

Proper VIII Year A

“Whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me.”

The day of my ordination to the diaconate was on Saturday the twelfth of June in 2004. I was to preach the next day at All Saints at which I had just been hired as Curate. That Saturday was a big day and we, my family and I were all worn out, and I was a little nervous about preaching for the first time here...but at a reception that Saturday afternoon I was invited by Dottie Dunnam (She who must be obeyed) to stop by Stirling Hall late in the afternoon as vacation bible school was winding down to deliver the closing prayers and meet some parents and children.....so I went as weary as I was.

The first person who spoke to me was Terry Clowes....some of y'all will remember Terry....she was a resident of L'Arche. She was one of the few, perhaps the only core member of L'Arche who could read, but she liked coloring books the most...when she'd exhausted her supply she'd summon Amy Hamilton to get her more....Most of you know what L'Arche is, but for those of you who don't, it is a residential community of mentally disabled people, their caretakers and staff who all live together as family sharing chores, activities, prayers and life itself....the residents, otherwise would be institutionalized...but with L'Arche they live with dignity and with care taken for their well-being; their four houses in which they live are each within a block of the church....We provide and have provided office space for them for some thirty five years and have developed an intimate relationship with them....I walked in the door of Stirling Hall and Terry walked over to me and took gently my hand and with a genuine smile said welcome father Jim, I'm glad you're here.

I was immediately set at ease....welcomed into a sacred space....feeling at home after a whirlwind move from Austin to Mobile...made welcome by someone deemed so-called disabled...but then able to understand the secret of the universe.....Terry died young and her remains are buried in our garden....and I like to think that if in paradise God knows the art of sacred welcome, which surely God must, then Terry is welcomed there indeed, standing with dignity and well-being for eternity.

In the first six lines of our gospel reading today the word for welcome, or to give hospitality, is used six times....so we've got to pay close attention here because Matthew is clearly up to something, hammering home his point... the root word for welcome in the Greek is Xenos....as a verb it means to welcome or provide hospitality...as a noun it means stranger...

Isn't that incredible, this play on words, completely lost to us in the English translation...Matthew is playing with the dynamic linguistically...the dynamic, the tension that exists between our resistance to, and perhaps even fear of stranger, and the dignifying art of welcome.

Anthropologists contend that this resistance...this guardedness...this fear of the other comes from the primordial fight or flight instinct...In the ancient human...an instinct for the success and safety of the tribe. But in this passage Matthew recounts Jesus teaching that a new order is at hand in the course of human evolution...that we approach the other, the stranger, the resident alien; the immigrant in our midst, whoever fits the description as the one different...we approach them with welcome....Jesus later in Matthew will take this dynamic so far as to say love your enemies....This is the true bedrock of God's gracious commonweal, that we welcome, that we live always in a predisposition of open arms to the other, the stranger...that to welcome the stranger is to welcome the Christ, and to thereby enter into the relatedness of God's presence, the sacred relatedness of stranger become friend....or perhaps better said our welcoming the other allows us to recognize, recognize Christ's relatedness already among us...recognition, a big part of our work as people of faith...and it is within this way of welcome that friendship, mutuality and collaboration and equality and trust are engendered....a way of life that stands against fight or flight.

Now, what a convenience in the lectionary; who knew in the three year cycle this passage would appear within weeks of the passage of Alabama's immigration law.... So I could right here launch into a rip-roaring sermon on the newly passed and signed, "tough" immigration law in the State of Alabama...but you've read my blog...right...so I'll just say this: whoever wrote this legislation, and there's some question as to who wrote it...whoever wrote this legislation wasn't reading Matthew 10 verses 40-42 as a guide...Now, I realize that this is an extremely complex issue...but what is not complex is the attitude with which we are dealing with the issue... the language and tenor of the legislation is hateful, fearful and downright impractical...What I wish is that as this issue evolves as it certainly will in the courts... we must approach it with a spirit of compassion and welcome, because these people at our gates are our brothers and sisters made in the image and likeness of God, simply and in some cases desperately trying to live a better life.... and to use the term illegal alien demeans them and implies that they are not legitimate children of the one who made us all.

So let's approach this crisis with a predisposition of hospitality, and of creativity...We can do better...let's encourage our elected leaders to find a

practical way for the immigrant to safely make a home here...It will take time and creativity and it will require rules and regulations and restrictions, of course... and a great deal of common sense....It is a complex global phenomenon....but what isn't complex is the attitude we bring to the problem....and according to Matthew that attitude, that predisposition... is welcome....and the other word used three times in just three lines in this gospel text is the word righteous, which is just as accurately translated as just..... Matthew saying that this act of welcome bears God's justice.... distributive justice...God's love distributed to the whole...well-being distributed for the whole....dignity distributed for the whole....and the means to that end, whether on an individual level, or on a statewide or national level...the means to a just end in the collective is welcome and hospitality....that's what saves us from flight or fight.... these marching orders from Jesus are no less than a call for an evolutionary turning point for our species, (homo sapiens: knowing man) and still we haven't as humankind turned that corner yet....In every act of welcome the world is changed for the better because the love of God is shared in that moment, and when the love of God is shared it takes root exponentially...we say the words "love of God" all the time as church people in hymns, prayers and in scripture, but do we ever stop and ask just what it is? This love of God...I believe at the roots level the love of God quite simply but profoundly means dignity and well being....at the heart of the matter that's all anybody really wants or needs....well-being and dignity...that's what God yearns for all of us...all of God's people.

So this art of hospitality, this art of welcome is about the means of bringing God's kingdom, this commonweal of relatedness, in which isolation is no longer an option....this art of welcome is for the now.... for the time is past time that all peoples and nations live as family....make them all one Jesus prays on the eve of his martyrdom....It is time, past time that all people of every race, nation and culture, who only want to know first hand the love of God....It is time for them to enter in, their hand taken gently and told with a genuine smile that sacred word...welcome... welcome, we're glad you're here.