

Proper 12 Year A

“Not here for high and holy things we render thanks to thee, But for the common things of earth”

When my mother was in her late twenties at the birth of her third child she found herself in the midst of a spiritual crisis...these days we would call it post partum depression.....but for her in 1959, before sophisticated medication to control such mania, she called it a pervasive spiritual darkness... and she set about trying to find some light...she grew up Presbyterian...and because my father and all his family were Methodists in Dothan, she joined the Methodist Church...She hated it...she said the senior pastor was more like an undertaker than a preacher...but she felt strongly that the means by which she was to deal with this crisis was through the church...She started reading C.S. Lewis, the Anglican theologian and novelist deemed to be the voice for the Christian skeptic, she read Charles Williams, Carl Jung, both explorers of the psychic mystery of spirituality.... She was referred by a friend to the local Episcopal priest, Ben Meginnis, whom she was told was an expert on C.S. Lewis and quite literate (one time she mused whether the aforesaid Methodist minister had ever read a book)... She began to meet with the Father Meginnis and suddenly, as she tells it, things began to make sense...to this day she calls this experience a religious conversion...she describes it to this day as encountering light...and she gave her life to it.

Needless to say her experience had profound ramifications in our family....we changed churches to the disgust of the Flowers Methodists.... She fell in love with the grace and solemnity of the Episcopal liturgy....she thought it so cool to kneel to pray (we have an ongoing argument about that. She says she's too old to change....If God wanted us to stand to pray why would he have made kneelers)...she joined the altar guild, and got involved every way she could....and for the next fifteen years...at least until we went to college, it was unthinkable that we would miss church on Sunday...But this was the sixties, so the context of her experience was greater than just finding a spiritual home; her experience was a part of a larger collective awakening during that time...the church was experiencing dramatic change....the feminist movement had found its voice....the anti-war movement afire....the advent of civil rights for blacks....political assassinations....the world, her world and the world around her was upside down...the days of “father knows best were over.”....She started going to ecumenical bible studies, spiritual retreats:...Faith at Work, Faith Alive....

she started making us pray together as a family when the least little problem came up....we would all wince and roll our eyes....but she was dead serious...we finally convinced her that it was not cool to pray in front of our friends when they came over to play....so she compromised on that one.... my telling you this would probably embarrass her...though she makes no apologies for her so-called conversion....and she never was a fundamentalist...she was just as she would put it full of the Spirit...as so many were in that era, both in and outside the church....there is such a thing.

During these years she got interested in social and economic issues...she started a jail ministry... she got appointed to the Head Start board and discovered an African American family living out in the county... a husband, wife and five children in just squalid conditions...dirt floors, rats, no plumbing....the husband was on his way to prison for armed robbery.... so she through hook and crook and connections arranged for them to live in section eight housing....in the brand new so-call "project"She would often see about them..... sometimes some of the family would eat supper with us....not often....if one of them got sick I remember her calling our pediatrician at home (back in the day) and making sure he would see them.sometimes she gave them money, but not all that often....we knew them all by name, and they ours....and it was not until these children began growing up, as children of the projects do...that they started getting into trouble.....The father died mysteriously in prison....one of the daughters who was fourteen got pregnant....the son by age twenty had been arrested at least three or four times....I don't know if he served time or not....the mother basically wrote the children off.....she an addict and died young... just this year the middle daughter Sharon died of AIDS at age thirty five. For my mother it was not until these rude symptoms of perennial poverty showed their ugly face within this family with whom she was so invested, that she began to doubt.

My mother began wondering over the years of her relationship with this family..... wondered whether the work for and the caring for this family really ever mattered at all....was this work, so inspired by her faith, all for naught?...that's certainly a question I think many of us ask concerning the ways we serve our neighbor....even serving within our families, in our jobs...was and is our work for naught?

But just this last Christmas, the only son of this family, Pete Dozier Jr. nicknamed "man" called her...he told her that he had a good job that he has had for six years....He wanted her to know how much he and his family

loved her....because as he said... “We all always knew no matter what that you loved us....you made us feel like we were somebody.”

Brothers and sisters the work we do to love our neighbor as small as it may seem, and perhaps how vain it may feel, is like a mustard seed, the tiniest of all seeds in the grand scheme of the world’s vast drama....but it grows into a tree that becomes nurture for all manner of life....and is invasive, subversive, this mustard plant that vigorously makes more seed and more trees....What Matthew is saying here, to a community with the same doubts as ours, is that our work of bearing God’s love is exponential... small, or seemingly small on the giving end....but profound on the receiving end....a tiny seed that bears salvation, salvation meaning dignity and well being....*being somebody*....Our work is like yeast kneaded into wheat that once set loose leavens the world with goodness around us.... bearing nurture beyond our greatest expectations...and these sound bite parables in today’s gospel tell us that nothing is more important in this life than working to bring God’s kingdom, God’s commonweal in earth....It is worth all we have...It is worth it all whether chosen or found....It is the highest moment of grace to discover this joyful vocation of love and to give ourselves to it, selling all we have metaphorically speaking....give ourselves to it because our God depends upon our choosing...and sometimes we never know the fruits of our labor....sometimes we get a gift like my mother got last Christmas....but sometimes we simply labor on knowing that what work we do sometimes, somehow does take root, and somehow, some way will ramify exponentially for the good of the whole....The wholeness of God’s creation, God’s persistent project of which we are a part.

The kingdom of God, God’s great and abundant commonweal does not begin in our institutions...it does not begin in our churches...in our governments....It does not enter from the high and holy places...but it begins in the common acts of love in the mundane and often unclean corners of our world....Jesus doesn’t ever say in any of the Gospels that the kingdom of God is like the Temple (which quite ironically was constructed to symbolize the kingdom of God)....the kingdom he says....the great commonweal of God is a process...the commonweal of God is like work.... all of these parables about work that transforms...the kingdom of God is not a place...but love in action that bears well being and dignity and agency... and by agency I mean the empowering of people who live marginally to take charge of their lives and join the work of salvation... able to join the work of changing our world for the better....The great commonweal of God is like a good day’s work.

I imagine our mission team just returned from Tuscaloosa might have learned a little about the mystery of mustard seeds, and yeast, fields and treasure.... and the giving of one's self....Friends of God: Let us be about planting the seeds of the kingdom, no matter how small. Plant the seeds each day in simple acts of loving sacrifice....and what surely will grow will be great branches that bear up the vulnerable around us....In this short time on earth that we call life, it is the only thing....It is the thing in which we must persist.....persist in love...there, another parable:....the kingdom of God is as if one for all her life persisted in love, and that love bore great fruit..... that somebody felt like somebody.