

Pentecost 5B, Proper 14

Lections: 2 Samuel 5:1-5, 9, 10; Ps/ 48; 2Corin/ 12:2-10; Mark 6:1-13

Yesterday one of the news stories (NYTimes) spoke of the Vatican's intention to prepare a confidential report on 340 congregations of nuns in the United States. This apostolic visitation is usually undertaken when a particular institution has gone "astray."

Apparently the fact that some nuns are running church reform groups and are practicing Reiki (a healing modality) has made the authorities uneasy. They are looking for brand loyalty; what truth will they find? We are undertaking our own diocesan sessions on identity/branding as well.

We have some focus on loyalties in the texts today. In the Hebrew scripture the tribes of Israel pledge their loyalty to David because they believe God is with him. The psalmist pledges loyalty as well, proclaiming, "our God for ever and ever." Paul who claims a transformative mystical event, struggles with a troublesome thorn which he asks God to remove. Some have decided it was a disease or a deformity; others have thought it might be a troublesome person. We do not know the nature of his discomfort or its source. We do know that he found God's grace to be sufficient to bear it.

The lessons are a prologue or set-up for the rejection of Jesus. Like a college student returning home, he is no longer the same as when he left. Perhaps he was expecting some loyalty. Those who should be counted upon in his hometown to stand with him will not; he is like a stranger to them. This will be the last public appearance in the symbolic space of the synagogue on the Sabbath. The neighbors are suspicious of his reputation and expect more mundane things from his hands, like carpentry and not healing. Like the nuns, he is not to step out of the familiar box. Who does he think he is? The text says they took offense at him; the New English Bible says "so they fell foul of him." There was no hospitality to new stories, new truths or new experiences from him. So, fresh from the healings of Jairus' daughter and the woman with the hemorrhage, he could do no major work there. The boxes they had constructed for themselves wouldn't allow a new initiative to happen. Without cooperation and openness to a new order, to new truth, there can be no new landscape of spiritual truth.

We would call this a bridge passage – a place where we can see that Jesus is crossing over into new territory. Now, after the rejection in his hometown, he will begin an itinerant ministry leaving the regular kinship ties and moving to make new homes among strangers. What follows is an apprenticeship for the disciples where they will learn to go and move as sojourners, offering what they can, where they can. From September to May of this coming year we will offer hospitality to a seminary student and her family. She will bring the mystery of her faith; she will be wondering if we are open to the truths and experiences she will bring and offer to us.

The disciples needed to learn about making a home among strangers. They were allowed the means of travel but their sustenance would depend on others. The focal point of hospitality will no longer be the synagogue but the home. The disciples will go in vulnerability, testing to see if there will be a basis for establishing relationships. Someone

has said, “there is no possibility of respecting the mystery of others if we have not learned to respect our own...of course, if we assume that what we know of ourselves is the whole truth, then we will turn to a labeling of others in equal confidence.” Nations do that against each other, spreading stories to justify their actions and people; even church people do it as well. Part of our spiritual challenge is to release assumptions and labels. It is clear that loyalties to the past may make this a hard task for some folks. At one level I am speaking about judgments and gossip; on a deeper level I am speaking about the possibility that God may have something new to teach us.

When I first came to Canada I frequently heard lots of anti-Americanism. In one conversation someone said, “I ‘ve met Americans before – you’re pushy” No subtlety there, no possibility for open-ness to the mystery of me. Or, as someone else said, “I don’t care what gifts you bring.” Yesterday we were included in a fete at the home of the American ambassador to celebrate July 4, Independence Day for the United States. Hearing my home country’s national anthem was powerful for me – as was hearing and singing the Canadian anthem as we did this morning. I realized that I am an itinerant disciple too, following the Jesus path and needing hospitality for the work we have been given to do together. And perhaps, although you haven’t had to leave home, you are looking at the nature of hospitality too.

Summer vacations, summer patterns of new opportunities to see new faces, hear new words may produce new kinship ties, new loyalties, new opportunities to give and receive hospitality which the gospel says is indeed good news. Maybe you’ll befriend a Roman Catholic nun this summer; maybe she will provide food for your journey. I honor two such women this morning: Sr. Margaret Farley who was my ethics professor in seminary and Sr. Anne O’Leary, who has been my spiritual director in Canada for some time. I could not have done my own work without them.

The disciples were given instructions to shake the dust from their feet if they were not received well, so that nothing of rejection would walk with them. They also were given an opportunity to stay with those who received the word of God with them and good things followed. May we all give and receive the truth of ourselves and of more than ourselves in Jesus’ name. And may God’s grace be sufficient for all the thorns encountered. Amen+