

SPG#173, Season after Pentecost 6A, P. 7

June 22, 2008

Genesis 2:8-21

Romans 6:1b-11

Matthew 10:24-39

I read a book once on object lessons for children. The format of the book was to tell a story that implied the importance of the lesson for that day. For example, one story had a ten year old boy we will call Tommy who is given chores to do by his mother. In every case, when his mother asks him to take out the garbage, or do the dishes, he responds with “Just a minute.”

Well, the problem becomes so chronic that the mother figures something is wrong with the child and takes him to the doctor. After examining him the doctor gravely announces that Tommy has “Just a minute it is.” The doctor says the condition is incurable, and that Tommy will always be putting things off that need to be done. The doctor says he is sorry he could not be more help. The next day, Tommy’s mother temporarily forgot about his condition and asked him to take out the garbage. But instead of saying ‘just a minute’ Tommy said, “Sure Mom,” and took out the garbage. Well, Mom was astonished. She called her husband, and he was astonished. She called all the neighbors, and they were astonished. The governor of the state heard about it and scheduled Tommy to speak to a joint session of the state congress. There was a huge parade in Washington, DC attended by the President, the Pope, and Queen of England.

The writer of these object stories uses the tool of exaggerated terms to make a point.

In today's gospel Jesus uses exaggerated terms to make his points. He says in today's reading: **Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; and one's foes will be members of one's household.**

It is possible, I think, that the first century followers of Jesus looked for a stable and more genteel life in their following of him. And a large part of what Jesus had to say was deeply comforting. **Blessed are the merciful; blessed are the peacemakers. I no longer call you servants. I have called you friends.**

But if the rhythm and nature of the gospels can be seen as faithful to the real person of Jesus Christ, and I think they can, we must realize that Jesus is not simply presented as a comforting presence. We must realize that he is not just presented as a loving friend.

For there are many times in all four gospels when Jesus' words are more provocative than comforting, more challenging than soothing. It falls to us in our lives of faith therefore, to embrace the totality of Jesus as presented in scripture. This is not always easy.

For it makes perfect sense at a certain point or points in a person's life that Jesus would always be just comfortable and comforting. And it could follow, in a certain line of thinking, that since Jesus had been supremely comforting once that he must always be comforting. And there are many of us who spend all our lives, or portions of our lives, insisting on the ever present comfort and comfortableness of Jesus Christ.

And yet, for the original twelve disciples of Jesus and his other followers in the New Testament, it was not always so. Many of them are presented at times as foolish, confused, embarrassed, fearful, and anxious.

And from the standpoint of Jesus himself, he consistently told his followers that he would be with them, that “where I am there you may be also.” But he was always very careful to show them another side to who he was.

And that was the provocative side, the side we see in today’s gospel. That is evident in how the followers responded to him. And it is evident in the very words that Jesus spoke to them. Besides today’s gospel there were the extraordinary claims that he made in their presence, culminating when he told his first century followers to their consternation that he must die, but in three days would rise again.

And so out of all this, it is important that we have a grasp of the multi-dimensional character of Jesus Christ.

And I think it would be safe to assume that even if some of his early followers did by chance comprehend what he was saying at certain points, that there would have been other times that they would not. And so in summary we could always say from gospel accounts that Jesus’ presence was at once comforting and affirming and also provocative and challenging.

It is one thing for today’s Christians to witness the forces within the first century followers as they related to Jesus. It is quite another for us pursue what that witnessing may mean for ourselves. In our own following, Jesus approaches us with that same love, that same comfort, that same assurance that he will always be with us. But he also, via the gospels, approaches us in a provocative and challenging way. And he challenges us to believe fantastic things about him and about ourselves.

The ways that other followers have responded to him when provoked are evident in the many and varied responses of the early followers in the New Testament. So the testimony and witnessing of others who have gone before indicate that each person has a unique response when provoked by Jesus Christ. So, no one will respond to the provocation and the love of Jesus Christ in exactly the same way. No one will respond to the provocation and love of Jesus Christ like you do. With the early followers, Jesus provoked and challenged each of them into a spiritual destiny and a spiritual vocation that was uniquely suited to the person and to the circumstance. The same is true for us.

In the Old Testament the child Samuel, staying with the old priest, Eli, heard God calling him in the night, but he did not know it was God. When Eli finally realized what was going on, he coached Samuel to respond by saying, "Speak Lord for your servant hears."

Then God told Samuel what he was to do. God gently provoked Samuel into a spiritual destiny, a spiritual vocation.

It may feel somewhat daunting to realize that Jesus loves and provokes us to spiritual wakefulness as he did many figures in the Bible. And in today's gospel Jesus speaks of this spiritual wakefulness in exaggerated terms like the hairs on our heads being numbered. And it may be that we would at times shrink from such an increased wakefulness, an increased awareness and responsibility in our spiritual lives. And yet it seems inescapable.

For we have the same human and spiritual credentials that figures in the scripture had.

And even if we do turn from that destiny, that challenge, the love and the provocation of Jesus Christ remain in the events and encounters of our lives.

For those who did answer the challenge, who did respond to the provocation of Jesus Christ, they wound up being ever focused on what he would have them do. And they were more than glad to do it.

For our own wakefulness, our own awareness, I put before you the possibility of an ongoing prayer. Conceivably the prayer could begin in church today and go for the whole week. The first part of the prayer I would call openness. That means that you allow for the reality that God specifically and uniquely calls to you in your life. You allow for the reality that God speaks in a conversation, that God speaks in a dream, that God speaks in a flash of insight, that God speaks in a slowly maturing realization, and other ways. You allow for the fact that an offhand comment made by someone may be an important message for you. You allow for the fact that your feelings in the course of a day may be a teacher with an important lesson.

I have observed in recent years in my work as a counselor that every feeling is a teacher that carries a message. So when we are angry, within the anger, there is a lesson. When we are sad and/or depressed there is something to be learned. When we are worried, there is a message.

The second part of the prayer is clarification. It may be that as you are open to the voice of God in your life, that it would be crystal clear what your direction is. Or it may be that you think so, but you are not sure. Or it may be that you do not know, that there is confusion. In any case, seek confirmation, seek clarification with someone you trust.

The final part of the prayer is action. Act on what has been revealed to you. Do something to act out the call. Do something that further clarifies and affirms the message. So, to summarize, I am asking you to pray a prayer that would include openness, that would include clarification, that would include action.

And all this is because of the way Jesus is. All of this is because Jesus loves us, will always be with us, and calls us and provokes us to the next step, calls us to new insights, revelations, and struggles. Calls us to the tomorrow of our lives and the tomorrow of this church. May this loving and provoking Jesus ever call us onward. And may we open our lives in response to that loving and provocative call. Amen.