

Epiphany 4B, February 1, 2009

Lections: Deut. 18:15-20; Ps. 111; 1Corin. 8:1-13; Mark 1:21-28

The story appeared in Thursday's Ottawa Citizen. In a letter to the editor Michael Geisterfer wrote about a recent experience during the bus strike. "Opportunities to help others come at the most inopportune times, forcing us to push hard through all the fears, prejudices and preoccupations that might otherwise prevent us from doing the right thing," he says. He picked up a young man who was hitchhiking, pushing through his bias about that. When the young man got into the warm car, he wept, saying how cold he was, how long was the journey to answer his grandmother's call for help when she fell in her apartment in Vanier. Suddenly the important business meeting became less important than driving the young man to his destination. In Jewish tradition this is called a mitzvah, a kindness that heals the social dislocation, the brokenness of the world. We might call it radical welcome.

Stephanie Spellars is an African American priest serving the Episcopal Church. Her book, Radical Welcome, is suggested reading for parish leadership and for all of us. The book is a compendium of lessons learned by congregations as they, collectively, move through the fears, prejudices, and preoccupations of their settled lives allowing the spirit of transformation to touch them. This book reflects some of the stated core values of the parish, gathered some months ago and now appearing on our parish website. They are: hospitality and welcome, care for the needs of others and the desire for and practice of inclusion. This means dealing with difference and working to stand in opposition to those forces of oppression which have power over folks, rather than power with or power for; this is the subject of Jesus' confrontation with the demon in today's gospel. What has that to do with us? Everything.

In the United States it meant moving from our notion of melting pot, assimilation so that all could be alike, to a new concept of the salad bowl, with distinctive characteristics adding flavor and texture to the common life. It no longer means eliminating difference; in fact, diversity is welcomed. The church's mission involves being in this diverse world, taking what we know of the gospel and moving into all the places where God is already at work. And then welcoming the world into our spaces, our community, our lives. At the end of May, on a Sunday evening, we will welcome the words and music of the rock group, U2, as we offer a U2charist to benefit AIDS relief in the world, one of the Millennium Development Goals. I need some folks who are willing to try radical welcome, serving pizza, greeting others, and learning what Bono has to say to us about contemporary spirituality.

Yesterday I was a mustard bottle in a sea of ketchup as I participated in a skit designed to help youth leaders in the Lutheran, Presbyterian, United and Anglican churches. There was interesting talk about new folks, new things, new wine for old wineskins. Let's hear from some of our own parishioners about their responses to Radical Welcome.

At 8 am: Mac Lindsay and Andy Moody

At 10 am: Laura Dallas and Pat Hotte

Notes from all presentations follow.

The Rev. Dr. Linda Privitera