

Koinonia

Deuteronomy 30:15-20

Psalm 1

Philemon 1-21

Luke 14:25-33

Last Sunday I was not here with you because I was in North Carolina at The Wild Goose Festival. This gathering is a bizarre blend of folks. Hippies, straight-laced church folk, scholars and professors, gender and sexual identities all over the map, and all colors of skin. You guys know I'm weird, but to appreciate the bizarreness of this event- In a single afternoon, on the Main Stage you could listen to a Baptist gospel quartet, classic rock, folk artists, a drag queen singing contemporary worship music, and hundreds of people singing hymns together. It's an odd collection of artists and thinkers who love Jesus, but do not believe Jesus is well reflected in most versions of modern Christianity. Many have been hurt or excluded from the church, but they still feel connected with the message of the gospel. I had some amazing experiences, heard some phenomenal teaching, and listened to some fabulous music. As I have been processing back over my trip, a few experiences keeping circling in my mind.

One of them was an interesting group activity where we were invited to begin with worship, move into lament together, and then embrace God's presence for our corporate healing. It was emotional, raw, and intimate, and I admit that at some points, I was not entirely comfortable. But there was one portion that won't leave me. We were standing in a circle around an altar and asked to name "others" from the news and in our personal lives with whom our hearts have been grieving. The latest school shooting had just happened and someone named the victims. Someone else named the shooter's family. Starving children, war-torn communities... you get the idea. After each person or group was named, we would all say the name again together and then put our hands to our hearts, saying "we are them too". Someone would say, "undocumented immigrants" and we would respond "we are them too," and we aligned ourselves in solidarity with them. It was

powerful, as you can imagine. But then someone said racists. All our eyes popped out of our heads. I can assure you no one in that group identified as a racist. But, recognizing our shared humanity and our shared propensity to align ourselves with victims, rather than perpetrators of harm, the only honest thing was to carry on with the liturgy. Racists, we are them too. Someone else said Misogynists, and we all gulped again. It went on for a short while after that and you can probably imagine some of the things named. My mind keeps taking me back to the way it felt when that liturgy changed directions. It was a significant moment. And maybe it was just one of those things you had to be there to understand, but I can't help but thinking how important it is for all of us to acknowledge our shared humanity, even with those we hold at the furthest distance from ourselves.

Today's gospel lesson is equally challenging. I heard one Baptist minister say he was raised in a church where the pastor would always say give me an amen, unless the reading warranted an ouch, then give me an ouch. This passage in an ouch. But I promise to help us get to amen by the end. Jesus starts off telling us to hate our families, then says we have to carry our cross, and ultimately forfeit our possessions. Ouch. And what the heck? Jesus is the love guy, so why is he telling us to hate? And how are we supposed to survive to follow him if we give up all our possessions. Jesus, come on... why does anyone follow this guy!

We will get back to Jesus, but let's hold that for a moment and talk about Philemon. If you aren't familiar with the story, here are the cliff notes. Philemon was a prominent Roman citizen. Like most of us, he had the security, finances, and freedom to hear and respond to Paul's preaching. Philemon became a Christian and eventually a leader in the Colossian church. Philemon, like many prosperous Romans at the time, owned slaves, one of which was Onesimus. We do not know how or why Onesimus escaped from Philemon's ownership. But Onesimus eventually met Paul in prison. We don't know if Onesimus was a prisoner himself or was seeking Paul out specifically, but he too became a Christian. They developed such a close relationship that Paul called Onesimus his own child. In today's

letter, Paul is appealing to Philemon to take Onesimus back, but not as a slave, as an equal partner in ministry.

That word partner is the same word Paul uses at the beginning of the letter when he says he prays that the “sharing” of your faith may become effective. Both sharing in faith and partnership use the Greek word Koinonia. The definition means the sharing in the activities or privileges of an intimate association or group, most commonly used of churches and marriages. This word is typically translated “fellowship”. Paul was asking Philemon to forgive Onesimus. But more than that, he was asking him, one of the elite and powerful in both civic and religious life, to relinquish his property rights over this man and lose out on the financial benefit of Onesimus’ labor. And, even beyond than that, Paul was asking Philemon to consider Onesimus, his slave, as an equal, to feel about him and interact with him the same way Philemon interacted with Paul himself, a beloved brother.

So, going back to Jesus, to hear the intent of his message, behind the intensity of his words, we have to remind ourselves of the heart of God. Both the words of Moses and our Psalm tell us God’s desire is for our prosperity. Our prosperity and fruitfulness are rooted deeply in the love of God as found in God’s Word. God is not a thief. God is the life-giver, and we can be assured that anything God asks from us will be replaced instead with abundance of life. Once we remember the love of God, we can hear Jesus more clearly.

Jesus words today instruct us to forsake our attachments to temporary world systems. Jesus doesn’t want us to literally hate our family members. That word for hate is used throughout the New Testament as a contrast, a comparison. Jesus understood that family was the safety net, the social center of human life. That was how it was designed by God; Jesus wasn’t attempting to destroy it. He was saying that our attachments to our family, our love and our security with family members could not hold his disciples back from following him. To follow Jesus, means understanding from the outset that we are positioning ourselves against the social and governmental systems under which we live.

And, knowing how difficult that expectation was, he told them to count the cost. Jesus never tried to shield them from the reality that following him would require everything. It is only in releasing hold of our ideas of abundance that we can be filled to overflowing with life in God. Which is why he goes on to say we must give up all our possessions. The word for possessions doesn't mean just our stuff. It actually means all the things we are connected to, our state of being, and our identity. Jesus isn't simply asking us to sell our houses, he's telling us to give up the ways in which we define ourselves, our rank in society, our position at work, our status above others, our power and the things we possess that maintain our sense of security and superiority. When Paul asks Philemon to accept Onesimus as a beloved brother, he is echoing Jesus.

Today's gospel falls immediately after Jesus tells the parable of The Grate Banquet. That feast was prepared for the elite, but they weren't interested. Instead, the banquet was enjoyed by the outcasts, the outsiders, and those who didn't belong. In the kingdom of heaven, the ranking systems of human life don't apply. Jesus is offering us the opportunity to be disciples, to experience the blessing God designed for us. But our triune God exists within a relationship of mutuality and God's kingdom only exists through Koinonia, equal relationships of fellowship, power, honor and dignity.

I do not know if God is asking us to literally give up everything we own. I do know that if holding onto our things and our definitions of ourselves gets in the way of sharing equally with those we feel deserve them less, we cannot experience the eternal blessings of life in Christ. True prosperity will only ever be found in mutual flourishing.

May God give us each the grace to look at the children, the weak, the poor, those who don't belong, and those with whom we disagree the most ferociously... to say... "we are them too" and then humbly invite them into partnership as beloved equals in Christ. Amen.

