

“A World of Welcome”

Obviously I am not a nun; nevertheless, I am a creature of habit. (Always good to get those over with, don't you think?) For virtually all of the seventeen years I lived in Omaha I got my hair cut at the same place. Generally for me it's not so much about the haircut and more about the relationship with the person cutting my hair; or so I tell myself. My barber's name was Dan—a great guy who loved to talk politics. Generally we served to reinforce one another's political predispositions, so we didn't have to be terribly careful about what we said. We could both let our hair down, as it were.

But there was one element of Dan's setup that made me very uncomfortable: a man who worked there cleaning up around the place and shining shoes. He was an older African American man who moved very slowly, and struck me as kind of a cliché. It's painful to me now even to hear myself say this. But the old stereotype of the shoe shine boy was difficult for me. I was eager to have this man claim his God-given dignity, to separate himself from this Uncle Tom-ish image and to stop offering to shine my shoes. I would have been more comfortable shining his. I would say “No thank you” each time he asked. And as time passed I actually began to make a point of wearing running shoes to my haircuts just to avoid the encounter. It never really occurred to me that my supposedly enlightened attitude was making it more difficult for this man to earn a living.

Then one year as I was preparing to preach on Maundy Thursday I reread the passage from John where Jesus washes the disciples' feet. Do you know the story? Peter objects because he cannot accept the thought of Jesus in such a subservient role: “You will never wash my feet!” Jesus replies, “Unless I wash you, you have no share in me.” Peter replies with characteristic impulsiveness, “Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head!”¹ Good old Peter. As I was thinking about this story I wondered to myself what might be a modern equivalent of foot washing; something we would think of as a personal but embarrassingly menial task. And then it dawned on me. Oh...

Just file that story away for a few minutes.

¹ John 13:8-9.

We've been working from the Gospel of Mark for the last couple of weeks, and we'll stick with it until roughly Thanksgiving. What Mark serves up for us is a series of lessons about discipleship: what does it *really* mean to be a follower of Jesus? Emotionally, these lessons are all very similar. They begin with a slap in the face, an affront to the lives we live and the world we know. If we are paying attention we are taken aback, knocked off balance just a little bit. And then, just as we are regaining our equilibrium, we are given a glimpse of something new. In Mark, Jesus is always teaching in a "not-this... but this" format. We have to be a bit tenacious with this stuff before we see what Jesus is driving at... and then there is a huge Aha!

The Gospel of Mark has a thesis statement. It's the first thing Jesus says, in the very first chapter: "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe the good news." (1:14) "The time is fulfilled": the period of waiting is over. "The kingdom of God has come near": now is the time for God's will to be done on earth as it is in heaven. The old order is passing away and a new world is being born, right here in our midst, generating new understandings and calling for new ways of being in the world. "Repent": turn around, start in a new direction, live in a new way. "Believe the good news": trust in this new reign of God that Jesus is proclaiming and embodying.

Everything else in the Gospel According to Mark is a footnote to this sentence. What does the world look like when the kingdom of God comes near? The sick are healed, the blind see, the lame walk, God's authority over unclean spirits is made plain... in Jesus, all heaven is busting loose. But Jesus also calls his disciples and all who would follow him to live as a part of this new reality: to surrender the lives they know and find new life as a part of God's reign. This requires a major readjustment; and that's what Mark is about. Jesus will challenge the social order, mess with our economic relationships, reorder the things we care about and introduce us to some tantalizingly counter-cultural ways to make God a central part of our lives. He will invite us into a fullness of life that has not an ounce of pretense about it. He will call us into new life by challenging us to take up a cross to follow him. He will be completely honest about how this will uproot, upend, upset and uplift our lives.

Particularly worthy of note in Mark's gospel is that not everybody gets it. Repeatedly, exasperatingly, even the disciples do not understand. Just when you would think they might be catching on they revert to their old ways. We say it around here a lot: "When people do not know what to do,

they do what they know.” That is exactly what is going on in this morning’s lesson.

Last week Jesus administered a sort of mid-term exam to the disciples, beginning with the easy question of, “Who do people say that I am?” and moving along to the kicker, “Who do *you* say that I am?” Peter gave the right answer: “You are the Messiah.” But he had the wrong understanding. When Jesus told him that that meant he would suffer and die, Peter took objection. Messiahs don’t suffer; not if they’re *real* messiahs. Jesus calls Peter “Satan” in that exchange. Obviously suffering and death are very much a part of what Jesus expects; and his followers must expect the same.

Then Jesus is transfigured: he glows on a mountaintop with Moses and Elijah—a clear affirmation of Jesus’ mission and an expression of God’s approval in the voice that says, “This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!” (9:7) Then the disciples try—and fail—to perform a difficult exorcism, which Jesus accomplishes, again underscoring his authority and authenticity.

So as they’re heading back home, back to the lakeside village of Capernaum that is the base for Jesus’ ministry in Galilee, Jesus tries again. Traveling between villages and moving *incognito*, he says to these key followers, “The Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him, and three days after being killed, he will rise again.” Their response? “But they did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him.” Remember, the last one to challenge Jesus got called, “Satan.” Obviously this strange teaching is a sore point with the rabbi.

So... not knowing what to do, they do what they know; and they speculate among themselves which of them is the greatest. Probably this means which of them is closest to their teacher; which of them is next in line; which of his graduate students will Jesus choose to be his research assistant. This conversation has everything to do with status, with pecking orders, with getting ahead in the world they know. But it has nothing to do with the kingdom of God that Jesus has come to proclaim.

When Jesus asks the disciples what they were talking about, does he already know? Is he angry? Is he weary? Is he determined to try this teaching one more time? How can he put the point across that he did not come to be the messiah-king who conquers and dominates?

He sits the disciples down and he takes a child. We get all googly-oogly over children, but this is precisely the wrong response. Instead think, “someone else’s badly behaved child with a suspicious smell.” We see

children as the center of our universe because we think of them as extensions of ourselves. But in the ancient world, children were absolute non-entities. Did you notice that the pronoun used to refer to the child is “it”? That’s the way it reads in the Greek. A child had absolutely no social status. But this child will be Jesus’ central object lesson; or rather, subject lesson.

The point to get across is, “Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.” Following Jesus is not about topping off the pecking order. It is about learning to serve, for through serving we see the world as it is: God’s world. Do you see this child? “Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.”

Well, that’s not so bad. I like children. No. The child here is a living symbol of those who are invisible. When we turn this saying around we really get it: Whoever ignores one such little one ignores me, and whoever ignores me ignores not me but the one who sent me.” Do you want to see where God is in this world? God can be seen in the ones who are invisible in society... maybe like the guy who wants to shine your shoes, but whose name you have never bothered to learn whom you never really see. Oh...

To see God we have to understand the futility of seeking status. What is status but having the “privilege to ignore”² some people as we attend to others? Jesus is trying to open our eyes to see a different kind of world that is all around us.

Did you catch Michael Jordan’s speech when he was inducted into the NBA Hall of Fame? If ever there was anybody who was a lock for the Hall of Fame it was Jordan. If ever there was a symbol of achievement it is he: success, wealth, fame—he’s probably the most recognizable face on the planet... certainly the most recognizable silhouette. Much of his speech was what you would expect: thanking teammates, parents, siblings, coaches, mentors. But the most animated part of the speech was when he named people who had slighted him and challenged them to compete. “This is how I motivate myself,” he said, talking about these real or imagined slights that are “fuel for the fire” of his competitive spirit... as though, even at this moment of his life, he still has something to prove to somebody. That speech is a monument to the absolute futility of trying to achieve a sense of personhood in a competition-driven, status-oriented world. The argument over who is the greatest never ends.

² Many thanks to Stephanie Haskins for this wonderful turn of phrase.

But instead Jesus offers us a glimpse of a world of welcome: where each person has God-given dignity; where the real key to who we are is not rubbing shoulders with the rich and famous, but sensing the presence of God in somebody else's poopy-diapered child; where the last are first and the first are last; where letting go of our hard-earned claims to power and status is the first step toward finding a freely-offered life in the fullness of community where there is enough for all and people look after one another; where, "Whoever wants to be first of all must be last of all and servant of all."

And it all begins with opening our eyes and ears and hearts to notice. Who are the invisible people in our world? Are they children? Are they immigrants? Are they homeless? Are they offering to shine our shoes? Are they cleaning up after us? Once we begin to notice, nothing is ever quite the same.

To paraphrase Jesus' central message, "The time is now. And the kingdom of God—the world of welcome—is all around you. It's *this* close. Stop what you're doing. Take a look around. And begin to live in a new world.

Amen

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