

Crossing the Threshold of Hope

7 – Marks of the 21st Century Church – A Church that Extends Justice and Compassion

Isaiah 56:1-8

Psalm 82

Luke 10:25-37

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World Communion Sunday

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If there is a more familiar story in the Bible I do not know what it is. The Good Samaritan is so ingrained in us we, well, we may just miss its meaning. We are accustomed to the conventional interpretations about the bad Jewish priests and Pharisees, religious insiders too busy to notice, stop and help the wounded man in the ditch.

They get their come-uppance through the example of this Samaritan outsider, a heathen, or at least a person lacking proper orthodoxy, who actually does what the faith the others profess tells them to do, to as Isaiah put it, “Maintain justice and do what is right.”ⁱ As the Psalmist put it, “Give justice to the weak and the orphan, maintain the right of the lowly and the destitute. Rescue the weak and the needy.”ⁱⁱ

This foreigner along the Jericho Road turns aside, goes out of his way and, at tremendous risk, personal inconvenience, and an open ended line of credit at the inn, leaves the man to continue to be cared for once he has tended to his wounds. This Samaritan is our example to follow, the outsider who lives the teachings of God more than the insiders.

I

It is a powerful message. But unfortunately not a very effective one. And we will miss its meaning if we are only hearing it as a moral tale to be kind and nice and take care of strays. When we hear it like that, we think it adequate to drop a few coins in the Salvation Army kettle at Christmas or work a few hours at the Habitat House or, as today, place a special gift in the peacemaking offering. All these are very fine and necessary responses. But all these responses, like that of the upstanding lawyer who questions Jesus in the first place, asking what must I do to be saved? What is required? What is the bottom line? Responses seeking our own self-justification. What must I do?

What if, instead, we see ourselves, not as the priest or the Pharisee or the Samaritan but honestly, as the wounded beaten man in the ditch. That is where we must begin. All of us, church folk and godless heathens, reprobates alike, start there lying nearly lifeless in the ditch, and all the ministries of the church whizz right by us making no impact whatsoever until this Stranger appears. This stranger who comes to us, bends down and offers us healing ointment, refreshing drink, bandages for our wounds, help and restoration to wholeness. This Stranger who is none less or other than God himself in Jesus Christ. We all are that man in the ditch first of all. We all must receive from the Stranger who comes from the strange far away place to help us before we are in any sense able to really “go and do likewise.”

William Willimon notes that, this is

“a story about the odd, threatening, humiliating, and extravagant form by which God draws near to us for our rescue. It’s a story about our shock at the peculiar One who risked all for us. The Samaritan is more than a moralistic story about how we ought to do good for others but rather a joke about how Jesus makes all of us look poor and beaten up and then teaches us to receive the God we’ve got. There is a kind of promiscuous quality in his extroverted love.”ⁱⁱⁱ

You see, the fact is nothing can happen through us until it has happened to us. The first step toward being a person and a community where justice and compassion are really practiced and working is to allow the God of justice and compassion to touch us with his grace. And then, yes, we receive that inner capacity from Jesus Christ alone to have eyes to see, ears to hear, hearts to break, minds to know, and wills to embrace and heal the broken ones we encounter.

II

I love this first Sunday in October that we recognize as World Communion Sunday. It is a really neat idea, started by a Presbyterian in 1936 as a way to dramatize and make visible, at least for a moment our hope to complete, our still unfulfilled calling to unity. The world is still full of problems. The church is as divided as ever, if not more-so. Here, on the other side of the Second World War, with continuous armed conflicts ever since. World Communion Sunday began to be observed. I do not see us much closer to the completion of God’s promised Kingdom among us. But World Communion is a place to stand, a perspective from which to move forward, “that we may be one,” as Jesus prayed in Gethsemane, gathered at one vast table that stretches throughout the world where Jesus is host and all people are fed with that which truly nourishes. That we may be one so that the world may believe.

There is a depth of communication in real communion, that cannot reach us through words alone but must be accompanied by actions. Bread and Cup are signs and seals of a deep spiritual reality conjoined within them. Bread is broken, which Jesus tells us is his body really broken for us for the forgiveness of our sins. Wine is poured, which Jesus tells us is his blood really shed for us for our salvation. The Supper points us unmistakably to the Cross and the costly love of God demonstrated there, and the victory Jesus Christ won for us there, that resulted in the Resurrection. Cross and Resurrection together. Jesus is really present in this very expensive meal, and we need to accept the invitation to come and receive his healing nourishment. We need to cross the threshold of hope.

John Calvin said,

“It follows that in order to have our life in Christ our souls must feed on his body and blood as their proper food... in order that we may learn to seek there the substance of our spiritual life.”^{iv}

“For we should understand, that not only has he (Jesus)called us one day to possess his heavenly inheritance, but that by hope he has already in some measure installed us in possession; that not only has he promised us life, but already transported us into it.”^v

This is to say – by hope what he has promised in the future we possess in the present. Here, now, always. Could it be we have been content to just drift along, passively marinating in what once was but is no longer, a vaguely Christian Culture? A thin veneer – Catching a nice little sermon now and then, rather than allowing the Crucified God to come and tend our wounds, bandage our injuries, get us to an inn, a good meal, healing, a night’s rest, and then send us out in his name to do as he has told us?

III

Nothing will happen through us until it has happened to us. That is why we need to come to this Table and be fed. Receive God’s nourishment. Then and then only will we have the capacity to go out and extend mercy and kindness, justice and compassion, to “do likewise,” as Jesus commands. Then and only then will we really see the man in need as did the Good Samaritan. Then and only then will we be ready to respond to the needs along the road. Then and only then will we be able to ask the right question. as Martin Luther King, Jr. said, “The first question which the priest and the Levite asked was: ‘If I stop to help this man, what will happen to me?’ But the good Samaritan reversed the question: ‘If I do not stop to help this man, what will happen to him?’” Our response then may affect a wounded person or a wounded world.

Rowan Williams, the Archbishop of Canterbury, described an amazing gathering back in 2000, in Great Britain. Churches round the world had united to work for debt relief for third world nations, building on the millennium theme, on the Year of Jubilee concept in the Hebrew Scriptures where every 50 years debts were to be forgiven and property revert to the original owners, our namesake. The U. N. supported it. The U. S. Congress supported it. The Vatican supported it. The Presbyterian General Assembly and other Church Councils worldwide supported it. The celebration came to a climax in Birmingham, England, where the G-8 countries’ heads of state had gathered for an economic summit. As Rowan Williams said,

“An extraordinary variety of Christian groups (was) on the streets, Catholic, Pentecostal, Left Wing, Right Wing... I felt able to say – ‘I have seen the church and it works.’ Something of a real hunger and thirst for justice in Christ’s name had drawn and held this unlikely coalition, its only agenda was to further what all believed was the call of God’s kingdom to resist what offended God’s justice.”^{vi}
 “I have seen the church and it works.”

So come today. Cross the threshold of hope. Come to the banquet of hope. This is an expensive meal. You need it’s costly nourishment. Then go, ransomed, healed, restored, forgiven, go in hope and do likewise. Amen.

ⁱ Isaiah 56:1.

ⁱⁱ Psalm 82:3,4.

ⁱⁱⁱ William Willimon, Who Will Be Saved, p.11.

^{iv} John Calvin, Treatises on the Sacraments, “Short Treatise on the Holy Supper of Our Lord Jesus Christ, 1540, p.170, 171.

^v John Calvin, Treatises on the Sacraments, “Short Treatise on the Holy Supper of Our Lord Jesus Christ, 1540, p. 165.

^{vi} Rowan Williams, Tokens of Trust, p.