

Women and Children First

When I read the assorted passages suggested by the Revised Common Lectionary for this week's worship services, I was struck by the way in which both the Psalm and the primary Old Testament reading provide contrasts to where the apostles seem to be in their discussions amongst themselves and a strong backup to what Jesus is trying to teach them. The lectionary epistle reading is from James this morning and it carries some of the same themes but not, I thought, in quite as interesting a fashion. I also wanted to deal with our Psalm and with the selection from Proverbs this morning because I've not touched on these in a sermon previously and also because I think it is always important to look at how the teachings of Jesus spring from the Scriptures that he knew; that is to say, what we call the Old Testament. There are still too many folks out there in the broader society, Christians and non-Christians alike, who would have you believe that the God of the Old Testament is different from the loving Father about whom Jesus taught. I'd like to feel that I'm giving you all some ammunition against that misunderstanding of the character of our Loving Creator.

I was also struck this week by the ways in which these passages of Scripture contrast with the attitudes of the dominant culture in which we live. In the current political campaign season, in the overheated responses to differences of opinion and of convictions, in the bellicose posturings of men and women who have been entrusted with leadership in our nation and others, I hear a close echo of the apostles' argument of who should be greatest. In the anti-intellectual bias that, at best, seems to lie just under the surface of our culture, I find a repeat of the disciple's unwillingness to ask questions of their teacher in order to learn the deeper truths of life. And, sadly, in the words and actions of many today, I find a close parallel with the cultural background against which Jesus so radically put forth a child as the epitome of God's call to God's people to welcome all who come into their lives.

But I'll get to these points as we go along. Let me first direct your attention back to Psalm 54, a portion of which, in its 2010 translation by Pamela Greenberg, we used as our Call to Worship. The beauty of this Psalm, particularly in relation to this morning's Gospel reading, is the situation in which the Psalmist finds him or herself. The speaker here is in danger, crying out to God for salvation from a sea of troubles. The author realizes that there is no way that he can prevail in his current situation. He is completely dependent upon God. This is not now, nor do I suspect then, an easy admission to make. We always like to think of ourselves as competent, don't we, to handle any situation we find ourselves in. I think men are particularly subject to that delusion. But the fact of the matter is that we all, from time to time, find ourselves in a position when we must ask for help. And, in fact, all of us, always, are completely dependent on God, whether we care to admit it or not. I am deeply suspicious of those who like to proclaim themselves as "self-made," who say that they have "pulled themselves up by their own bootstraps." They are either not very smart or not very observant or not very interested in the truth. All of us, particularly those of us who are, by accident of birth, part of the dominant culture, are beholden to parents, teachers, and other benefactors for whatever success we may enjoy. And all of us are beholden to God for all good gifts, as we are reminded in a different passage from the Epistle of James – "every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights" – or, if you are of a certain age, from that beautiful song in "Godspell," "All Good Gifts," which requires a far better tenor voice than mine to sing successfully.

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Another good lesson on where strength really lies comes from that passage I just read from Proverbs. All of us, without exception, had a mother, without whose nurture and labor, in the obstetric sense of the word, we would not be here. And all of us, I suspect, had someone, a mother, a father, an older sibling, or other relation or caring person, who got us through childhood fed, clothed, schooled, and with some idea of how to function in polite society. The latter part of Proverbs 31 focuses on the traditional provider of this nurture, the capable woman, wife and mother. We often hear that women and their contribution to society were not appreciated in Biblical times but I think this may be an exaggeration to set up an excuse for our culture's own shabby treatment of women. Clearly the author of this chapter of Proverbs, customarily held to be King Lemuel, thinks highly of women, whom he rates as "more precious than jewels," rubies, coral, or pearls, depending upon the translation.

And just what were the virtues that made this paragon of the ancient Near East so prized? Not the strutting and preening and muscle-flexing that we usually associate with kings of this period. Instead, King Lemuel directs our attention to this woman who made sure that everyone in her house had enough to eat, that they had enough warm clothes, that there was plenty of money set aside for a rainy day. She's the one who gets up before dawn to make breakfast, runs her own business for the benefit of the family, makes her own clothes. While she does all this, her husband goes off and sits with the elders at the town gate, able to focus on his own business and that of the village because he knows everything at home is under control. He gets praised for what she does. He's smart enough to praise her in turn. But the point is that she is focused on others, the welfare of her husband and kids and those who work for her. Never once in this passage do we hear that she is doing something just for herself. And her largesse extends beyond those in her immediate care to the needy and poor of her community.

Things have changed somewhat for the better in our culture in that women are no longer bound by traditional roles and expectations. But whether the virtues extolled here are practiced in the home or in some other kind of business, the lesson is the same and for men as well as women. We do best in the world and in the eyes of God when we are other-oriented, when we are willing to go the extra mile for someone else's benefit without undue care for ourselves. That doesn't mean being a doormat for others or to be satisfied with less than what's right. King Lemuel's ideal is obviously a sharp businesswoman and her husband and children are portrayed as wise enough to appreciate her. But it does mean that all of us, without regard to gender, are called to look out for our families, our colleagues, and the poor in the same way that this heroine of our faith does.

We are not called, as Jesus was, to die for others. Very few have that calling and only Jesus was called to die for the whole world. It was a calling that his disciples absolutely could not make sense of. They could not get their heads around the idea that the Messiah could be defeated, humiliated, and killed. The Messiah that they had been waiting for was a man sent by God to restore Israel to worldly glory, to chase the Romans screaming from Israel, to obliterate the Gentiles, to usher in a reign of peace enforced as peace always had been – with a strong arm and plenty of weapons, horses, and troops. This idea of a suffering Messiah? They just couldn't, as we used to say, "grok" it. It was inconceivable. And so, rather than to betray their ignorance, to save face with the Master, they smiled and nodded and didn't ask him to explain.

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Instead, they seized on the thing he said last, that he would “rise again.” This, they understood, or at least thought they did. After all, the Pharisees had been teaching for some time by now the universal resurrection at the end of all things. The disciples seemed to understand this as Jesus talking about that sort of apocalyptic, teleological event that we read of Daniel and Revelation and some other isolated passages in both Old and New Testaments. Again, they connected it with the kind of power they understood – power to destroy, power to defeat, a power that raised one group by placing them on top of another. And so, in this same vein, they began to argue about which of them would have the place of honor next to the Risen Christ as they imagined him. Who would get to lord it over others?

Before we get too disgusted with the apostles, before we decide we are ready to give up on them in particular or on the followers of Jesus in general for not really understanding him, let’s practice the old exegetical exercise: who are we in this story? Are we Jesus, all wise, ready even to die to fulfill the will of God for our lives? Really? Or are we, just like Peter and James and John and crew, more than a little confused by this whole thing? It’s perfectly human to want to be one of the favorites. It’s perfectly human to have a hard time identifying with the losers. And make no mistake, loser is what Jesus is warning them he’s going to be in this scenario. It’s always hard to admit we don’t know what’s going on around us, that we don’t understand what’s happening, that we’re not in control. Time to jump back to the lesson of Psalm 54 – we are ALWAYS dependent on God because we’re NEVER actually in control. Whether I like it or not, when I put myself into this story, I’m right alongside the apostles. “You guys are clueless! Jesus likes ME best!”

There are good, God-given reasons for each of us to rejoice in who we are as unduplicated children of God but we can take such unreasonable pride in the accidents of our birth: our gender, our nationality, our heritage, just like the disciples. Despite King Lemuel’s praise, despite the way that Jesus acted toward them as equals, if you’d called one of these men “a woman,” you’d likely have had a fight on your hands. Women were perceived as weak and they weren’t willing to be weak. Jesus was. Children were perceived as worthless – you had as many as you could in those days because they were more likely than not to die before they got to be old enough to be helpful. If they lived until they were grown, then they were treasured because they were going to take care of you if you lived long enough. We’re not so very different today. If our society really valued children between the time they are fetuses and the time they are old enough to send to war, school funding would look a lot different. Jesus saw the value in children, even if the apostles didn’t.

The apostles must have been surprised when Jesus pulled a child into the middle of their circle as he taught them. “Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.” Hospitality in that age, and I think still in ours, was expected to be reciprocated or at least to be praised to raise the honor of the host in the community. Children could not reciprocate and could not be expected to understand the necessity for honor-enhancing public praise. And yet, Jesus tells his friends that to give hospitality to one of these weak, worthless beings was equivalent to giving hospitality to God. What?

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There are plenty of people in our culture who still don't understand the value of someone who cannot repay, who cannot return a favor, who cannot somehow enhance the standing of others in the community. This is why we still have so many who are hungry, so many who are homeless. This is why we show so little mercy to those who've transgressed the rules of our community. We forget that other teaching of Jesus about feeding and clothing those in need, about visiting those who are sick or in prison. We forget about loving those who can do nothing for us in return.

But there is something about holding a baby that will help you remember those things. Most of the illustrations of this scene show Jesus with a child or children of preschool age or above, the age that kids can be expected to be quiet and behave themselves when in important company. In our Wednesday lectionary discussion group, my colleagues and I considered the possibility that what Jesus actually did here was to bring a baby into the middle of the circle. He would have been holding it. The baby might have been peacefully asleep or hungry and crying. Maybe, as he spoke of welcoming such a child, Jesus may have handed the baby to one of the apostles. Maybe they passed the child from arm to arm, struggling to pacify it, trying to keep it asleep. I'm going to ask you all to indulge me in an exercise of the kind I used to do in the theatre. How many of you here have never held a baby? Close your eyes and imagine that are in that house with Jesus. Are you sitting on a rough wooden bench or on the floor of hard packed dirt? Are you standing? Is it night with candles and lamps or day with sun streaming in at the door and window? Is it warm or cold? Now, here, have a baby. Can you feel the weight in your arms? Not too heavy, of course. Remember how to support its head? What sort of noises is it making? Happy coos, hungry cries, little snores? Put your face close to the top of its head. Feel the warmth? Isn't that clean baby head smell a miracle? What wouldn't you do for that child right now? OK, you can open your eyes.

On Wednesday, my colleagues and I decided that the experience of holding a baby while Jesus talked about welcoming such a one as a representative for God would have been profoundly powerful, even for those crusty, macho fishermen and farmers. After all, which of us hasn't seen such a man reduced to babbling in such an incidence? It would be a wonderful thing for the world if we could go up to all of those politicians and all of those generals and all of those executives who are on the same kind of power trips that the apostles were on and say, as we suspect Jesus was doing, "Here, have a baby. Smell its head. Isn't that a miracle? Now, what were you saying?"

The reality is that we all go on power trips from time to time. We all get wound up in thinking that we are the ones that really matter, that God likes us best, that's what's good for us is good for the country, and so on. But the lesson this morning is that we are all contingent creatures, dependent on God, just like the Psalmist said, no more powerful than that child in Jesus' arms. The lesson this morning is that the Godly way is the nurturing way, the way of care for others, just like that housewife so praised by that long-ago king. The lesson this morning is that we really should pay more attention to the weak ones in our midst, the worthless ones, the little ones. We really should put women and children and all they represent first and not just in lifeboats. Here, have a baby. Thanks be to God. Amen.