

WELCOMING THE STRANGER

Mark 9: 33-41

[Augsburg College Chapel, Lent 5, 26 March 2012]

Perhaps you are like me and you find yourself occasionally asking questions like these: “Why does that homeless guy stand in the middle of the road and beg for money? Why doesn’t he take advantage of the many services our community offers to meet his needs?” Or, in another moment: “How can that Democrat/Republican/Independent (you fill in the blank) believe such rubbish? Doesn’t she see what is going on and what is needed?” Or, even this: “I respect all religions, but why are Muslims often associated with terrorism around the world? Is there something about their faith that leans toward violence?”

We could go on, I imagine. Silly questions, you might say – especially for good, educated, faithful folks like us. But admit it, nary a day goes by when you and I don’t ask such questions – maybe not out loud, but surely in our inner thoughts.

The unnamed disciples in our gospel for this morning – those talking out loud among themselves about who was the greatest – are icons of our human proclivity to prideful claiming of the superiority of our own experience, intellect, political position, religious persuasion and so on. And it is Jesus’s equally iconic response – “Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all” – that turns our world upside down. So what do we do?

There is a remarkable tension in both our liberal arts academic tradition and our Lutheran Christian tradition. At their best and most faithful, both traditions claim that genuine learning and faith, grounded as they are in humility and openness, must embrace the experience of difference and otherness. In fact, they both argue that we are most learned and faithful when we give up attempting to control our world, when we recognize that the gifts and ideas and experiences of others are at the heart of a community that is healthy and just and compassionate, when we celebrate the ways in which our learning and lives are enhanced by the strangers in our midst.

That said, we are not always at our best in either our academic or faith communities. How easy it is once we have been educated and formed in the faith to believe that we have learned enough, that we have found the right way to God, that our ways of seeing the world and acting in it give us a leg up on those who do not share our superior learning and faith. And when we do engage with those we count as less learned and faithful, our behavior often leans toward finding ways to help “correct” their deficiencies at best or marginalizing and ignoring them at worst.

So here comes Jesus back at us again. “Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.” And then to make his point, he takes a child in his arms. Now, this strikes me as

a Hallmark moment of sorts, not really the hard-edged rebuke we might expect. It's pretty hard to argue about welcoming in a child. But he goes on. The disciple John pushes the point, believing that surely Jesus does not believe that outsiders are capable of helping the cause. But Jesus does not fall into the trap. His response -- "Whoever is not against us is for us" -- points to truly radical hospitality. Here is the claim that discipleship does not give you the right to turn your back on those whose lives and experiences and beliefs might serve God's cause in the world. Because that is the point -- this is about God's intentions for God's people and creation; this is not about our human machinations to claim superiority and power for ourselves.

Professor Tim Pippert from the sociology department and I are co-teaching the Senior Honors Seminar this spring on the broad topic of income inequality in America. The course offers a multi-disciplinary perspective on the realities of income disparity by focusing on two extremes: the homeless and the wealthy. Through a variety of readings and experiences (including volunteering at two shelters and tours of private clubs and museums), we are all being challenged as educated people to struggle with our own perceptions of those who are different than we are. And those perceptions often begin with the stigma we attach to those at both ends of the wealth spectrum. We do wonder why the homeless live the way they do. We jump to conclusions about their level of education, about their drug and alcohol abuse, about their mental competency, about the decisions they made in their lives. At the same time, we also wonder about the greedy 1%, those who occupy private clubs, those who control wealth and corporate power, those who are not accountable for their riches.

For me, the inspiring thing happening in our course is witnessing students admit these stigmas and then seek to listen to the experiences of others -- homeless or wealthy. So, for example, a student volunteering at Peace House on Franklin Avenue sits next to a long-time homeless man at lunch and learns his story, recognizing the common needs and aspirations they share. Or, on another night, students hear from a thoughtful member of the 1% who worries about her children and how they will live responsibly in a world marked by injustice and scarcity. Come to find out, we can learn from those different from us about how we live as God's people in the world. We can welcome the stranger -- even when that stranger scares us or makes us angry -- and therein find our way together to serve God's cause in the world.

So, here we are, living in this tension between the claims of our education and faith to welcome the stranger in genuine ways and our own human pride that distracts us from learning and faithfulness that serves God's intentions for the world. As we enter these final weeks of Lent and of our academic year, each of us faces the fact that we may be challenged by a world in which those who are different from us -- the strangers we will encounter -- make a claim upon us that is perhaps more real and intense than it has ever been. Whether that difference is ethnic or cultural, religious, intellectual, ability-based, socioeconomic or political, we will not escape the claim of otherness in our lives in the world. So how will we respond to those who do not share our beliefs or privilege or education? How will we engage the person we don't understand, perhaps the person we don't really like? How will we live as thoughtful and faithful people called to do God's work in the world?

We will sing a hymn this morning written for the L'Arche Community, an international network of Christian communities where people with and without disabilities share life together in a spirit of mutual dependence. L'Arche was founded by Jean Vanier, a Catholic lay leader who speaks passionately about how his life was transformed by his decision more than forty years ago to live with people with disabilities. He needed to overcome his own fears and stereotypes of those with disabilities. He needed to deal with social myths about people with disabilities. He did this by finding within himself what he calls the "compassion for life" that came when he faced his fears and learned to be present with another human being who happened to be different than he was. Once he learned this compassion and felt its gentleness in his own life, he then devoted himself to building safe communities for others to be present with each other, to live day by day with each other, to seek justice for those who were often marginalized. Vanier's learning and faithfulness became a lifelong practice of learning to be compassionate, to accompany each other, and to seek justice where the world is not fair.

This challenge to make welcoming the stranger a lifelong practice was brought home to me recently when I spoke with a colleague and friend from here in the Twin Cities who has just begun a new job as the director of a facility for those with severe developmental disabilities. She is a good and passionate leader on behalf of the vulnerable in our community, having led a housing services organization for many years. She spoke quietly of the challenge she has faced in accompanying the residents of her facility in their journeys. Clearly this has been more difficult than she imagined. And then she told of a wise colleague, who recognized her struggle, and told her how he had come to understand those they served as among God's greatest gifts to the world. Surely, he said, these good folks are God's most supreme angels, spiritually strong and mature and wise. Because they are the only ones God could trust to live in the world with their disabilities and the stigma attached so that all God's people could understand how much God loves all of us and how God intends for us to love each other.

I wonder whom else God has sent into our midst to show us how to love? We may never know if we spend our time arguing about the superiority of our education and faith. On the other hand, if we truly embrace the life of learning and discipleship that welcomes the stranger into our lives – no matter how difficult or messy – just imagine the riches of wisdom and faithfulness that God will send us. May it be so according to our gracious and loving God's will for all of us. Amen.