

June 5, 2011

The Seventh Sunday of Easter

John 17:1-11

All Saints' Episcopal Church, Atlanta, Georgia

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You may have seen this on the news last week or heard about it through the grapevine. A group of students from the Paideia School spent the week living on the streets of Atlanta as a part of a homeless immersion experience. They were only allowed to bring \$4 for the week and a garbage bag to carry water and a blanket. They weren't allowed a single change of clothes. They had no access to shower facilities, and of course no communication with home. They spent every night sleeping in Inman Park and their days helping out at local agencies.

Thirteen of those students arrived on our campus to spend some time at Covenant Community last Wednesday. The students gathered with the Covenant residents and spent a significant period of time engaged in a frank and honest discussion about homelessness, addiction, decision making and managing emotions. The experience was profound and impactful not just for the students but for the residents as well. By the end of the 90 minutes there were tears and hugs all around. Two of the students shared how they were being bullied and pressured into smoking marijuana by a peer at school and now hearing the stories of the Covenant residents, those students felt strong enough to stay away from the bully and to get help if needed. For the kids, this large group conversation combined with their experience of living on the streets of Atlanta served to open their eyes and their hearts. They were more aware of their own judgments of and attitudes toward homeless people. The students were profoundly affected by the stories that the men shared openly revealing their struggles, their shame, along with their joys and hope. During the course of that conversation both students and Covenant residents discovered points of overlap in shared experiences – touchstones where they could empathize with one another. This was a fantastic opportunity for the students, but it was also the same for the Covenant residents. They got to experience some of the unintentional benefits that come with doing service work: they discovered increased confidence, self-esteem and a sense of personal fulfillment. God's hand was at work in that shared time together.

These opportunities are available to all of us. The residents of Covenant are visible here on the campus serving as additional security on Sunday mornings. Stop and get to know one of them. These men know what it is to live on the streets, to battle addiction, to sell their body and compromise themselves to feed that addiction. They know what it is to be treated like a disease, like a leper, to be discounted, to have no one even look you in the eye and recognize your existence. As a homeless person, you never feel like you are even seen – your identity is lost and becomes secondary – people see you not as Elizabeth, but as a faceless, nameless representative of the social issue of homelessness.

These students from Paideia should be commended for taking a week to challenge themselves and face their stereotypes about homeless people. The truth is we all

stereotype. When we are not at our best, we from time to time will make assumptions about a particular group of people. It doesn't matter the color of our skin, our socio-economic status, our sexual orientation, our cultural heritage, we are all guilty of this sin. When we succumb to stereotyping and making assumptions about a group of people, this places them in the category of not neighbor or friend, or brother or sister, but as "the other" distancing them from ourselves. This behavior only serves to diminish us as we act with arrogance and assume we know what it is to be someone else – to assume we understand their reality. In our busy lives we allow our stereotypes to dominate and don't take the time, like the students at Paideia did, to enter into the world of "the other" and see them, relate to them human being to human being. But this fear, this lack of effort to relate, this distancing reflects poorly on us. It means that we act without grace and we have closed ourselves off from the opportunity to experience God at work through us.

Jesus prays for his disciples, "All mine are yours, and yours are mine; and I have been glorified in them. Holy Father, protect them... so that they may be one, as we are one." God is glorified through us, through what we do and say. And so Jesus prays that we will be perfectly of one heart. I am not convinced that Jesus expects that all his followers think the same way about things. But Jesus does expect us to be intentional, to be prayerful in our words and actions. If we are prayerful, mindful and remember that our lives flow from the gift of God's love for us then our words and actions will reflect the gratitude we feel for God's unconditional love. And if God loves us unconditionally, broken, sinful, imperfect, and stumbling as we are, then God certainly loves the homeless person, the drug addict, the migrant worker, the social activist, the lawyers. Whoever that "other" is for you, remember that God loves them unconditionally also. We are one in God's love for us, and that makes us all inextricably connected.

And so living into the fullness of our faith means we must venture outside of our own comfort zone and strive to live into the call to be of one heart. I invite you to spend some time in self-reflection and identify where your stereotypes and your discrimination lies – name who the "other" is for you. I bet it won't take you very long to figure out. And then find the courage to stretch yourself: reach out and get to know that "other." Walk around in someone else's shoes and feel what it's like to be them. But even more importantly, take the time to listen and hear from their perspective what their reality is – where their struggles and pain lie, and what gives them joy and hope.

This morning at the 9 o'clock service we commissioned the Journey to Adulthood pilgrims for their pilgrimage to Ireland. They are going off to seek God in Ireland and to be open to God's hand at work in them. In the commissioning prayers, we charged them to reflect the love of Christ in all that they do. And so as part of their pilgrimage, they will be encouraged each day to get to know someone new – someone outside of the group – someone they encounter on the journey, and take the time to be present with them, journey together for a while and share stories. These J2A pilgrims are taking up this practice as part of their spiritual discipline. We could easily take on this practice ourselves. I would bet that there are countless opportunities throughout our normal days that we can stretch ourselves beyond our comfort zones and interact in a

meaningful way with someone different from ourselves. The community of God draws us all together as one. Living the life of faith requires that we take seriously Jesus' prayer that we all will be one.

This is a difficult charge that Jesus gives us. It requires us to challenge the stories, the "truths" we carry around within ourselves about other people. When I spent a year in Los Angeles following college, I lived in Inglewood, part of South Central Los Angeles. My house was three blocks away from where the riots broke-out after the Rodney King verdict. The residents of South Central, LA are predominantly African-American and Hispanic. Needless to say, my then much blonder hair, fair skin, and blue eyes made me stick-out like a sore thumb. For that year, I knew what it was to be so very aware of the color of my skin. The lady in the check-out lane in the grocery store asked me one day, "Honey, do you know where you are?" I smiled and said, "Yes ma'am. I live just down the street." I lived and breathed and worked in South Central and that experience has forever changed me. There was not one single day that I was not aware of the color of my skin and there were many moments when I felt like I did not belong, like a fish out of water. But because of that year, I now move in the world in a different way, probably with a little less judgment. I share all of this not to imply that I am perfect, far from it. I still have other prejudices and areas of discrimination, my own demons within myself to face and wrestle down. But I share this because it is important spiritual work that we all must do. If we are to transform our world, we must find the courage to face the rhetoric we carry within ourselves, the prejudices that builds up walls and keeps us from relating one to another. Because when we begin to break down these walls that separate us and recognize that we are inextricably connected to one another, then we can see the Kingdom of God breaking in right in front of our eyes, and we get a glimpse of that heavenly banquet.