

“Whom Will You Serve?”

November 9, 2008

Psalm 13

Joshua 24:1-3a, 14-18

During my first semester in divinity school, probably some time in early November, 2001, now that I think about it, the readings for one of my courses included an article about Glide Memorial Church in San Francisco.

I appreciated being reminded and learning more about Glide and the radical acts of hospitality, healing, ministry, and mercy that are possible within a Spirit-filled church, but there was another student in that class who most definitely did not appreciate Glide’s ministry, or at least not a part of it. In truth, she wasn’t simply unappreciative; she was appalled. She was appalled that the Rev. Cecil Williams and Glide Memorial Church were providing (and, as far as I know, still are providing) clean needles to drug addicts and prostitutes who needed them.

This young woman – I’ll call her “Kate” – couldn’t understand how anyone who’s a Christian or any church that’s trying to be faithful to the Gospel could, in her words, condone drug use or, worse still, facilitate drug use. It simply made no sense to her at all.

Kate was, at the time, in her early 20’s. She had studied classical Greek philosophy and aesthetics and had gone straight from college into divinity school at Harvard. She was bright, focused, kind, and was herself classically beautiful. She seemed to have come from a family and a home where she was loved and encouraged and supported. Her life and her studies hadn’t prepared her to understand how lost, how far from health, how far from God a person can become. And so, not understanding the cold, frightening, forsaken places from which human beings can’t seem to find a way out, Kate was certain that the church should be trying to convince addicts to quit using drugs, not giving them more needles to shoot up with.

Believe me, I hadn’t gone off to divinity school planning to play the role of the older, wiser student, guiding my much younger colleagues with greater understanding and insight, but that afternoon the Spirit did seem to tell me to open my mouth and start talking. And so I did. What I remember saying to Kate and our classmates is that we are all able to dig ourselves into deep holes and, no matter how far down we already are, our ability to keep digging is, apparently, endless. And what that means is, as a result of what’s been done to us and what we’ve done to ourselves, we can be so far down in a hole of addiction or alienation that it’s not possible to take a single, simple step and emerge from that hole. We can be so far down that we may have to take step after step after step after step toward light and life before we’ll ever have a chance to step out of that pit of despair. So, as the people from Glide said, if we’re going to help our brothers and sisters emerge from their hell holes of addiction, the first thing we have to do is to get dirty needles out of circulation, so that our kindred will have a chance to live long enough to find their way out of there.

I don’t know if Kate left class that day or left divinity school understanding that loving our neighbors as ourselves sometimes – *often* – means loving them when they are not making healthy choices, when they’re on a destructive path and don’t step off it after we’ve told them they should, and it means loving them when they are not living lives of wisdom, justice, and mercy. (And I hope I don’t need to remind any of us that you and I are also perfectly capable of choosing unhealth, destruction, folly, injustice, and cold-

heartedness. I'm not talking about "those" other people over there who are in need of God's radical, redeeming love. I'm talking about all of us, here, there, and everywhere.)

Kate and her struggle to understand the messiness of recovery and redemption have been on my mind this week as I have struggled to understand and accept where we are and where we are not in California on responding to God's call to justice and mercy for gay and lesbian couples. Kate and her impatience with addicts who won't just say no have been on my mind as I have heard and read the hurt, anger, and even rage of people within this congregation and beyond. Kate and her conviction that, if *we* simply lay "the truth" at the feet of people who need it, *they* will pick it up and start to live it have been on my mind as I've heard the name-calling, the accusations of bigotry and hate flung at anyone and everyone who voted "Yes" on Proposition 8.

Let me start by being clear about the harm that Proposition 8 inflicts. Proposition 8 claims to write into the California Constitution an exception to the guarantee of equal protection under the law for all people. Proposition 8 rests on the belief that separate *can* be equal, even though we as a country abandoned that idea more than 50 years ago. Proposition 8 says to James and Mike, Kathy and Veda, Julie and Keri, Manuel and Paul, Nancy and Chey that we should be treated differently under the law, that it is just and right to treat us differently under the law. It says to us, to our gay and lesbian brothers and sisters, and to all who know and love us that there is something "less" in who we are and that the law should reflect that "less-ness."

It is absurd that a bare majority of voters in a single election can restrict the state constitution's protections for a minority within the state. It is absurd, and it makes a mockery of the very idea of constitutional protections. The legal battle is not over; this story has not come to an end.

Of course, I stand here before you not as a lawyer, although I am that, but as a preacher. I stand here as someone called to listen for the word of God and to share what I hear. And in the midst of my dismay and disappointment about Proposition 8 and in the midst of the hurt and anger I encountered in so many of you, gay and straight alike, along came the question and the challenge from the Book of Joshua: "Choose this day whom you will serve."

In this moment and in all the moments of your life, the Holy One asks, "Whom will you serve?" In a week when the healing and justice countless people thought they'd never see in their lifetimes came to pass in the election of a presidential candidate whose skin color would have been used to deny him the right to vote just a generation ago and who would have had to live with the threat of being lynched for speaking his mind just two or three generations ago ... in a week when healing and justice become visible in one election and are denied in another ... in a week when the pain of that denial leads to outrage and anger ... in a week so filled with joy and grief, the Holy One calls us to decide, "Whom will you serve?"

Will you, will we, serve the god whom we make in our image, the god who is angry at those who voted, out of fear and a restricted sense of God's love, to keep some of God's beloved people in a separate, lesser category of citizen, of human being? Will you, will we, serve the god who resembles our worst selves, the god who wants to hurt and shame those who have tried to hurt and shame us?

Or will you, will we, seek to serve the God made known in and through Jesus, who continues to call us to love our enemies and to bless those who curse us? Will you, will we, seek to serve the God made known in and through Jesus, who continues to tell his followers, in so many words, that it's no big deal if we love those who love us, if

we're kind to those who are kind to us, and if we're generous with those who are generous with us? Will you, will we, seek to follow God in Christ, who calls us to forgive those who trespass against us? Will you, will we, seek to serve God in Christ, who urges us to be as wise as serpents ... and as gentle as doves?

Being kind and compassionate to the poor, the downtrodden, the weak is pretty easy, because if we are not the poor, downtrodden, or weak, those who are don't pose any immediate threat to us. Loving those who hate, blessing those who curse, and forgiving those who do us harm is usually much, much harder. Doing that kind of loving, blessing, and forgiving is much riskier and makes us much more vulnerable when we do it. And that, my beloved brothers and sisters, is why Jesus' message was so radical 2000 years ago and is so radical today, November 9, 2008, in Sonoma, California.

Think about it. Christianity (and other religions, too) proclaim that God calls all of creation toward healing and justice. And God in Christ proclaimed and still proclaims that the way toward healing and justice is the way of love -- risky, greater-than-we-can-imagine love. What God has led this church and many other churches to see and to live is that the gift of lifelong love between two men, two women, or a man and a woman is simply that: the gift of a gracious God of unending love. Even in the midst of needing to be politically savvy and as wise as serpents in legal strategy, we are called to be people who trust love as more powerful than anger, condemnation, fear, and ignorance.

Human justice does not unfold in a smooth, swift movement. I don't think it ever has or ever will. Injustice persists in so many forms, here close to home and all around the world. The Holy One has planted in our hearts a yearning for human and divine justice and has, in the words of one of early Christian desert mothers or fathers, given us anger as an appropriate response to injustice. The question before you and me is, what will we do with that anger when we feel it? The question uttered in the Book of Joshua and uttered in our hearts, is whom will we serve with our longing for justice and our anger?

This morning's psalm and many other psalms invite us to take our longings, our anger, and our despair to the Holy One and, in that conversation, to ask for justice, healing, and mercy. And the God made known in the life and ministry of Jesus calls us to bring love when there is hate, blessing where there is condemnation, and forgiveness even before the ones who have hurt us have repented. Loving our enemies doesn't provide the adrenaline rush that returning hate and intolerance with hate and intolerance provide, but God isn't offering adrenaline rushes. God is offering the path that leads to true justice, deep healing, and the peace of God that surpasses human understanding.

My fellow student Kate couldn't see how many steps it might take for someone to emerge from the pit of fear and constricted love. We may not always be able to see how many steps it will take someone to come to see the beauty and blessing of God in same-sex couples, but the Holy One calls us and challenges us to look more carefully and to offer love as the guide along those steps into light and life.

Amen.

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