

Sunday 2nd July, 2017 - 4th Sunday after Pentecost
Year A
Genesis 22:1-14
Psalm 13
Romans 6:12-23
Matthew 10:40-42

In the name of the Trinity; Creator, Redeemer, and Life-Giver...

I mentioned in my homily on Friday morning how much of Jesus' ministry was about welcome and restoration. How in his healing, his ministry, Jesus not only healed people of their conditions, their sickness, in some cases their sin, but he also restored them. Nowhere is this more obvious than in the case we had in Friday morning's Gospel of the healing of a leper. These people, cast out from society, forced to live alone, outside city walls, experienced perhaps the greatest restoration when they were healed - allowed to return to family, friends, and society again.

In order for us to understand just how important this aspect of Jesus' ministry was, we need to put ourselves back into his context. In the time of Jesus, it was believed that you had to be pure to stay in God's good graces. The Jewish purity system of first century Palestine was built around a system that elevated the most pure and reviled the most impure. One's purity depended on one's birth and lineage. Priests and Levites came first, and were followed by Israelites and then converts to the Jewish faith. Further down the road were what we might call "mixed race".

Purity also depended on behavior. Those who carefully obeyed purity codes were regarded as more pure than those who ignored them. People who ignored or downplayed these codes were regarded as outcasts, which typically included tax collectors and shepherds. Physical wholeness was also a purity issue. People who were not whole – who were maimed, chronically ill, lepers, eunuchs, and so on, were considered impure. People who were abjectly poor were also considered impure.

Males were considered more pure than women. Finally, Jews were considered more pure than Gentiles

Marcus Borg, who was one of the great liberal, progressive theologians of our time, reflects on Jesus' ministry and says this

“The effect of the purity system was to create a world with sharp social boundaries: between pure and impure, righteous and sinner, whole and not whole, male and female, rich and poor, Jew and Gentile.”

Borg continues: “One of his [Jesus'] most characteristic activities was an open and inclusive table. ‘Table fellowship’ – sharing a meal with somebody – had a significance in Jesus' social world that is difficult for us to imagine. It was not a casual act, as it can be in the modern world. In a general way, sharing a meal represented mutual acceptance.

More specifically, rules surrounding meals were deeply embedded in the purity system. Those rules governed not only what might be eaten and how it should be prepared, but also with whom one might eat. Refusing to share a meal was a form of social ostracism. Pharisees (and others) would not eat with somebody who was impure, and no decent person would share a meal with an outcast. The meal was a microcosm of the social system, table fellowship an embodiment of social vision...

“The inclusive vision incarnated in Jesus's table fellowship is reflected in the shape of the Jesus movement itself. It was an inclusive movement, negating the boundaries of the purity system. It included women, untouchables, the poor, the maimed, and the marginalized, as well as some people of stature who found his vision attractive.

It is difficult for us who live in a world in which we take for granted an attitude (at least as an ideal) of nondiscrimination to appreciate the radical character of this inclusiveness. It is only what we would expect from a reasonably decent person.

But in a society ordered by a purity system, the inclusiveness of Jesus' movement embodied a radically alternative vision...

“In short, Borg says, there is something boundary shattering about... the center of Jesus' message and activity: ‘Be compassionate as God is compassionate.’ Whereas purity divides and excludes, compassion unites and includes. For Jesus, compassion had a radical sociopolitical meaning. In his teaching and table fellowship, and in the shape of his movement, the purity system was subverted and an alternative social vision affirmed. The politics of purity was replaced by a politics of compassion.”

Bottom line: Jesus not only challenged the religious, social, and political order of his day, but he was viewed as a dangerous virus that was infecting others with similar ideas and practices.

Today, then, we have just 2 short verses from Matthew's Gospel - but they encapsulate Jesus' ministry, and the command to his followers to do the same. And it raises the question for us, what does it mean to be welcoming - what does it mean for us to be compassionate in our dealings with others; to open up our table so that all may be welcomed.

Sometimes, in trying to answer this question I think we jump straight to the big things - grandiose plans of throwing open the doors, and being a community drop-in centre; selling up the worship space and giving the proceeds to the poor;

In some cases and in some scenarios, maybe these are the very things that need to be done. But take note of what Jesus says today, as he gives us another idea - a cup of cold water...

What a little thing, don't you think, to give a cup of cold water? Jesus emphasizes the same by his use of the word “even.”

We do often imagine discipleship as requiring huge sacrifice or entailing great feats, and sometimes that is exactly what discipleship comes to. But at other times, Jesus seems to say, it's nothing more than giving a cup of cold water to one in need. Or offering a hug to someone who is grieving. Or a listening ear to someone in need of a friend. Or offering a ride to someone without a car. Or volunteering your time here in the Emergency Food Relief Ministry, or at Sisterworks, or the Prahran Mission. Or making a donation to an agency like ABM, or Anglican Overseas Aid. Or...you get the idea.

Discipleship doesn't have to be heroic. Like all the small acts of devotion, tenderness, and forgiveness that go largely unnoticed but tend the relationships that are most important to us, so also the life of faith is composed of a thousand small gestures. Except that, according to Jesus, there is no small gesture. Anything done in faith and love has cosmic significance for the ones involved and, indeed, for the world God loves so much.

Today we are asked to think of those who we might call "the outsiders", and to consider the ways in which we can welcome them. Jesus says that even our smallest acts of kindness and generosity done in faith are remembered, have cosmic significance, and make a difference beyond what we see, as each act of kindness and generosity done in the name of Christ reverberates out and is gathered into God's work to love, bless, and save this world - so let's be a part of that mission.

In the name of God, Amen.