

Proper 5 Year C

“When the Lord saw her he had compassion for her and said to her...do not weep.”

Just this past Tuesday, we all arrived in the office at the church after a long holiday weekend...back to the grind. There were already people around the door asking for financial assistance...Mary and I have commented often that if we allowed ourselves, we could end up being full time social workers...except that the money runs out so fast...and it's hard to tell what is a scam and what is not...which case is legitimate, and which is not...who's being honest...sometimes we can tell...most times we can't...I'm not sure I've learned all that much over six years....It's different every day...and from time to time I have to fight off my growing cynicism...the need is so vast and relentless, and the little we do...does it ever make a difference, I sometimes wonder?

About mid-morning this past Tuesday, the volunteer at the front desk came back to my office...and said that there was a young woman who had been referred to us, who had just been released from Tutwiler prison...and who needed money so she could get an I.D. As y'all know, in our post 9/11 world without an I.D. we are personae non gratis...I could tell from the volunteer's voice that she believed in this person...I feared I didn't have the mere \$18.50 needed to reinstate her I.D....but we scrambled and found the money...I made a check payable to the Mobile County License Commission, and I gave it to her...she caught her breath, her face brightened...she was on the verge of tears, she thanked us sincerely and profusely and told us that this I.D. meant she could go for a job interview.

We stood there watching her leave...and I realized again that in the economy of ministry, in what ever form it takes, in the economy of the commonweal of God, one small act of sacrifice, one small act of love, has profound ramifications on the receiving end....We merely bought her an I.D., a small thing, and she was able to take a giant step towards the rest of her life....In the commonweal of God one doesn't equal one...but one act of sacrifice sets loose infinite potential for the new....the creation set about its own renewal because of one mere act of love....we did one small thing which was no small thing at all....we found out Thursday that she got the job....Her name is Ebony...pray for our sister in her return to the family.

The more I read the Biblical literature, Hebrew scripture and the rhetorical gospels, and the letters of Paul, the more I am convinced that our culture, when it speaks of salvation, has quite missed the point...we've made

it into a private and intensely personal matter...From my reading and thinking, I believe salvation is first and foremost about the restoration of community....resurrection life, restoration of community....in each and every one of God's deeds of power enacted through the patriarchs and prophets and by Jesus himself, the heart of each story is that the saved is one who is restored back into the community...the community itself becoming whole...when one is ill, there is a decided isolation from the family and community...when one is impoverished....a stranger....a victim of injustice...all of these things cut us off from the warmth of communal relationship....community wherein there is dignity...so these so-called miracle stories are stories about the power of God that restores us in right relationship with each other...as one is made whole, then the community moves towards wholeness...salvation then, a life long process of restoration and renewal...resurrection life, a life long process of believing in each other...so that in sacrificing for each other we serve the sake of all.....which renders meaningless the phrase we've often heard and debated... "once saved always saved" When I was a teenager, the "holy rollers" of the day would ask me, "are you saved?" My mother told me to just say yes and be done with it, but now, in case you get asked, I think the answer might be something like this: "Thanks for asking, but I am in on God's grand process of salvation, bearing the dignity of resurrection life to the world, resurrection life contained in our very DNA....bearing this life as the world turns towards its perfection....you can quote me...that'll probably end that conversation... Salvation is an eternal, beautiful process of claiming those isolated, those cut off, those left behind, the ones abandoned... claiming the outsiders into the family of God...helping the ones bent under oppression in whatever form oppression takes...helping the ones stooped under injustice, or illness, or hunger, or exclusion or shame...ours is to enable those outside to stand in the light of community on the inside...in the light of dignity....that is our vocation brothers and sisters, lifelong vocation and perhaps beyond.

Our gospel reading for today is a classic example of this theology: Jesus raising from the dead the widow's only son...Now there are several things going on here. First Luke is attending to his prized motif of relating Jesus to the line of the prophets, Elijah no less...this story is really a retelling of the story of Elijah raising the widow's son in first Kings that we just read....and in case any of Luke's listeners might miss the point...Luke quotes first Kings directly, word for word... "and Elijah took the child and gave him to his mother"....So Luke is not historian here, right?...but theologian...describing to his community the way love is brought to bear in God's commonweal, in God's economy.... In which one does not equal

one... We get a sense of the economy in the family of God in the first Kings reading about the multiplying of the bread and oil... from meager to limitless...the household restored....and in the raising of this child restoration is everywhere....the widow having lost her son, her son her only means of support; she would be destitute and homeless, cut off from community without him...and God doesn't like that....and the son is raised, from ultimate isolation to a return to the life of the family...restored to his mother and she restored as well, now included, restored in the social structure, not outside, but inside the family....so this is a cardinal act of justice as well is it not....the mother and son returned as equals.... transformed from lost and outside to found and included....If we the people of faith do not have a word for the grieving widow, then we have no words....so there is resurrection in this passage, which means restoration.... and then the crowd gets in on it...praising God...celebrating *their* very renewal...and telling everyone they see....And it all happened because of a mere touch of the hand, and a word... small things... a touch of the hand motivated by compassion....Compassion being artful listening...paying attention, and believing in the other, Compassion I think the means, the means of crossing the boundary of isolation...one mere touch and the dead boy is raised to life...The dead raised, Luke's hyperbole to get at the profound reality of salvation....that a single act of sacrifice is powerful enough to raise the dead...can raise, restore a community to life and life abundant...a small thing that is no small thing...one does not equal one.... one small act of love, and life is sprung anew, and the universe moves ever closer to its apocalypse of joy.

As the body of Christ, we now brothers and sisters, are the ones to be about the small things....the listening; the paying attention, the believing in our neighbor....learning, practicing the art of compassion...all of us bearers of healing touch...all of us speakers of the prophetic word...all of us priests of the good...and we as the people of faith stand raised, up and against the vast and relentless evil in our world...but dear ones of God's commonweal, in which one does not equal one.... that evil is no match for the small acts of sacrifice, which makes love go viral, as it were, in our world....be about the habit of small things...because they are no small things at all...be about the habit of the small things... for they will raise the dead....and praise will abound here in this place, and in the surrounding country....and around the world.... For she was dead on Tuesday, as good as dead... and now she is alive....one doesn't equal one....so do not weep for there is joy in earth as it is in heaven.