

HOLY CHARITY

Pentecost 15 – Cycle C: Hebrews 3:1-8, 15-16; Luke 14:1, 7-14

I believe it was near the end of my second year in seminary when our liturgy professor, Neil Alexander, suggested that we visit the Liturgical Apostolate in Toronto when, upon completing the requirements for ordination, we could begin preparing for a call to a congregation. He explained that the Liturgical Apostolate was a worldwide order of Roman Catholic nuns whose mission was to equip pastors and churches with vestments and church furnishings. He told us that in this age of mass production they actually designed and *made* each of the vestments they sold; that they were not profit-motivated, so we would find that their prices would be quite competitive with other suppliers; and that their designs and fabrics were quite beautiful. In this part of the world, he told us, they operated out of a little hole in the wall on Jane Street in Toronto, quite close to the 401.

By the time I was ready for ordination, Neil had left Waterloo Lutheran Seminary and was already in his second year as Dean of the Chapel at General Theological Seminary in New York City. But in my last term at seminary, I remembered Neil's advice from earlier days, and upon receiving the call to Zion, Stratford, made the trek he had recommended to that little hole in the wall in Toronto.

As it happened, Neil had not exaggerated any of the details. The store was long and narrow; unpretentious (you could walk right past it without noticing it was there); and jam-packed with vestments and other items Neil would delight in calling "holy hardware". He was also correct about everything else: the vestments were simple, elegant, and reasonably priced. As a result of that trip, I eventually returned home with an alb and communion vestments for three of the five liturgical seasons – having stayed *within* my rather modest budget.

What Neil had not told our class was how warmly we would be welcomed; how accommodating the sisters would be in fitting us and giving us advice; how irrelevant it was to them that we were Lutheran (as opposed to Catholic) ordinands. And they trusted us! It was long before the days of debit cards and overdraft protection, but certainly not long before the days of fraud: they accepted my personal cheque and would didn't even entertain the idea of asking for my driver's license.

I have returned many times since ordination for other items. When a small delegation from our church made a pilgrimage there in 2002 to buy material for our Lenten altar hanging, we learned that the hole in the wall was no longer adequate for all their fabric, and we were actually invited to their residence in north Toronto to purchase the purple cloth.

Two years later, the sisters moved into a beautiful new facility a block west of their place on Jane. The order now both live and work in this building; their showroom is spacious in comparison to the hole in the wall; and they have a chapel, open 24/7 for prayer and meditation. In fact (and this may be true for all religious orders), they keep a constant prayer vigil in the chapel: there will always be at least one sister in prayer in the chapel at all times.

Now in case you are wondering why you're hearing all about the Sister Disciples of the Divine Master this morning, it was today's lessons from Hebrews and Luke and an impromptu trip our son Graham and I made to the Liturgical Centre recently that brought them to mind. Early in the week, I read over the advice of the author of Hebrews to his readers and thought his or her teaching to be somewhat impractical and out-of-touch with reality. The world has changed, I say to myself when I read the letter to the Hebrews.

Similarly, when I listen to Jesus' parable of the wedding banquet, I realize that we are, by-and-large, quite insensitive to the social dynamics Jesus identifies in the story. Humility is not a highly valued quality in most circles, and is often misunderstood. In fact, if someone in business yields too often to another's wishes or point of view, that person is usually instructed to register in an assertiveness training course (or something similar). To be aggressive and bold are the virtues of our time. Reality television encourages people toward self-promotion and fame, rather than humility, privacy, and self-effacement. Some years ago, we used to smile at Speedy Muffler's promise that "at Speedy, we were a Somebody." The un-stated message in their commercials was, of course, that we are all Nobodies, and that we don't like being Nobodies.

But take a look at the values extolled in today's two New Testament lessons: the author of the Epistle writes, "let mutual love continue...do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers...remember those in prison...be faithful in marriage...keep free from the love of money and be content with what we have...remember those who have spoken the word of God to us and imitate their faith...let us continually praise God...do not neglect to do good...share what we have." What a different world this is, we think to ourselves, than the one we know so well! Was it ever like this?

And Jesus, counselling his disciples not to consider themselves above others, but rather to honour the personhood and dignity of another, even of someone they may not know or recognize. And then, he drives home his point in presenting a vision of all the poor, weak, injured and forgotten people we should invite for a meal – love without boundaries, in other words; life beyond the economy of transaction and payback.

The Sister Disciples of the Divine Master in Toronto and Montreal, the Ursulines I knew as a boy in Chatham, Ontario, the Carmelites I have come to know in Niagara Falls since becoming a Lutheran pastor, the Anglican Sisters of Saint John the Divine in Toronto, and the Benedictines I have come to know through Kathleen Norris's books live, as much as they can, according to this model of discipleship described for us this morning in both Hebrews and Luke. The Benedictines actually have their values codified in what is known as the Rule of Saint Benedict or Benedictine Rule. And, as Kathleen Norris has found out, the Benedictines provide for married, non-Catholic lay people to become part of their worldwide apostolate if the journey of faith takes them in that direction.

It is an alternative world, the world of devotion, prayer, meditation, and good works. It is a world in which the kingdom of heaven is intentionally given entry. To quote Scripture, it is a culture or a community *in*, but not *of* the world. And to visit or be welcomed in such a community has given me and, I suspect, has given millions over the past 2000 years a vision of the Christian life, not always realized in our churches, in our families, and in our individual aspirations to holiness. Life as we read about it in today's two New Testament lessons is not easily accomplished, we must admit. The vision provided by religious orders helps.

But truthfully, even the religious orders who model discipleship so beautifully so much of the time, fail. You need go no farther than the texts of some of the ancient office hymns in *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* to learn about the presence of jealousy and conflict in religious community. Or read Kathleen Norris's *The Cloister Walk*, a copy of which is in our church library. We're all human, we learn, but we have heavenly potential.

Our son, Graham, loves to sharpen the vision in my third eye when it comes to Lutheran Christianity as he has come to know it. My third eye is the one that looks at experience objectively, evaluates, gives perspective. He says, and I believe that he is correct, that there is in North American Lutheran expression a vestige of Methodism. He listens to sermons such as this morning's and would say that there is an underlying holiness motive; that it's all about doing good and being good; that for all of our Lutheran lip service concerning being saved by grace through faith, Lutheran *culture* suggests that we have our doubts, and would really prefer to take matters into our own hands when it comes to salvation.

And so, here is the corrective for today's 'Lutheran sermon with Methodist undertones.' All of those wonderful things we read about in Hebrews and Luke, all of the gospel hospitality and trust and sharing and humility which are assumed to be characteristics of Christian community at its best, are not ends in themselves. Rather they are (and now I will quote Neil Alexander) "the result of a graceful encounter with the Word of God, and the Lord who is its treasure." We can seek God; but it is God who comes to *us* and changes *us* and shapes *us* as the grace present in God's Word has its way with *us*. Discipleship, in all its varied expressions, is all part of the divine mystery of faith.

Truthfully, we have no control over where we are led in our journey with God. But we can be open to the life-changing possibilities of worship, prayer, devotion, and good works. We can read, mark, and inwardly digest God's Word and trust in its goodness. Through the grace of Christ Jesus, we can be in holy communion with the One he embodied and revealed. Through the grace of the Holy Spirit, we can lose ourselves in Christ and Christ can be found in us – in our *community*, the community of our discipleship. Amen.