

Proper 21 Year A

“Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interest of others.

Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who though in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself.”

Well, That’s kind of it, isn’t it? I should sit down, there’s just not much left to say... If you wanted to summarize the Christian faith in one sound bite...this would be it. In fact of all the New Testament literature, including the Gospels, Paul’s letter to the Philippians consisting of just four chapters speaks with the most precision and eloquence as to God’s will for God’s people...this is Paul whom you remember is the earliest source of Jewish Christian literature in the Canon, and the only New Testament literary figure who lived during the time of Jesus’ life....and though the Gospel writers get most of the so-called press... without Paul, his writings, his preaching and witness, his neuroses notwithstanding, Christianity may never have taken root....and the letter to the Philippians is in my mind Paul at his best and Paul at his most passionate....exhorting his followers to love their neighbor above themselves....to live into our Godlikeness...to give ourselves over to it...not for our own benefit but to give it away for the good of others...Paul calls this life one of ekenosis, in the Greek, emptying oneself, emptying our Christlikeness which is Godlikeness for the good of the whole....our Christlikeness, the form of God, an image of the church: our innate predisposition for compassion; our innate love of a just social and economic order; our innate sense of mercy; our desire for peace; our innate respect for the well being and dignity of our neighbor....As God’s sons and daughters those are our gifts to the world.

If modern American people who call themselves Christian actually bothered to read scripture (and that’s one criticism bishop Jack Spong has of fundamentalists is that they don’t read the Bible)...and especially if our politicians who so ardently and publically claim to be Christian...if they bothered to actually read what’s in the Bible and take it to heart, the world might very well be a far better place....most have obviously missed or ignored this passage in Philippians...We don’t serve our own interests, but the interests of others...we don’t exploit our power, our Godlikeness....we give it away...we who are in the form of God, like our brother Jesus are to empty ourselves....we are to empower the powerless....Mahatma Gandhi said it best, he said, “If Christians started acting like Christians the world would be drastically changed for the better.” And I believe that applies to all

people of faith in all religions...because all the religions of the world call for an enacted faith...not merely an ascription to a system of beliefs...that's easy....but all religions including our own require action and practice.... emptying ourselves of imagination and creativity, our Godlikeness for the dignity and well being of our world, particularly for the ones who have no dignity and live in the dire straits of poverty, disease and violence and oppression...these are the unsaved.

In our culture we are taught that salvation is about us...but dear friends it is not about us... Salvation means well being and dignity,....that is what our sacred texts are saying to us...So salvation is something we give away...Our practice of the faith...our work as people of a doing faith in the world is the sweat equity of God's commonweal in which all have a stake, in which all share in the world's abundance, in which all are equals....wherein the interest of our neighbor becomes the interest of all...and sadly and tragically the powers and principalities of our world just don't believe that! We still go to war; there is still preventable disease and hunger and thirst; the disparity of wealth grows exponentially.

Matthew is making the observation in our Gospel reading this morning that the powers and principalities don't get it.....The context is this: Matthew is writing in the eighties of the first century, some ten or so years after the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem by the Roman army...and not just the destruction of the Temple, but the entire city was burned to the ground...the center of the Jewish soul crushed...so Matthew is writing to an audience on whom the Romans are keeping a close eye....he is writing about the possible reconstitution of his people....a way forward after the calamity of 70 A.D.....the chief priests and elders of the Jews are vassals of the Roman government charged with keeping the peace....they can say their prayers and worship their God...but don't dare challenge the status quo... that's the same old deal with Rome, the same old deal with empire...if one challenges the way of empire then one pays the price....John the Baptizer, beheaded....Jesus of Nazareth crucified... Stephen.... Andrew... Peter.... Paul... Perpetua...and countless others martyred for the cause...the cause... the cause being the turning of society around where it looks like the society that God intends, that God envisions for us and all. Matthew is saying in this passage in so many words, as he does throughout this gospel, that to believe is to act....Jesus accuses the leadership of hearing but not believing and certainly not acting...the word for belief in the Greek is *pisteo*...which is also translated trust...you did not trust the way he tells them...you did not trust the way of life that John preached...you did not trust the way of not serving self interest, but the interests of the least of us, the cast out of us....

you are not trusting the time honored way pointed to by the prophets come before, he tells them....you do not act as if this way were true....the chief priests and elders cardinal symbols of the self interest of powers and principalities.

And Matthew here is also talking about authority...that is an important word....that with faith in action, which is true believing, then there is authority, there is power and empowerment....authority that can effect change.... John the Baptizer earlier in Matthew sends emissaries to Jesus to check out whether he is the real deal or not...and Jesus asks them, "What do you see? We see people being cleansed and healed, we see the dead of our world raised....we see people being offered lives of dignity and well being in the face of degradation and abuse...a chance to stand with their head up, they say....Faith in action, the real deal, has authority and therefore has the power to change things... and it is irresistible.....The root for the word authority is the same root for the word creator, as in author.....So we people of authority practice the words of Jesus, acts of creation...practice the words of Paul, acts of creation... having the mind of Christ, which is to have a mind bent on reconstituting, restoring the world...to heal it of its brokenness...its violence...its shame and humiliation....to gather the scattered remnants of our common humanity to God's gracious and bountiful table...It is for us as followers of the way of Christ to author...to author a renewed goodness in our world.

Our authority dear people of God, the authority of a lived faith, will be known by the way we love; people will see love in the flesh, love enacted in our world; they will see the authority of love.... and there is no authority on this earth more powerful....Our love emptied for the world's sake will change everything....If the leadership of this city; if the leadership of our state; if the leadership of this nation would just believe that...just believe that they are first and foremost to serve the greater good...to not serve our interests first but the interest of others.... To passionately love the world the way God loves the world, then things would change in a flash....We as Christ's raised body are in the form of God....God who does nothing but empties God's love for us....that is our vocation, the way we live our lives, a profound responsibility... to empty ourselves, our creativity, our ingenuity, our skill, our power... to empty the love that is within us, our minds, the mind of Christ bent, no matter the cost, on emptying ourselves for the world's sake....and what marvelous change that would bring.....what marvelous change.....believe that brothers and sisters....believe it... and act as if it were true.