

Sermon – August 30, 2020

During college and for several years afterward I worked and lived with a refugee community in Greeley. Some of the refugees I got to know have become some of my dearest friends. When I first started volunteering, it was because I wanted to share the gifts I had with those who, in my eyes, had very little. I quickly discovered that I had the thing the wrong way around. The refugees that I thought I had come to serve actually had more to offer than I did. I ended up receiving far more than I gave. During Seminary I remember reading about a missionary who said, “I came to bring them Jesus, but when I arrived, Jesus had beaten me there.” From my refugee neighbors, I learned about how to exist in true community. I learned what generosity can really look like—when those who have little give to those with even less. They taught me how to pray, to grieve, and lament. They showed me what it is like to have faith in the midst of tremendous pain that life can bring. Jesus was already there, long before I showed up.

And as Lutherans, this really shouldn’t surprise us. One of the key tenants of our theology is our commitment to the theology of the cross. Luther’s Theology of the Cross says that God is not found in the halls of power or among the rich, wealthy, and powerful. Instead, God chooses to be found among the poor, the outcast, and those on the margins. God does not just exist on the mountaintops of life, God exists in the muck, grief, and brokenness that so often envelopes us. God is always on the side of the marginalized and the oppressed.

Old Testament law, the prophets, and the epistles all call for Christians to care for those on the margins, and Jesus’ life highlights this aspect of God’s Kingdom even more clearly. Jesus is frequently criticized by the teachers of the law, the scribes, and Pharisees for hanging out with prostitutes, tax collectors, and sinners. He heals Gentiles and talks with a Samaritan woman. Jesus goes out to those that are most marginalized and makes them the center of his ministry.

And the powers that be in Ancient Israel were not please by Jesus’ choice of friends and companions. A high profile teacher should have high profile followers—not fisherman and tax collectors and sinners. Even Jesus’ disciples are taken aback by his movement towards the margins sometimes. When Jesus speaks to the Samaritan woman at the well the disciples are concerned—doesn’t Jesus know that he should be avoiding this woman! In his book *Tattoos on the Heart*, Jesuit priest Father Greg Boyle writes “Jesus stood with the outcasts until they were welcomed or until he was crucified, whichever came first.”

And that brings us to our Gospel text for the day. Jesus knows exactly what preaching peace to the Gentiles, welcoming tax collectors, and elevating sinners is going to get him. Jesus knows that as he shakes up the status quo of idolatry, ethnocentrism, and power hoarding that religious and political elites will have to get rid of him. He completely understands the end that awaits Israel’s messiah. He tells his disciples: pain and death. What’s more is that Jesus expects his disciples to do the same.

Standing with the oppressed and the marginalized is not a comfortable position. I can’t think of many times in world history when those with power voluntarily shared it with those on the margins. When you look at the lives of activists and those who moved toward the margins hardship is certainly a common thread—Martin Luther King Jr., Nelson Mandela, Mother Theresa, Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Cesar Chavez all endured hardship in one way or another. The world and those in power do not take kindly to those who would move to the margins and make it the center.

Ideally, we want our messiah to come and bring peace, righteousness, and justice without the discomfort of turning tables. So when Jesus explains that in order to fulfill his role as messiah he will face suffering and death at the hands of the Jewish leaders and Roman government, Peter's response is somewhat understandable. "No way!" We don't want God's chosen one to go through all of that, or expect it of us for that matter. But Jesus knows this is the road he has been given to walk. You can't claim to be God's messiah, the chosen one, then welcome in all the riff-raff and expect the leaders to not get upset. Jesus knows that this is his mission and he knows the consequences, and so he rebukes Peter and says, "Get behind me Satan." He can't let Peter get in the way of the mission that God has called him to.

What is interesting though is that this rebuke "get behind me," in Greek is used just a little bit later when Jesus tells his disciples to take up their cross and "follow me." Jesus is not telling Peter to leave, Jesus is telling Peter to follow, as a disciple. Jesus extends grace to Peter and invites him to keep following. And we can trust that Jesus extends the same grace to us! As followers of Jesus we won't always get it right. We will mess up. Because moving to the margins and making it the center is hard, counter-cultural work. And so when we don't do it right, when we overlook something or someone, or when we fail at whatever Jesus might be calling and inviting us to in that moment, there is grace. We are still invited to "get behind" Jesus, we are still called to follow.

Even as we follow, God is active bringing God's kingdom to fulfillment. In these verses in Matthew, Jesus is talking about the cross and the resurrection. And through Jesus' life, death, and resurrection God's kingdom is brought into being. In God's kingdom there is justice, there is peace, and there is wholeness for all people. Those on the margins are brought to the table as equals. Everyone will live in righteousness and love. This is God's work, but we can catch glimpses of it right here and right now. Ask any of the Family Promise folks about how God's kingdom has been revealed to them as they spend time with those experiencing homelessness. Talk with anyone involved at Eiber about the ways they have seen God at work, in them and around them, as they do carnivals and pass out school supplies and plan Christmas parties. While there will be hardships as we follow Jesus as messiah, there will also be life, joy, and abundance. Moving from the center to the margins may be difficult, but it is holy and it is good and Jesus invites us to follow.