

Pentecost 16B, September 20, 2009

Lections: Proverbs 31:10-31; Ps.1; James 3:13-4:3, 7, 8a; Mark 9: 30-37

(A brief discussion about what people heard in the lessons: responsibility. Discipleship, impossible expectations. Gender roles, preceded this sermon.)

“Voice A: He called me but I did not want to go. I had some business to attend to – private business. I am a self-made man, fired by the spirit of free enterprise. It took a lot of my time, that’s the way it is with private business. And he expected me to give it up when he called: give up my independence and go public, give up competition and go cooperative. I did not want to go.

Voice B: He called me but I did not want to go. I had a relationship to attend to – a private relationship. I was involved with one person whom I coveted and adored and who kept me infatuated...that’s the way it is with some private relationships. And he expected me to give it up when he called – give up my obsession with one person and love everybody, give up caring for one individual and start caring for the world. I did not want to go.

Voice C: He called me but I did not want to go. I had some money to attend to – private money. I had inherited a small fortune from my parents. I had made some fast money on the stock market and I was making inroads in another. That’s the way it is with private money. And he expected me to give it up when he called; give up my private wealth and share it around; live on less so that others could live on more. I did not want to go.

Voice D: He called me but I did not want to go. I had my faith to attend to – my private faith. I was devoted to a god much like me, who I imagined to be much like me. I worshipped that god in my own personal way, that’s the way it is with private faith . And he expected me to give it up when he called; give up a private faith and make it public; serve God in my society and not just in my soul. I did not want to go.

Final voice: He called us but we did not want to go. We did not want our business, our love, our fortune, our faith to be infected and affected by his touch. Yet we went. We gave up everything and lost more. And we gained the kingdom of heaven.”¹

The lessons from scripture today seem reasonable – at least the Wisdom material from Proverbs and from James. The psalm as well spelling out ethics and value of godly relationship. But at a closer look we might suspect that none of us has quite what it takes to meet those standards of capability and dedication, no times when our lamp doesn’t go out, when we aren’t seated or speaking about the good, when we grumble and debate our way of doing things. Barbara Brown Taylor says that if Jesus were in charge of an average congregation, with all of his expectations and hard sayings added to the things we have just heard, he would find himself with maybe four people in the pews. She imagines him greeting folks at the door with words like this, “Are you sure you want to follow this way of life? It has to matter to you.”

¹ John Bell, Gathered and Scattered

Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem. He is loving his disciples, and us, by telling the truth, refusing to lie and make it sound easier than it is. Following him is costly. Are we capable people in this God relationship? Are we wise in the nature of Biblical wisdom? Do we want the blessing of being shaped and reshaped as partners of transformation for all of our lives?

There is a web site that I check as I do my research for sermons; it is called text this week and people are offered at least 40 different frames of reference for the weekly lessons. I often look at 'blogging toward Sunday' on theolog, from the Christian Century website. This week I was impressed by someone who had met weekly with those who had power and authority, in a faculty club at a well known university. Groups formed so that people could speak of vulnerability and meet in ways that they didn't elsewhere. The writer too needed places in which he could regain some perspective. He chose to work in his church's nursery where some dedicated older women showed him how to care for the little ones that Jesus placed in front of those disciples who wanted power. Not much of a power trip holding new babies and caring for them unless one needs new wisdom. Changing your place in the order of things can open your eyes, maybe even bring you to a place where you understand what Jesus wanted of those who follow him.

Like the disciples who are silent when questioned, we may pretend that we are just fine with what we have chosen. We may be defensive about our priorities but not speak about our lives in relationship to the One who calls us. Or perhaps we are afraid that the crucial teachings about discipleship, about our role as a mirror to Him as the body of Christ, that these things are too hard for us. Where is the good news in all of this? Look it is all around you – people who are loved by God, called into more than we had hoped.

We went, gave up everything. Lost more. Gained the kingdom of heaven. Amen+

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