

Sermon September 20, 2020 “Not the world as it is, but as God wants it to be...”

Sung- “bring forth the kingdom of mercy, bring forth the kingdom of peace bring forth the kingdom of justice, bring forth the City of God.”

I grew up in Green Bay, Wisconsin, in a house that was just down the street from a city park. My friends and I spent a lot of time in that park- it had baseball fields and wide open grass to play football.

Every winter, the baseball fields were flooded with water to make two hockey rinks and a skating rink, and every spring the snow and ice melted on those fields, so that the baseball diamonds became large.. fields..of..mud; wonderful, thick sticky mud.

My best friend growing up was Don; he lived 2 houses down the street. One beautiful, warm, spring afternoon when we were 5 or 6, we made our way to the park, to the mud, and it was wonderful. We stood along the edge, picked up a couple of handfuls and tossed them toward the middle of the field. They landed with satisfying “plops.”

Being boys, one thing leads to another, and soon we were wading in the mud, enjoying the feel of it on our feet and legs. My friend and I were laughing and soon pelting each other with the mud, until the moment we came to our senses; both of us at once- it seems...

We stood still- looked at our shirts and shorts and hands, arms and feet.. and almost in unison, we said; “We’re gonna get it.” All the way home, over and over we said, “We’re gonna get it.”

I walked in the back door, stood on the rug and said, quietly, “mom.” I heard her walking through the kitchen, and I was thinking that these were my last moments on this earth... As she came around the corner, she looked at me standing there - and she laughed- “oh my goodness” she said, laughing... And she whisked me off to the tub.

I was dumbfounded – once clean, I wanted to know how my friend had fared, so I ran out the door, and he was running down the street toward me. He yelled: “did you get it?” “No, I didn’t get it, did you get it?” “No, I didn’t get it.”

But you know what? These 5 decades later, as I stand here telling you that true story of little Billy- I realize that I did get it... I got a glimpse of the kingdom of God.

In this world, we learn quickly “you get what you deserve” – if you play in the mud and soil your clothes, you’re gonna be punished, so you don’t do it again. Jonah, in today’s first reading, thinks the people of Ninevah should “get it” -they should be punished,- they were his enemies- he was an Israelite, they were Assyrians. The Assyrians had conquered the Israelites back in 722, so they should be punished- But God said no Jonah.. go to Ninevah and tell them to repent.

And you might know the story, Jonah said, “no,” went off on a ship, got tossed overboard and swallowed by a large fish, then spit up on the shore. Jonah came to his senses and said “all right God, “I’ll go” And half heartedly, he told the Ninevites to repent and when they did, Jonah was mad. In today’s passage, Jonah is angry that God changed God’s mind about the calamity that God was planning to bring upon them.

They deserved to be punished for what they did- no matter that they had repented. Jonah sulked away and sat outside the city. It was hot, and God made a bush come up over sulking Jonah, and Jonah was happy to be cool, but then a worm came and withered the bush, and Jonah was hot once again.

And God used that as a lesson, to teach Jonah. He did nothing to deserve the bush, and it’s shade, it was a gift- just as God’ forgiveness of the Ninevites was not something they deserved, it was a gift. Just as a little boy covered in mud being washed and made clean was not something he deserved- it was a gift.

A gift that offered a glimpse of the kingdom of God.

This lesson is made clear in today’s Gospel reading, a parable. Workers hired by the owner of a vineyard; some are hired at the beginning of the day, some more at noon, 3pm and finally 5pm. When they come to be paid the 5pm workers received a full day’s pay. The all day workers probably thought “great they were paid for all day, we’re going to get more”, but no, they received the daily wage they were promised, and they were angry- “we deserve more” In this world, you get what you deserve, and we worked longer, so we should get more.

Never mind that those 3pm and 5pm workers might have had physical challenges that prevented them from working all day; or perhaps they were caring for an ailing parent or child; or maybe they lived on the outskirts of town where housing was more affordable and it took them hours to get to the marketplace. Never mind, you should get what you deserve those all-day workers think. And the landowner says something interesting, he says to them, **“friend”**

Even as those workers grumbled against him, disrespectfully, the landowner referred to them as friends.

Because this is a parable, a parable about the Kingdom of God. A kingdom where the usual divisions of wealth and power- like the division between the landowner and his laborers- don't exist. Because all are beloved, all are made in God's image- landowner, all day worker and 5pm workers alike. By calling them “friend” the landowner is encouraging his all day workers to see their fellow workers as friends- as brothers and sisters, deserving of a full day's pay.

As David Lose says:

“Jesus isn't telling us a parable about this world as it is, he's telling us a parable of the kingdom, that is, of the world *as God want it to be*, a world where everyone is treated the same, despite what they've contributed or have, where everyone is accorded the same dignity, respect and reward.”

“This strange, hard, and important parable reminds us that, at the end of the day, it's actually not about deserving, but rather about being known and accepted and loved and redeemed, not because of who we are or what we've done or not done, certainly not because of the color our skin, our accomplishments or lack thereof. But simply because that's who Jesus is- the one who surrenders all titles and claims and calls us- each of us “friend” and then invites us... to see those around us as friends and fellow children of God, and (calls us) to work for the world of equity God desires, praying as we go, “thy kingdom come, they will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.”

From “In the Meantime”

The lesson I learned long ago down the street from a muddy field, A lesson Jonah learned through a bush he did nothing to deserve, and all- day workers learned from a landowner calling them “friends” is clear;

God’s kingdom is not built on fairness or getting what you deserve, God’s kingdom is built on grace- God’s love poured out as gift- given to the deserving and undeserving alike.

A love that has the power to transform us and to change our world so it’s a little more like what God wants it to be... a world where little boys learn they don’t get what they deserve – they receive unconditional love -

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