

Proper 20 Year B

“...and they argued among themselves who was the greatest.”

This past Thursday afternoon I was privileged to serve on a panel to lead a discussion on Rob Gray's and Joel Lewis's documentary entitled *Mobile in Black and White*. We watched the introductory segment among faculty and students. There were probably a hundred plus in the room. Some of the panelists like me were interviewed in the documentary and some were faculty with expertise related to the issue of race. All of you are invited to view and discuss the same segment that we saw Thursday this evening at 6:30 beginning with a light supper and then the documentary segment. It would be well worth your while. I've got plenty of time to rave about this documentary, but I'll save that for another time.

I just want to relate to you a few of my impressions of my experience Thursday. First of all, the documentary powerfully speaks to the reality, that in terms of racial equality and justice in our city, in our State and in our country... that we still have a long, long way to go. Three fourths I'd say of the audience were students, and I don't know about you, but as I get older the more college students look like children to me....one young woman, a student, who was white stood up, obviously moved by the film and stated, her voice quavering, that she was homosexual, and that her parents had rejected her for that...another young woman, a black student, told us that in order to help her parents pay her tuition she was working at a fast food restaurant...and amid tears she told us that a group of teens showed up one night and called her nigger...and then while she was not looking they threw a cup of water at her....Hearing them speak one could feel the pain of what it means to be hated out of ignorant prejudice and what it means to be marginalized....a feeling we don't often get because we are so privileged, most of us, and isolated, insulated against such marginalization....God bless the child....It was noted in our discussion that there is still a Mardi Gras organization with hundreds of white members, a good representation of white Mobile that parades floats bearing racial slurs through downtown Mobile on Mardi Gras day...as one panelist put it, they parade amid the halls, the walls of justice...What a shame that is!

In today's gospel reading Jesus places a child in the midst of his disciples and tells them whoever welcomes the child, welcomes him, and that whoever welcomes Jesus welcomes God....Now in our culture of the helicopter parent...we have romanticized and sentimentalized children...we see them as pure innocence, eager to receive what the world has to offer

them; they are put on a lofty pedestal...but in the ancient world the opposite was true...children were the lowest on the social ladder, often unwanted... many nobles, and want-to-be nobles sold their children into slavery...and would later adopt a more presentable young adult as heir... The fact that a child would be in the midst of men in a teaching context and not out of sight being cared for by the women would be unthinkable in this world...so Mark is making a dramatic example of the child as symbol/metaphor of all the marginal, all the vulnerable, all the outcasts of our world (the child, a metaphor for our weakest and least)...and our vocation as people of faith, our vocation as humans is to welcome them as equals and love them as God loves us...God bless the child.

This is also a teaching about power, a predominant theme in Mark... you remember that this encounter with the child takes place just after the disciples are arguing about who was the greatest among Jesus' followers... presumably who would reign supreme in this hoped for coming new world order in which the overlords are cast down, and the occupied people are freed...who would come into power, worldly power...and of course the disciples' lack of understanding leads Jesus to remind them that true power... true power that changes the world...power that is of God...power that comes from sacrifice and service and self giving...that true power comes from welcoming the child...Power that makes its way into hierarchical structures of our world is dangerous, easily corrupted...we only have to look at our institutions: government, corporations, prisons, school systems.....in God's commonweal power must be shared to empower the least, given away to the vulnerable, the lost, the outcast...the proverbial children among us...power must be at equilibrium...power, wealth a symbol thereof must be redistributed...God empower the child.

Ironically enough in this country the largest segment of the population living in poverty are literally children....21% of them live below the poverty line in the wealthiest nation on earth.....So perhaps things haven't changed all that much after all.....they, the children who stand still for suffering, represent all who suffer from preventable injustice in our world...God save the child.

I want to get back to the text again, because in it there is a most important root word that appears and reappears throughout the Septuagint, the Greek translation of Hebrew scripture written in Egypt around two hundred B.C.E, which is the text drawn from by the new Testament writers... and the word appears and reappears throughout the gospel literature and the letters of the New Testament...and that root word is xenos... the root word for stranger, from which we get the word xenophobia,

fear of stranger....and quite amazingly it is also the root word for welcome as well....the prophets and sages of scripture over centuries have put their finger on something profoundly important about us as humans....I referred to it two Sundays ago....this so-called crimp in our DNA....a learned imprint in our genetic makeup that causes us to fear the stranger, fear the other....I believe it is due to millennia of violence....breeding into our species, imprinting upon our DNA fear of the other, which has evoked all manner of violence and oppression in human history. If there is a so-called fall, then I think that is it....that crimp in our DNA that we have acquired by a collective rote memory of violence....we see the manifestation of such fear all over the world....the child in this passage is the symbol of the other, the other that is outcast, the other the weakest among us....the other that is powerless....the other of color....We, all humanity continue to exploit and abase the weak and least among us. Have you noticed that it is always the weak, the powerless who bear the brunt of violence first....Is it our own fear of our own vulnerability that projects such a shadow upon those who least deserve it? I don't know.

But what Jesus is telling us here is that to welcome the child....to welcome the stranger, to welcome the other, even our enemies....to welcome the abased and undignified, and that requires a continuous and courageous practice of vulnerability on our part...Jesus is saying that to practice such vulnerability in the art of welcome is the very means of the world's salvation; ...and until all are welcomed into the circle of dignity, the human circle of welcome, then none of us have a right to stand there, and we will all continue to stand under the aegis of fear....in welcoming the child, we welcome the light of Christ which casts out all fear for the welcomed and the ones who welcome....May those two girls from Thursday afternoon know the dignity of God's welcome one day soon....May God bless us in our sacred welcoming May God bless, empower, and save the child.... Welcome them into the presence of the saints. God bless the child.