

The Reverend Marjo Anderson

Pentecost 17

Genesis 18.1-10, Psalm 54, Philippians 2.3–8, Mark 9.30-37

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Salem, Bridgeport

“Entertaining Angels Unaware”

One of the things that I find intriguing about the Bible is realizing that these are the stories that have survived. And that always makes me wonder about the stories that didn't So let me share with you a short story that didn't make it into the Bible ;)

The three men continued their long, hard trek through the hot, dry desert. Their assignment was to visit three couples and decide which couple would receive God's blessing. They had visited the first two. And they had been treated as desert hospitality required. They had been given food and water and some time to rest. As they walked along, discussing their experiences, they reflected on how they had been treated adequately and had had their needs met, but how there had been something missing from the encounters. They agreed that they had left that first couple feeling like an obligation had been met and that was it. and that they had left the second couple feeling like they had made that couple feel good about themselves. But in neither encounter had they felt any interest in them as individuals, or any curiosity about their journey, and no expectation that they might be recipients of a gift rather than the givers of one. It wasn't as if anything had been wrong exactly, but there was just something not quite right, something missing. If the third visit was anything like these last two they didn't know how they would choose.

But as they approached the next encampment they saw the third man they were to visit waiting in the doorway with an expectant look on his face. And the minute he caught sight of them, his eyes lit up and he smiled broadly as if they were exactly the people he had been waiting for. He greeted them warmly, with the utmost respect and deference and awe, and there was also an air of excitement and anticipation in his bearing. At the other two places they had felt accepted, but not really welcomed; they had felt that they had been quietly judged and found wanting. But here – here – they felt like family.

After he had made them comfortable in the cool, shade of his open-sided tent, Abraham had excused himself. Although he was obviously trying to speak softly enough to his wife Sarah that he would not be overheard, their younger ears could hear him urging her to get her finest flour. Then, as Abraham stepped out and called a servant over, they again heard Abraham asking for the finest calf they had. They looked at each other and smiled. Now they realized what was missing in the last two encounters. In those places they had been seen as the “other”, as the ones in need, as the vulnerable. But here they felt as if they were being treated, as family, or maybe even as royalty. They felt that Abraham and Sarah weren't going to just feed them and give them water out of a sense of obligation or because they wanted to be good people. Abraham and Sarah were interested in who they were, curious about their journey, and open to the possibility that they might receive even more than they were giving. Before they left Abraham and Sarah they gave them the gift they had been asked to give to the right couple – the promise of a long-desired child.

I tell that story because in some ways it parallels what's happening in our gospel today. In that story we also see two ways of responding to people who were seen as in need, as vulnerable, as less than, as inferior to others. In Jesus' day children were not given the worship that we give children in our culture. They were seen first as the property of their fathers – just as the women were considered property, first of their fathers and then of their husbands. And secondly children were seen as necessary workers to keep the family business going and as that society's social security system – that is, people to take care of you in your old age should you manage to live longer than you could work. Children were treated almost like servants and were certainly expected to keep in their place which meant they were not supposed to be bothering an esteemed rabbi. But Jesus tells them that there is a different way to see the children, a different way to treat them – not as inferior, not as subservient, not as less than adults. What Jesus says is, "These children have something to teach you. They are modeling a way of living and trusting that you would do well to emulate. These children have a gift to give you." Jesus didn't simply tolerate or accept the children. Jesus welcomed them as gifts from God.

The trouble is that human beings have evolved in a way that makes it hard for us to see others outside of our own family and own tribe that way. We automatically categorize people as inside or outside our tribe and we judge them and compare them to ourselves. And the vast majority of us human beings tend to see ourselves as superior – no matter how others see us!

Yet scripture makes it clear that we are all God's equally beloved children. I was reading an article on Julian of Norwich's reflection on God's presence in a hazelnut. We humans tend to think that we are vastly superior to animals, to plants, and certainly to such a thing as a hazelnut. But when we talk about God being omnipresent that means that God is everywhere all the time. God is in everything and everything is in God, and that means that there is no person and there is no place and there is no situation that is outside of God's presence. And that's really hard for us to wrap our minds around. And on those rare occasions when we can enter into that truth and realize that not only is every human child of God equal in God's eyes but every part of creation is treasured by God, we find ourselves where we belong – humble and submissive and yielding to the one who made us, the one who redeems us, and the one who sustains us. It is when we are humble before God and humble in relationship to every other human being that we find the way to abundant life now.

Look back at Psalm 54 that we heard today and find verse 9 and let's read it together. Everyone have it?
9You guide the humble in what is right and teach them the way of life.

The Apostle Paul makes it even more clear in our lesson today from the 2nd chapter from Philippians. Let's read those first two sentences together:
Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in in humility count others more significant than yourselves Let each of you look not only to his or her own interests, but also to the interests of others. [vss. 3-4]
That goes even beyond the Golden Rule
in which we are asked to do unto others as we would have others do unto us. Here Paul says, "Don't just look at someone as your equal. Look up to them." And we are supposed to look out for their interests just as much as we look out for our own.

What God asks of us, what Jesus asks of us, what Scripture asks of us, is not easy.
It goes against our human nature, which is bound so tightly to sin that we cannot free ourselves.
We cannot change our minds or our hearts or our spirits
so that they will never categorize or judge or compare others.

We cannot change our minds or our hearts or our spirits so that we are looking out for the interests of others –
people who are strangers, people who are different – as much as we are looking out for our own interests.

Only God can change our minds and hearts and spirits.

And even with God doing it, that changing, that shaping, that molding is not a one-time fix.

It's what our lives are all about – from the day we are born until the day we die.

It's not enough to give out of our abundance;

it's not enough to do the right thing;

it's not enough to provide for people's physical and social needs.

It's not enough because none of that will address the underlying problems and issues and challenges
of our lives and our world. Only God can do that.

And God can only do that as we grow in our relationship with God,

as we get to know God on a more intimate basis,

as we learn to see and recognize God in all of God's disguises,

as we learn to discern God's voice in the midst of all of the other voices.

Jesus didn't come just to teach us, but to show us, how to live.

If anyone was superior to anyone, it was Jesus,

and yet *Jesus did not regard equality with God as a thing to be grasped,*

⁷but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness.

*And being found in human form,⁸he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death —
even death on a cross. [Philippians 2:6b-8]*

Jesus emptied himself, humbled himself and became a servant,

not serving the way the first two couples in my historical fiction behaved,

not serving because it was the right thing to do

or because it made him feel even more superior.

He showed us how to serve from a place that looks at the person we are serving,

not as the one who is in need of us, but as one who, like us, stands in need of God.

You don't have to be a Christian to provide social services to others.

That only requires that you be a caring human being.

Oh, Jesus could've just kept healing people, feeding them, and performing miracles for them,

and their needs would have continued.

The same is true with all of our social service programs because they all simply treat the symptoms.

Jesus showed us that what God desires is that we empty ourselves of our ego,

that we let go of our power and privilege and prestige,

that we stop categorizing and labeling and judging,

and that we serve people not from a place above, not from a place of obligation

or the social expectations of others or the moral expectations of ourselves,

but from a place where we see the one we are called to serve

as the one who may give us a greater gift from God.

Jesus emptied himself. He gave up his comfort, his safety, and his life, simply because he trusted God.

And out of that God was able to do something far greater than anything Jesus could do

while he lived here on earth.

God raised Jesus from the dead and showed us the way

to abundant life here on earth and eternal life with God in heaven.

As we go through this next week, I pray that every time someone comes across our path,

God will remind us to see in that person a potential angel

who just might have a gift from God that fills us with such joy and hope that we laugh out loud. **Amen**