

November 20, 2011

The Last Sunday after Pentecost

Matthew 25:31-46

All Saints' Episcopal Church, Atlanta, Georgia

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When you did it to the least of these my brothers and sisters, members of my family, you did it to me. These are powerful words and they are words that stay with me, as I encounter people on the street every day.

We have all been there, approached by someone on the street asking for assistance of one kind or another. Not a day goes by during the week here at All Saints' where we are not approached by someone off the streets asking for assistance, almost always money, and we have to decide what to do. We have to determine if the story is true. If this is the proper use of limited resources in this case or will this person be back in a month, with nothing really changed. What do we do? Often, we err on the side of graciousness and yet often when we do this, there is still a sense of something being amiss, because there is an underlying feeling that even though we have helped someone for the time being, nothing is really changed. There is a sense of throwing money at a problem and doing it because we are supposed to, but left to wonder, how much have we really helped?

Part of the problem is the issue of power has not been resolved. We who have the education, the mobility and the affluence often have power over those with limited education, no mobility, and little money. So when we engage in some sort of assistance, we are sometimes making it even more clear who is in authority and who is not. There are some who are in the assistance business who like to have this authority. What's more those who have no power often recognize this and then engage in the manipulation of those with resources. This is why many become so guarded with their resources, because they are protecting themselves against manipulation. This power and manipulation game is a cycle that we all recognize and clouds our judgment at times.

I once offered to buy a woman on the streets a meal and we walked together to a local fast food restaurant. I could tell the minute we got to the counter that our presence, her presence, was not particularly welcome and I could even feel the nasty stare I was getting from the security guard behind me. After we ordered our food and went to sit down, the security guard called me over to have a word with me, and let me know not to bring this woman in again. "I know you are called to do what you are called to do, I know we all need prayer, Lord knows I need them, but you are not doing her any good," he said. "She won't change. The minute you walk out of here, she'll take the remaining food and sell them for drugs. You are not really helping anyone", he said.

In retrospect, he was doing his job and he is not a bad person. I imagine he has seen a lot and was quite sensitive to manipulation. It clouded what he was seeing, which was not about changing her, it was about sharing a meal with someone, getting to know someone, being kind to someone who might experience assistance each day, but not necessarily kindness.

Do not get me wrong. I am not suggesting that we treat each other to dinner, sing kumbaya and the world will be well. Financial assistance, resources, are important and there are very real needs being met at times when we engage the world through the use of our resources and at times, through the strength we can wield, to get things done. When Jesus talks of feeding the hungry, giving drink to the thirsty, clothing the naked, it is not a mere suggestion and it fits well within the pattern established throughout the Gospel according to Matthew, particularly the Beatitudes. However, when Jesus says “when you do these things you do them to me”, he wants us to see more than then need to slavishly follow another command. Perhaps he wants us to see that God is in the world, in the present moment and that each of us possesses the spark of divinity, that each of us bears the image of God. Even when we look into the face of the vulnerable, the weak, the hungry, the drug addict, we are still looking into the reflection of God. Jesus calls us into relationship with one another, to recognize God in one another, and to realize that in right relationship, one side is not greater than the other. Each person is capable of blessing the other with the love of God and in doing so, can subvert the powers structures that be.

Many here are familiar with the Church of the Common Ground, a ministry of our Diocese which based on the streets of downtown Atlanta. Their primary goal is to build relationships with those who live on the margins by being a presence on the streets and to be a worshipping community on the streets. It is a ministry based on relationship in which this power structure might be altered. One day the Vicar of Common Ground, The Rev. Mary Wetzel was walking the streets, and she encountered three young men, walking shoulder to shoulder and it was impossible for Mary to get around them. The young man in the middle, Andre, asked her if she was a priest. She replied that she was, and over the objection of his friends, who wanted to leave Mary alone, he asked her for a blessing. Mary obliged, laying hands on his head, and pronouncing God’s blessing on him. But, before they could go anywhere, she said, now I want you to bless me. This took a little time to sink in and Mary had to repeat it, even convince him to do this. He agreed. So there, on an Atlanta sidewalk in the heart of the city, Andre pronounced God’s blessing on Mary. They hugged and went on their way.

Over a year later, Mary was walking on the streets, and around the corner came a young man. He walked up to her and said, with a big smile on his face, “Do you remember me?” Yes, said Mary, “You gave me a blessing.” They hugged and talked a while longer, honoring their connection, a Godly connection. This relationship was one based on mutual respect and equality, rather than power and manipulation. It was based on recognizing the spark of divinity within each other and through this relationship, as brief as the encounter may have been,

there was real healing and real change. My guess is that if Andre ever needed help, Mary would do it. But the difference is that if Mary ever needed help, Andre would do it too and in each case it would be about people who are connected through Jesus and helping one another out of genuine affection, without any games.

We are indeed called to feed the hungry and clothe the naked. But if we divorce this passage from the rest of the Gospel we miss the real point, which is to connect and seek that divine spark within each other, opening up all sorts of possibilities as a people engaged in the work of God.

Today we are celebrating Rite 13. In this liturgy we all will renew our baptismal covenant and promise to seek and serve Christ in our neighbors and to respect the dignity of every human being. Underlying what we say is that we will move away from conventional power structures and seek to find God in one another, to find value in each other and allow ourselves to be shaped in new ways. This is the life we are inviting our teens into and they will have a tough go of it, because so many within the world are still playing by the old rules of engagement. This is why they will need our continued support. It is why our community continues to seek God's support. But when we all participate in right relationship with the wider world, we honor our Baptismal covenant; we affirm this Gospel and find ourselves inching ever closer to the Kingdom of God.