

Sunday 9th July, 2017 - 5th Sunday after Pentecost
Year A
Genesis 24:34-38,42-49,58-67
Psalm 45:10-17
Romans 7:14-25
Matthew 11:15-30

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

We should not, I think, be too surprised about what is happening in today's Gospel. It's reflective of very human behavior. Maybe we should call it the Goldilocks syndrome: never being quite satisfied with what we've got.

John the Baptist comes along, and he doesn't measure up. He doesn't conform, that is, to what the people think he should be like. He's too reclusive, too ascetic, a loner, too somber and serious. He should eat and drink more. Then Jesus comes and he's, well, too much the opposite. He drinks and eats too much, and with the wrong kind of people to boot.

No, we are not looking for the porridge that is too hot or too cold, we want it just right! So, John the Baptist (and the God John represents) is just too severe, while Jesus (and the God he represents) is just too accepting. We'd like our religious idol to be just right, which pretty much means, if we are honest, we want them to be just like us.

But here's the thing: if God were just like us, who would save us?

Which is perhaps what's so appealing about our pictures of God. They don't threaten us, don't expect change from us, don't ask us to do all that much, and don't do much more than affirm us. And affirmation is great, even necessary at times. But it doesn't save. And so God comes along - first in John, then even more fully in Jesus - in part to disrupt our pictures of God, to shake our hands loose from holding those pictures (which all too often can harden into idols) too tightly.

It's not possible to live without some picture of God. And, inevitably, simply because we're mortal, human, fallible (the old word is sinful), we'll likely picture God in ways that are helpful and unhelpful, clear as well as distorted. And so God comes and shows up where we least expect God to be - in order to shake us up, in order to call what we thought we knew for sure into question, in order to surprise us by being so different from what we expected...and yet precisely what we need.

No wonder Jesus gives thanks that God has revealed all this - and God's own self to boot - not to the wise but to infants, because that alone surprises us, makes us think twice, challenges our preconceptions, and generally refuses to give into our Goldilocks-like predilections.

Jesus does another thing in this passage as well, though. He doesn't simply call our pictures and expectations into question, but also gives us another picture. God is the one who bears our burdens. God is the one who shows up in our need. God is the one who comes along side of us. Nothing demonstrates this more than the cross - God's willingness to embrace all of our life, even to the point of death, in Jesus, to demonstrate God's profound love and commitment, love and commitment that will not be deterred...by anything.

It's not necessarily what we want. We often would prefer a God who takes away our problems rather than helps us cope with them, who eliminates challenges rather than equips us for them, and who vanquishes our opponents rather than enables us to make peace with them. Again, it's not usually what we want, but pretty much exactly what we need.

Last week we sang a hymn, written by Dietrich Bonhoeffer. On the surface, a simple set of lyrics, that begin like this: All go to God when they are sorely placed / they plead to him for help, for peace, for bread / for mercy, for them sinning, sick or dead / We all do so in faith or unbelief.

As I say, nothing too controversial there - we believe in a God who hears and answers prayer. The next verse, however, is where it becomes more complicated: All go to God when he is sorely placed / find him poor, scorned, unsheltered, without bread / whelmed under weight of evil, weak or dead / We stand by God then, in his hour of grief.

What a confronting image for us, who make God out to be some sort of super-human distant deity - but whom Bonhoeffer asserts is right there, in the midst of the messiness of life, standing in solidarity with the weak and the helpless, the poor and the hungry, the condemned prisoner and the dying sinner.

Today we are challenged to re-think our picture of the God we know in Jesus. And a fuller or more complete picture of that God causes us to reconsider the essence of Jesus' promise in today's Gospel. "come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest," is not just a message that says "take care of yourself". Rather, it promises that "as you embark on the discipleship way, I am with you."

"I am with you". But not always how we would expect or want. In fact, it might be truer to say that God always shows up where we *least* expect God to be: in the need of our neighbor, in the person that doesn't look anything like us, in the person who believes and thinks and acts differently than you do. And that in all these circumstances, our call is the same: to care for them, to meet them where they are, to accept them as we are able.

It's not easy work. But as we undertake this kind of discipleship - which pretty much has been the subject of the last few weeks of our readings from Matthew - we discover God in Jesus is already there. Waiting for us, encouraging us, forgiving us, bearing us. Which is what makes the burden light, the yoke not just easy but joyful.

We live in a time and place where we are increasingly taught to believe that true joy, deep satisfaction, and the realization of what we were created for comes through self-discovery and self-expression, being authentic to one's true self. And while there might be great value in that kind of authenticity, I'm not sure we can achieve it apart from being in relationship with, and bearing the burdens of, those around us.

And so God shows up where we'd least expect God to be to call us to the same place and discover ourselves as we turn away from ourselves to meet the other, and to find our lives by giving them away.

God keeps coming in unexpected, even unlikely places. And that includes in the words of Scripture; in the ordinary bread and wine of the communion in which we will share this day, and in the life you lead.

May you always and forever know the blessing of our surprising, but ever present God, coming to us; in Word, in Sacrament, in the stranger we meet, and in the ordinariness of our everyday lives.

In the name of God, Amen.