

Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost
September 20, 2015
The Rev. Denise Trogdon, Rector

Turning Challenges to Blessings

In the name of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Amen.

If you have ever received a call in the middle of the night, you know that it is rarely good news. One such call came to my house when I was young, and I could tell that it was serious by my mother's tone of voice. It was a hospital emergency room in Connecticut, where my father was on business travel. There was an automobile accident and his injuries were critical. Springing to action there was no time to think, as we gathered our things.

It was nothing short of a miracle that my father survived the night, and we were able to make it to the hospital in time. Only in the quiet of the ICU waiting room did the anxiety emerge. Nothing made sense and the world felt upside down, as this man who had seemed a pillar of strength to me, now lay vulnerable and weak, barely clinging to life. As I watched the arduous work of recovery over the next several months, I grew up a little. I witnessed how love can heal even the worst brokenness and how challenges can bless us with a rare glimpse of what is really important.

In the gospel this morning Jesus gave his disciples that rare glimpse. For a second time, he predicted his death and resurrection, to prepare his friends for the days ahead. They didn't understand when he taught them before, that to save their life they must lose it. And they certainly didn't get it when he told them that the first must be last and servant of all. Teaching the upside down values of the kingdom, Jesus's attempt to reset his disciples' priorities was met with fear and confusion. What seemed most important to them could be heard in their argument about who was the greatest.

Jesus asked his followers to imagine abundant life offered not through power but through vulnerability, not through accomplishments, but through service. He took a little child into his arms saying "whoever welcomes one such child in my name, welcomes me and whoever welcomes me, welcomes not me but the one who sent me." This was a radical teaching for those who lived in a culture where position was of utmost concern. Imperial politics favored relationships of privilege. Political and religious authorities were at the top of the power hierarchy, followed by the rich and then the working class. Women were of humble status and below them the children took their place. For Jesus to lift up one so powerless was to confront the values of his day and to assure his own persecution by the authorities. The disciples would soon witness a miracle that would change their perspective and priorities. Love would overcome suffering and death to have the final word.

Today, we have the benefit of history to see God's hand in life's events and recognize the great and small miracles that have been offered to us. Yet we are just as likely to be distracted by the values of our day that promote power and wealth and achievement. Our culture often interprets humility as weakness and servanthood as demeaning. We place great value on self-determination and personal happiness, which focuses our attention inward, and we can become blind to the suffering of others.

I read once about a study on compassion that was done at a seminary. A famous speaker was holding a lecture on the Good Samaritan. On the way to the lecture hall, they placed a man who appeared to be homeless and disheveled, sitting right in the path of those who would attend the lecture. He was talking to himself and sometimes calling out for help, and most of the students walked around him with little notice. Some even stepped over him, when he lay on the sidewalk.

This study concluded that a frenetic pace and misplaced priorities can profoundly affect one's ability for compassion. We often miss these opportunities to be someone else's small miracle.

I think the hardest part of Christ's teaching for us is that we, as Christians, are not promised a life without trouble; only that Christ has gone before us and will walk with us. Perhaps we are being prepared to walk with others. We cling to whatever makes us feel secure but to live kingdom values means trusting that when we give love away, Christ fills us with more. It is hard to see God at work in the midst of fear but we know from Christ's example that God desires to redeem our suffering and empower us to use our struggles for good.

This realization came to me some thirty years later as I found myself serving as a priest at that very same hospital in Connecticut, where my father had almost died. When I stepped into those doors to visit someone for the first time, I was flooded with memories. There were recollections of the fear and anguish of that time and also of the strong presence of God as my family walked that journey. Now I was being called to be that presence for another, to lift up one who was vulnerable and weak.

Opportunities to give and receive love are before us every day. Our perspective and priorities impact whether we notice or respond. This year at Holy Cross we are making an intentional effort to prioritize spiritual growth, to strengthen our connection to God and to each other. As we deepen our roots to God's kingdom values we will naturally broaden our reach out to the world. I ask you to consider joining us in this commitment to grow into the fulfillment of the mission God has given this parish. What is it that you value? How does this impact what you notice or to what you respond?

Wherever you are on your journey of faith, take one step in growth and engagement this year. God will bless us with challenges and miracles so that we too can be a blessing for another in need. Amen.