

Seek the peace of the city

This story from Luke's Gospel has been the preacher's punching bag on Thanksgiving weekend for a long, long time. It seems custom made for the season - a perfect way to remind people who may be prone to taking too much for granted that we ought not to do that...take stuff for granted, I mean. Good things are abundant. What's more, we have claimed a privileged place in God's sight by our allegiance with Jesus, so good things ought to be abundant. And like the other nine, we just accept that 'good' is how things should be for us. Whole and healed is our resting state. And we are ready to be reminded that the Samaritan - the one who lives on the fringes of the promise - is instantly and exuberantly grateful for the mercy Jesus offers. Fine - that's a great reminder, and one you've all heard before. But this isn't the kind of thanksgiving we are having.

Prayers for healing aren't always answered, are they; and the good news that we have claimed in Christ's name has failed to solve all our problems. We have, in fact, discovered, invented and revealed plenty of new problems in the course of our living in light of Jesus resurrection.

Our fear of leprosy has been replaced by other sinister diseases. We divide our planet into friend and foe. Arrogant enough to believe that we couldn't be wrong about something so fundamental as faith, we divide the Creator into "our god and their god". We routinely trade democracy for demagoguery, and limit our discussions to 'safe topics' for fear of offending one another. One wonders how we could possibly find room for gratitude...

There are moments, of course. Family gatherings where good memories are shared and favourite stories are resurrected for the benefit of younger generations (and our own self-preservation). Many of you will gather around tables later today and rise completely satisfied and very grateful...but what about next weekend? What about January 17th? What happens when the bad news catches up and the world grows dark with dread... what happens then?

Well, because of who Jesus is, and because his store of wisdom and knowledge comes from a tradition that has known many such moments of despair, we can find solace in our faith tradition. We follow the risen Jesus who personifies the Eternally hopeful; God who has only good in mind.

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It will not always be obvious. Good will not always instantly prevail because we've said the right words or offered the perfect prayer. Sometimes, you have to work against the grain.

Did you ever wonder where Jesus gets his radical ideas? He arrives at 'the right time' (according to scripture) and is both a 'breath of fresh air' and an incredible thorn in the side of those who prefer that nothing change. (for the record, those folks are found on both sides of the Scriptural story - religious Jews and rigorous Romans).

Jesus is talking about loving enemies and praying for those who are doing the persecuting, and while there are those who seem to be hearing these things for the first time, this approach to difficult times for God's people is nothing new. Prophets have been making these kinds of noises for generations - for centuries. It happens whenever the righteous decide that God is no longer 'on their side' - that is to say, when the nation is defeated, and the people are oppressed or on their way to exile. Listen to Jeremiah again; the game is over, and the wrong team won. Smart money is on the abandonment of hope - the sackcloth and ashes route - but the prophet urges a different approach. Jeremiah advises gratitude.

“(29:1) These are the words of the letter that the prophet Jeremiah sent from Jerusalem to the remaining elders among the exiles, and to the priests, the prophets, and all the people, whom Nebuchadnezzar had taken into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon...(v. 4-7) Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon:
Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce.
Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease. ***But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the LORD on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.***

Seek the welfare of the city...look for good things and in the search you will find good things. This is an unimaginable paradox for the people. Good things happened to them BECAUSE they were God's people in God's promised place. No other goodness was

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possible - no other blessing was conceivable. Yet this (Jeremiah insists) is the Word. From. God.

So on this thanksgiving weekend, as we see in the news the misery that has once again erupted in a region that we have designated the home of 'the other' - the same area of the world where Jesus walked and where the first stirrings of real hope were once felt - we would do well to re-imagine our approach to gratitude. It is not our right (nor is it a privilege) to find ourselves in a place where there is so little standing in the way of our wholeness. Gratitude is not an achievement to be reached at the end of a difficult road. Gratitude (like faith) is a gift that can find us in even the darkest moments.

The samaritan gives thanks because, as a Samaritan, he is not welcome in the presence of the priest. So he praises God in the moment. He's in an impossible position, yet his gratitude is real and his healing and wholeness is cause for celebration.

Likewise the exiles are encouraged to 'seek the peace of the city' - to live, worship and pray in ways that benefit the place they would otherwise call a prison. That is the way to gratitude - to redemption.

Jesus isn't really radical - he is just following an ancient pattern of looking to God in every circumstance. For Jesus, there is no 'them' - and no 'us'. There are those who have seen and acknowledged the glory of God - and those who haven't yet. Even on the cross, Jesus sought mercy for those who weren't there yet. He prayed, not that they would be punished, but that they would understand. "forgive them, for they don't know what they're doing"

Let us be grateful for the patient mercy of God that allows us to live and learn and grow into the knowledge of what God has in store. Amen