

Proper 14C ✚ August 11, 2019

Genesis 15:1-6 • Psalm 33:12-22 • Hebrews 11:1-3,8-16 • Luke 12:32-40

Some of you noticed, maybe some of you didn't, but I was gone a lot during July. I spent a lot of time with Addie Tapp and our youth on two different missions: one to Ecuador with Education Equals Hope and the other to Johns Island with Home Works. The experiences were transformative, and the grace of God spilled, splashed, soaked, and covered us in a multitude of ways. Today, I'd like to share a small lesson from Ecuador.

When you get oriented to life in Ecuador, you are keyed in on some not-so-subtle cultural differences. At the heart of them all: people are the top priority in every scenario.

Space: how many people sit on a typical couch? 3 maybe 4, right? Not so in Ecuador. If there is space, someone is squeezing in. I've seen 6, 7, 8, and more on a standard couch.

Time is flexible. What time did church start? (8:00am / 10:30am) 15 min...20, 30, even 45 minutes could pass before church starts. It is important for the community to be present, so the start time is flexible. You start when a critical mass has had an opportunity to gather.

Greetings: they often entail *besitos*: cheek to cheek kisses (right side), along with an embrace or a hug. This happens between women and when a man and woman greet one another. *NOT* when two men greet...that's just a simple handshake and gets awkward otherwise. → Here's what cool. When you enter a room, proper etiquette requires you to greet everyone. Each and every person. Doesn't matter how many people are there. 2, 3, 14, or 37. Everyone.

Rinse and repeat at departure.

People come first. Relationships come first. People are the top priority.

+++

"For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."

Sometimes, the lectionary breaks up scripture in really odd ways. When I look at the overall arc of the Lukan narrative, I believe that we should have a question from last week ringing in the back of our minds:

What does it mean to be rich towards God?

This all seems to set up a dynamic with God on one side and wealth, possessions, and stuff on the other side. And while that may be true, is it meant to stop there? What is the deeper truth Jesus is inviting us into? What are the implications?

Who or what are we being watchful for, exactly?

We are meant to call to mind the readiness of the Passover, having our loins girded, our robes cinched up to free the feet for action. Ready for the arrival of the presence of God. Throughout the Old Testament, to be dressed for action is an image of readiness for service.

Christian existence, then, is rooted in a posture of expectation. An expectation that will be fulfilled, but that timing is unknown. Watchfulness, my friends, is required. Every moment, every interaction, every relationship, every encounter is ripe with expectation for the holy to be present. Every moment, every encounter is ripe with expectation for God to show up.

And like he often does, Jesus flips the script on how God shows up.

When the Master arrives, he puts on an apron and serves his servants. This reversal is surprising, yes, and must be understood through the lens of Jesus at the Last Supper: "I am among you as one who serves."

Authority is expressed in table service.
Power is conveyed through waiting on tables.

+++

In May of 2018, from this very pulpit, I shared the story of St. Lawrence of Rome, of whom our own St. Lawrence Place is named after. It bears repeating on this day.

Following the execution of Pope Sixtus II, the prefect of Rome demanded that Lawrence turn over the riches of the church. He was granted 3 days to gather the riches. Lawrence distributed the money to those who needed it, and when order to deliver the riches to the prefect, Lawrence presented the poor, the blind, the lame, the lepers, orphans, widows, and the suffering, declaring: **"These are the treasures of the Church."**

"For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."

Are our hearts set on the treasures of the Kingdom of God?

The things I have seen on social media...
The stories I have seen on the news...
The events that have unfolded in Dayton, El Paso, Mississippi,...
...even here in Columbia...

We each need to ask ourselves this question very seriously.
Is my heart set on the treasures of the Kingdom?

Jesus lays out for us very clearly who the treasures are and the deeper meaning of caring for those treasures.

...the hungry...
...the thirsty...
...the naked...
...the sick...
...those in prison...
...the poor...
...the captive...
...the oppressed...

“And the king will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.’”

Is this what it is to be rich towards God?
To store up the treasures of the Kingdom?
To care for and love...to be vulnerable in relationship?
To see someone for more than whatever circumstance they find themselves in?

If so...we are doing an absolutely terrible, horrible, no good job.

+++

I am so tired. I am heartbroken. I am angry and frustrated. I am overwhelmed.

A good friend of mine, when he and his wife tried to talk quietly, whisper, about the shooting in El Paso, his 9-year-old questioned: “Was it a church or a school?” His 9-year-old has a context for what happens in this country.¹

Such malice and hate filled a 21-year-old person’s head that he felt he had to drive 10 hours from Dallas to El Paso because that’s where the enemy lived, and he had to do something about *those people*. He had to take them out, defeat, kill *those people*.

And then this week, we have learned about racist and violent videos that originated from a young person here in Columbia.

These events were simply the high water marks in a week of racist images, dog whistles, and violent acts.

It feels like a fever pitch.

+++

In the midst of it all this past week, I witnessed a local interview asking young people, teenagers, about their experiences with racist and violent language. The interview was not perfect, but it raised good questions. So I invited conversation with young people and those who work with young people and asked: What have you witnessed? What have you experienced?

While experiences varied all across the board, the overall and overwhelming feedback was this:

Racist language is common.

Violent language is common.

Extreme language of all sorts is common.

Bullying is common.

Pushing boundaries (maybe to find where the appropriate boundaries are) is common, while memes and internet-culture obscure and make it all more difficult to track and catch.

Reporting does happen. Teachers do their best and keep records. Student reporting is hit and miss. Some kiddos are more confident than others...some, many are scared about being bullied themselves if they do report. I can't blame them. People are scared.

+++

This just cannot continue. It has to stop. We have to **do** better. We have to **be** better.

A Christians, as followers of Jesus, we have to stand up to the powers and influences that would promote language of hate and allow it to shape our lives, relationships, and faith. Malice, wrath, fury, anger, cruelty, spite...this madness...it **has** to stop. Language matters. How we talk **to** one another matters. How we talk **about** one another matters.

When I was younger, the language of opponent was used in politics. Today, I more often hear the word enemy (on both sides of the aisle). My opponent was someone I swam against at swim meet, shook hands at the wall, and laughed with in the locker room. I only have enemies when I am at war, and when I look at an enemy I do not see them as a person. I do not see that person as bearing the image and likeness of God.

I'm going to reach back to last week again and read St. Paul in Colossians:

"In that renewal there is no longer Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free; but Christ is all and in all!"

Christ is all and in all. St. Paul doesn't qualify this in any way. Simple and straightforward: Christ is all and in all. As followers of Jesus, we see, and know, that Christ is in each and every person. How we look at, see other people matters. How we treat other people matters. Language matters. Actions matter. And our geography matters too. In other words, where we stand matters. Who we stand with matters.

In *Being Disciples*, Rowan Williams teaches that a facet of discipleship has to do with being where Jesus is. "Being with Jesus means being in the company of the people whose company Jesus seeks... Our discipleship is not about choosing our company but choosing the company of Jesus."²

Look at the people Jesus sought out. Jesus stands with the oppressed and captive, the downtrodden and broken. Jesus stands with the hurting, the lonely, and the outcast. Jesus stands with the immigrant, the foreigner, and the stranger. Jesus stands with the racial and ethnic minority.

And I don't say that as any sort of political statement. I say it as a scriptural and theological statement. We know the geography of where Jesus stands, whom he stands with, by reading the Gospel narratives, the stories of his encounters. To stand where Jesus stands, to be where Jesus is, requires risk and vulnerability... and courage. It is difficult work...hence the language of taking up our own cross.

+++

What does it mean to be rich towards God?

First, we grieve, we sorrow when any person fails to live up to the commitments and promises we value in the Baptismal Covenant. We sorrow when racism and violence raise their ugly heads and upend our communities and families.

And then, we re-commit ourselves to overcoming the evils of racism and violence. We re-commit ourselves to striving for justice and peace and respecting the dignity of every human being. We re-commit ourselves to seeking and serving the Christ in each and every person. Re-commitment requires repentance. We turn back to God, and we call the people of God to come with us. Part and partial to that repentance is naming out loud the evils that simmer at the surface of our communities and society.

As followers of Jesus, we condemn racism, and we condemn white supremacy. As followers of Jesus, we condemn violence of any kind, and we call people back to the peace of God which surpasses all understanding.

And then we work towards healing, gathering up the treasures of God, the people of God, like a mother hen gathers up her chicks. Because where our treasure is, there our heart will be also.

We work to reconcile to all people to one another and God, build bridges, cultivate the Beloved community... We listen to the experiences of our neighbors, coworkers, and friends. We read and learn, books like *The Cross and The Lynching Tree* (James Cone), *Just Mercy* (Bryan Stevenson), and *I'm Still Here* (Austin Channing Brown). We engage in ministries that heal and build bridges: our relationship with WA Perry, MORE Justice, and many of our mission and outreach ministries and relationships in the surrounding community.

Where will we hear the stories of hurt and struggle? Where will we build bridges and bring about healing? How will we take on the posture of table service? Because where our treasure is, there our heart will be also.

+++

Do we have faith that we can be rich towards God? Do we have faith that we will gather together the treasures of the Kingdom? I have heard it said that hope is believing in a world that does not yet exist, and it is the Father's good pleasure to give us the Kingdom. So, if faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen...then yes. Yes, I have faith. I have hope...I believe that the kingdom of God is breaking into this world as we speak and breathe in this very moment.

+++

In the midst of it all this week, renowned author and professor Toni Morrison passed away. I saw this quote shared more often than any other in the wake of her death: "I tell my students, 'When you get these jobs that you have been so brilliant trained for, just remember that your real job is that if you are free, you need to free somebody else. If you have some power, then your job is to empower somebody else.'"

A brilliant synopsis of a facet of Christian vocation. And that's the thing, right? In following Jesus, "...we have a role to play in righting a world whose axle is tilting in the wrong direction."³

+++

This year, especially on this day, I hold dearly the gift of my Ecuadorian brothers and sisters. Everywhere I go, too see everyone in the room, or that particular space I am in, and to greet each and every one with holy *besitos*...to greet the presence of Jesus in each and every one.

Be watchful, aware and looking for the arrival of Jesus, particularly in the other you encounter. In this way, you "become a place in the world where the act of God can come alive."⁴

My friends, be rich towards God. Be rich towards the treasures of God.
For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

¹ <https://anchor.fm/alanbentrup/episodes/Language-Matters-A-Sermon-for-Proper-13C--2019-e4re1j>

² Williams, Rowan. *Being Disciples*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 2016. Pg. 11.

³ Chittister, Joan. *The Time Is Now: A Call To Uncommon Courage*. New York: Convergent Books, 2019. Pg. 27.

⁴ Williams. Pg. 18.