

LEARNING TO BE THE PEOPLE OF GOD Year A, Pentecost 10

Gen. 45:1-15, Ps. 133, Rm. 11:1-2a, 29-32, Mt. 15: 21-28

As blessed as we are, our readings this morning remind us that there is nothing easy about being the people of God; that the nature of God as One who is always creating and re-creating, that the mark of communities of faith of always being “works in progress” indicate that change is part of our DNA, so to speak.

Mike Frantz, who was the pastor of Waterloo Mennonite Brethren Church when I began my pastorate here at Christ in 1994, said to me one day over coffee at Tim’s that he knew it was the nature of the gospel to include more and more people, to constantly be enlarging the circle; but that it was hard for him to be nimble and flexible. In those days, WMB was experiencing a growth spurt, and Mike found himself consumed by the administration of the institution, rather than present with people as their pastor. Christ Church, at the time, was growing as well, but not at the fast rate WMB was. I didn’t envy him, and eventually he had to go on leave from call, reflect on why he had become so unhappy, and then begin again in a smaller congregation.

For many of us, Sundays on which we bid our members farewell and Godspeed, as we do today with the Irwins, are difficult Sundays. People such as Jackie and Steve and Elvira Sentes, who have shared of themselves so generously in our congregation, have an effect on who we are and who we become as a church. I mentioned in the newsletter Jackie’s considerable volunteer work, above and beyond her work as a member of staff. Churches are not run by their professional leaders: they are completely fuelled in their mission by people willing to volunteer their time and their gifts for the sake of the congregation. And so, on Sundays such as this one, we somehow need to be able to take a deep breath and pray a prayer of thanksgiving for all that has been and all that is to come. The grace of God has been present in this congregation for 47 years, and as difficult as it is for us to bid farewell and Godspeed to Jackie and Steve, we keep the faith; we walk the talk; we look for renewal and rebirth; we accept the pattern of dying and rising, of being formed and then reforming.

I believe Joseph’s sobbing in this morning’s First Reading is emotion that is only in part the joy of reunion with his family; the other component is his being overcome by how present the grace of God has been not only for him, not only for his people who will be saved by immigrating to Egypt, but also for all the Egyptians themselves. God works through people and communities of people. But yes, things are always changing; the earth is always moving under our feet; if God is not on the move, the people of God certainly are.

We see these dynamics in our other two readings today as well. For weeks, we have been reading of Paul’s struggles to bring together his congregation of Jewish and Gentile Christians. Today we read that the Christians are taking pride in their status, and Paul has to remind them that their new life in Christ, notwithstanding, the people of the Covenant preceded them as the people of God.

In today’s Gospel Gentile legitimacy is challenged by Jesus as he first refuses to heal the daughter of the Canaanite woman. And this lesson is almost a liturgy of what it means to for Gentiles to come to faith in Christ. Matthew tells us that the woman is faithful, kneels before Jesus, and calls him Lord. Do we not do the same? And is not the Canaanite woman and a few others like her in the gospels a sign that the community of faith is always under construction? Jesus himself resists the change the woman represents in the thrust of his ministry. God’s grace in the Joseph story embraces the many, not the few. And St. Paul, for all of his many flaws and shortcomings, brings profound change to the community of the faithful, allowing them to see in Christ’s proclamation a universal message that eventually translated into what we now call the people of God in Christ Jesus, the church.

None of this is easy going. None of this would stay on the board room table of any business for more than a few seconds. But such is how we know God – as One who continually calls us forward, preparing the way ahead of us against all odds, blessing us with sufficient grace to provide for faith.

And our call as a community of faith is to recognize that the story of the Canaanite woman also finds us in the place of Jesus: that in Matthew's gospel, as easy as we find it to identify with the woman who approaches Jesus in faith asking his healing grace for her daughter, in these latter days, we, the church, are also Jesus; that our call in Jesus is to welcome strangers, to bless them, include them, receive them, and incorporate them as part of our community, our congregation. The ministry of welcome is a sign of the kingdom of God: if we do nothing other than welcome newcomers, we are radicals. Think about it: think about our world and how easily people reject one another, fight with one another, separate themselves from one another.

Then, think about the world as God sees it, and how we can be God's ministers, simply in opening our doors and welcoming people to break bread with us.

Mike Frantz was correct in recognizing that the nature of the gospel is always to include more and more people. But the other part of the picture is also true: that the community of God's people is prepared by grace and sustained by the indwelling of nothing less than the Holy Spirit. We may be constantly dying and rising, being formed and reformed; but we do so trusting in God's goodness and steadfast love.

Jackie and Steve, may God's grace prepare your way to Cornwall and beyond; may you receive blessing upon blessing. We look for a joyful reunion whenever you return; and, in the meantime, we shall tune our voices to singing God's new song.