

Sermon for 11/20/11
Last Pentecost Proper 29A

Are you concerned about the economy and the government?
Or am I the only one?
There's a sense of foreboding and unease in the air around us.
Another new crisis seems to pop up every week; we don't have a clue as to what's coming next.
One day the stock market soars; the next day it crashes.
The favorites for next year's presidential election seem to change right along with the weather.
The ranks of the poor and the unemployed seem to be swelling with no end in sight.
The Tea Party has called for a radical restructuring of how our nation works.
Occupy Wall Street continues to grow in numbers and influence, calling for a change in the direction that the economy has been heading for the past 30 years.
Some wealthy people step forward saying they're willing to pay more taxes while there's a sneaking suspicion that others are using their wealth to buy up political preferences and favoritism.
And most of our representative in the state and the nation seem far more interested in winning more power for themselves than in doing what's best for the people who elected them.

It makes me think back to another time of upheaval in the nation's history: the 1960s.
It was the time of the Civil Rights movement, the women's movement was beginning to gain some traction, and many questioned the government's policies in Viet Nam.
It was a time of anxiety and uncertainty as the long-held social contract seemed to be changing.
In "Ballad Of A Thin Man" Bob Dylan summed up the way it felt to many people: "Because something is happening here and you don't know what it is, do you Mr. Jones."
The world was changing and there was real confusion as to what that change would be and what it might mean.
Sound familiar?

When the earth shifts beneath our feet, we're left feeling unsteady and anxious.
Perhaps the earthquake in August is a perfect metaphor for how life feels right now.
The things we thought were solid and dependable have shifted in ways that we never expected.
We don't know what's going to stand and what's going to tumble to the ground.

Right now we want – we *need* – something solid to hold on to.
I think that today's Gospel has an answer.
It contained a very clear call to feed the hungry, to tend to the thirsty, to welcome the stranger, to clothe the naked, to care for the sick, and to visit those in prison.
This passage leaves no doubt that Jesus wants his followers to minister to people in need; it leaves no doubt that Jesus wants us to minister to people who have less than we do.
But he does it in a surprising way.

Current politics gives us a tendency to divide people into three groups: the two extremes on either side and then the majority of the people who are somewhere in the middle.
Right now we have the Tea Party and Occupy Wall Street which are seen as the extremes with most of the country falling into the middle group.
I think we make the same kind of distinctions when it comes to ministry to others.
On one side we find the saints who break their backs helping the poor while on the other side we find the slum lords, drug dealers, and con artists who actively prey on the poor.
And then, of course, there's the rest of us in the middle.
Jesus rejects that model categorically.
Instead of having the three categories – saints, sinners, and those in the middle – he separates us into two categories: those who help people in need and those who don't.
He takes away that luxury of our believing that we can just stroll along in the middle.
You're one of the sheep or you're one of the goats.
You're on the side of God or you're not.

*The Rev. Kent D. Rahm
Trinity Episcopal Church, Fredericksburg, VA
Sermon for 11/20/11 Last Pentecost Proper 29A*

You are a good and righteous person who helps the poor or you are a sinner who ignores the needs of the people all around you.

That's a frighteningly stark distinction, isn't it?

Does it make you as uncomfortable as it makes me?

This is one of those Scripture passages that just doesn't leave us any wiggle room at all.

It is absolutely unequivocal in its call to serve people in need.

Our faith calls us to care for others **AND** it calls us to rejoice in the opportunities for service that we have.

Tuesday Night Outreach, Christmas Outreach, and the Turkey Fund are all good starts.

But are they enough?

Shouldn't we feel the responsibility to do more?

After all, every time that we don't reach out to one of the least of these we lose an opportunity to serve God in Christ.

And that service requires a sacrifice on our part, a sacrifice that might cut more deeply than we would like.

Charity is, of course, a good thing and it can make a real difference for a great many people, but it isn't enough.

Charities are already stretched to the breaking point; they just don't have the resources necessary to take care of the expanding needs in the community, the nation, and the world.

Having the government help to provide a public safety net for the needy has been an American value for generations.

But as our political system has embraced giving less and less to the poor while enabling the wealthiest in our midst to amass almost unfathomable fortunes it has moved farther and farther away from the Gospel values that are supposed to be at the core of our being.

And while our pluralistic government will never precisely reflect our values and preferences, we as individuals can stand for our beliefs and can work to see them made part of public policy.

Which is where our sacrifice comes into play.

For example, I like the mortgage interest deduction on my taxes since it saves me money.

But perhaps the time has come to do away with that tax break so that the hungry can be fed and the homeless be provided a place to live.

And I like the fact that I don't have to declare my health care benefits on my taxes, effectively lowering my income and therefore my tax bill.

But perhaps the time has come to do away with that tax break so that the poor can get the medical care that they need.

And the wealthier we are, the more that God has blessed us with financial resources, the greater our responsibility in providing for those who do not have enough.

In a perfect world, everyone would have enough and no one would have to make any sacrifices.

But we don't live in a perfect world.

We live in this world; and the only way that we can begin to meet some of our God-given responsibility for others is to be willing to sacrifice and to make do with less ourselves.

When you read the unemployment statistics – remember that it is Jesus who is out of work.

When you hear about the expanding millions who are poor in our country – remember that it is Jesus who can't make ends meet.

When you hear about people who can't afford the health care they need – remember that it is Jesus who doesn't have enough for a co-pay.

When you see stories about the explosive growth of people behind bars in the US – remember that it is Jesus who is caged, knowing that he has few opportunities in his future.

And remember his words, "Just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me."

*The Rev. Kent D. Rahm
Trinity Episcopal Church, Fredericksburg, VA
Sermon for 11/20/11 Last Pentecost Proper 29A*