beings live together as sisters and brothers of the one God whom we call by many names and come to by many routes. *Shalom* is God's realm where peace, justice and kindness reign. As commonplace a Hebrew greeting as it is, to bid *shalom* with intentionality is to wish the very best for the one you greet.

If welcomed, Jesus instructs his disciples to eat whatever is offered, and don't look for better accommodations. In other words, be a good guest. After receiving the hospitality of strangers, Jesus' followers are to proclaim in word and deed the kingdom of God - wholeness of body, healing of spirit, and peace for the household and their community.

Being idealistic but not naive, Jesus prepares his followers for rejection: "Whenever they do not welcome you, shake the dust off your feet and move on." As Michael Ondaatje observed in his 2018 novel *Warlight*: [You] can learn as much from those who bar the door as from those who let [you] in."¹

After cautioning his disciples about the inevitability of rejection, there is a verse *not* included in this morning's lectionary. Jesus says, "On that day it will be more tolerable for Sodom than for that town." To be clear, the residents of Sodom were punished not because of homosexuality, but because of their inhospitality and lack of compassion and regard for the stranger. Jesus concludes his training with the encouragement that, "Whoever listens to you listens to me, and whoever rejects you rejects me, and whoever rejects me rejects the one who sent me." (Luke 10:16)

In this passage, we are introduced to Jesus' idea of mission and hospitality. Ambassadors for Christ, including you and me, are simply to be ourselves. Evangelism Jesus style does not involve great techniques of salesmanship. There are no special tools or gimmicks. Nor are there any formula and or sales pitches for success. Jesus' disciples are commissioned to just be gracious, genuine people, sharing in both word and action the love of God. And Jesus' concept of hospitality is simple and clear. If you are the host, welcome the stranger, offering food, drink, shelter, attention, and protection. If you are the guest, receive what is offered with gratitude and thanksgiving.

Can you imagine being one of those first disciples? Can you see yourself leaving home and going on such a mission? Can you even talk to your next door neighbor, friend or co-worker about the good news of Jesus or the realm of God? On the other hand, would you offer hospitality to a stranger who comes in the name of Christ? It's one thing to hear the Gospel proclaimed on a Sunday morning, it's another to actually live the Gospel on Monday morning.

Over the course of my ministry, I've frequently used this text to prepare youth groups for mission trips. However, this week, I'm hearing something new in the 10th chapter of Luke. I'm reflecting on this morning's

gospel passage in light of what's happening on the US-Mexican border, and I invite you to consider it with me from the perspective of an immigrant seeking entry into the United States.

Like a loving parent concerned for a child going on a mission trip, Jesus says to those who are leaving home and coming to America: "On your way! Go in search of a better life. But be careful—it's a dangerous journey. Travel light. Be polite to those whom you meet along the road, but don't loiter. Tread gently on the earth, picking up after yourself. Receive the hospitality that is offered to you without complaint, and don't neglect to say, 'Thanks.' Once you settle in a community, be a source of help, healing and hope. Be prepared for rejection, but know that in rejecting you, they're also rejecting me."

Can you receive this gospel message from the perspective of our sisters and brothers (the vast majority of whom are Christian) coming from Central America (usually walking) to the US in search of asylum, protection, freedom, and relief from the violence, war, and economic hopelessness in their native lands? Can you imagine hearing this morning's gospel proclaimed in detention centers, tent communities, and migrant camps, and churches with undocumented parishioners. Like our immigrant ancestors, the hundreds of thousands of men, women, children and infants coming to this country are not seeking to take advantage of us, but rather, hoping to start a new life among us.

For over a decade, I served a church where the majority of my parishioners were immigrants, coming from the Caribbean, Latin America, and Africa. Many of them were or had been undocumented for a period of time, and some had fled their homelands with only the clothes on their back. The first-hand accounts I heard were often tragic and terrifying.

During those years, I would make an annual visit to Ellis Island. It was a pilgrimage of sorts, a way of connecting my congregation's immigrant experience with that of my paternal great grandparents who - like forty percent of all Americans - immigrated through what has been called an "island of hope and tears."

Walking the vast empty halls, looking at old photos, and listening to tape-recorded voices I could hear and see echoes of my own immigrant heritage. Reading the words of Emma Lazarus inscribed on the Statue of Liberty reminded me of what people have been willing to sacrifice for freedom, hope, prosperity and peace. "Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free..."²

The immigrants who have settled in the United States – whether they were 17th century British pilgrims on the Mayflower; masses of European immigrants in the steerage of 19th century steamships; or recent arrivals from Asia, Africa, and the Americas landing at Miami, Newark and Los Angeles airports, or crossing borders in Texas, Arizona and New Mexico – have come to this nation bringing new hopes, new dreams, and new lives in search of freedom.

For those who came to this land in chains, shackled in the bottom holds of slave ships, freedom became the quest after they arrived. And for some, as the old spiritual reminds us, freedom only came with death.

What makes us all Americans, I think, is our quest for freedom. When we're trying to get, it's all we can think of, and we are willing to take enormous risks for it. Once we have it (especially those who have had it all our lives), most of us tend to take it for granted, and some of us want to deny it to others.

Undocumented immigrants, disparaged as “dangerous and illegal” by those who want them out of this country, present a moral dilemma for people of faith. When it comes to immigration, the biblical values of welcome and hospitality have been discarded.

As people of faith we must speak up and act. I believe Jesus is calling us to educate, donate, advocate, and yes vote.

First and foremost, it is incumbent upon us to educate ourselves about immigration in this country. To be informed citizens, we need to learn about the history of immigration. We need to understand the present crisis at the border: what is really happening and why it is happening. We also need to study both the root causes for the surge in world-wide migration and the vast and varied solutions for a just and comprehensive immigration policy.

Once we are educated, I believe we are called to act. We can donate to organizations that provide assistance to immigrants on the border and in local communities, and to NGOs working in countries of war, starvation and strife. Some might feel called to volunteer their time and talent with such efforts. And others might feel called to offer an undocumented family sanctuary in their home.

I know from experience that people of faith can be very effective advocates in this immigration crisis. We can communicate with legislators and write op-Eds to our local newspapers. We can show up at demonstrations and vigils. We can even make witness at the border and at local ICE offices. As part of a national day of concern and action this coming Friday (July 12) there will be a vigil in front of Wellfleet’s Town Hall at 8:30 p.m. I intend to be there, and I hope some of you will join me.

Finally, when the time comes, people of faith can and should express their values at the polling booth. That is how democracy works. We show up and vote.

Yes, we do have an immigration, humanitarian and political crisis. And it’s not going away anytime soon. So, heeding the words of Paul’s letter the church in Galatia: “Let us not grow weary in doing what is right, for we will reap at harvest time, if we do not give up. So then, whenever we have an opportunity, let us work for the good of all, and especially for those of the family of faith.” (Galatians 6:9)

Endnotes

1. Michael Ondaatje, *Warlight* (2018, Alfred A. Knopf) p. 213
2. Emma Lazarus, “The New Colossus”