

Sermon: Pentecost 18

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September 23, 2018

Year B
Proverbs 31:10-31
Psalm 1
James 3:13-4:3, 7-8a
Mark 9:30-37

Who do we welcome... and do we impose any criteria... any conditions on those we do welcome... and how do we welcome them... how far into our lives... into our emotional or physical spaces... do we allow them to come... this far and no farther... only to our front door... only into the foyer... or perhaps to be seated at the kitchen table... and how do any conditions we might impose... compare to the either more restrictive... or more inclusive ways... in which we have been welcomed by others...

I have been welcomed into the home of Joel's former wife Anne... I have been welcomed into God's family... Joel and I have been welcomed into these two communities... but how do we welcome women... do we welcome them in some ways but not in others... we welcome them into our voting booths... and sometimes into our board rooms... but how far do we let their stories... their realities... their truths... soak into our collective consciousness... think about this... *boys who report decades-old sexual assault by priests... spark public outrage... and Grand Jury investigations... but girls attacked by boys decades ago... are accused of waiting too long...* something's wrong here... we live with a startling disconnect in how we respond to those who are abused... Dr. Christine Ford has said that she will testify this coming week... I pray that she is not being used by powers greater than herself... that she speaks her truth alone... and that she is not dismissed because of the intervening years... or because she is a woman...

In some non-liturgical churches... in some churches which don't follow a lectionary... today's reading from Proverbs is read only on Mother's Day... pastors would affirm that a mother's work is hard... that the work God has given to mothers must be respected by

all... as it is respected in this passage of scripture... but how far did that welcome extend...

As H. James Hopkins wrote... not far enough... these same churches were firmly against women in the pulpit... against women in public places of power... against women who rejected the traditional roles of wife... mother... and subservient member of the community... because these same churches were against any mention of equal rights for women... the way the text was used in my church... Hopkins wrote... is an example of the way preachers limit its bite... by sentimentalizing it... and you and I know... that some people tell their daughters... that when a boy is mean or rude to them... that it's because he has a crush on her... and this runs the risk of teaching them... that abuse is a sign of love... it's not... even before I was a teenager... I was teased repeatedly by one of my parent's friends... I liked the attention but disliked how it felt... and my father told me it was because this person liked me... another... startling... disconnect...

And part of the reason that these abused boys are believed decades later... but girls are not... part of the reason is rooted in the cultural rejection of women... by powerful straight men... who abuse women and call it love... men who are aligned with Empire and power... and two clues which point in the direction of that truth... and which all women know... are glass ceilings... and unequal pay for equal work...

But the woman described in today's reading from Proverbs... is an equal partner with her husband... she buys fields... she is praised at the city gates... and she speaks Wisdom... and our reading from James... tell us that the Wisdom that is from above... is without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy... it means that all are welcomed and treated... with equity...

When they got to Capernaum... Jesus asked them what they were arguing about on the way... but they were silent... they were ashamed to tell him... because they had

become aligned with the values of Empire... they were arguing about who among them was the greatest... who had the most power... Jesus had just told them that he must be betrayed into human hands... and be killed... this was not about having the kind of power they wanted...

Fr. Mike Hinman of All Saint's Pasadena... writes... think about the disciples... they have physically walked with Jesus all this time and seen him do incredible things... just before this passage... some of them saw him transfigured on a mountaintop after hanging out with Moses and Elijah... and they heard the very voice of God saying... "This is my son, the one I love. Listen to him!" and yet... when Jesus talks about not being a Messiah who takes a throne but who hangs on a cross... we hear... "They did not understand what he was saying... and were afraid to ask him."

Fr. Hinman continues... When we hear Jesus' passion predictions... it's easy to be drawn to the words "be killed"... but there is another word that is just as important... *betrayed*... betrayal is one of the most painful pieces of our humanity... one of the deepest parts of our brokenness... betrayal is when we take the greatest gifts we can give one another... love and trust... and we use them against one another... betrayal is when we tempt each other to feel foolish for loving and trusting... and yet... if we are to walk the road Christ walks... we invite betrayal... because to walk with Christ is to strive to love all... [everyone]... completely... and we can't do that without knowing that some of that love is going to be used against us... but we cannot let that stop us...

In fact... at the Last Supper... Jesus told Judas to go and do what he must do... he invited betrayal... a specific betrayal which down through the centuries... has been deemed unforgivable... yet the only sin which Jesus mentions in Matthew and Luke as being unforgivable... is blaspheming the Holy Spirit...

Then Jesus took a little child and put it among them... and taking it in his arms... he said to them... *Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me... and*

whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me... you see... children haven't developed the masks... the false persona... the guile... to hide their vulnerability... the way adults have... and it's why Matthew 18:2-5 records Jesus as saying... truly I tell you... unless you change and become like children... you will never enter the kingdom of heaven... whoever becomes humble like this child... is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven... whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me...

As Pearl Maria Barros... who teaches religious studies at UC Santa Clara... wrote... for some of us... we have the racial privilege of being white in a world that privileges whiteness... for others... we have the gendered privilege of being male in a world that privileges maleness... Jesus invites us to ask... how will I use my privilege to serve those who do not share it... how will I become "last of all and servant of all" in those places where I hold privilege... Jesus is not calling us to be doormats... we are not called to remain silent in the face of oppression... because we are "last of all and servant of all" ... due to our race, gender, ability, or sexuality... we are only last in those places where we are first...

So perhaps it's time to make the Church great again... by becoming vulnerable... again... like children...

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