

February 6, 2011: CALLED AND GIVEN WORK
Isaiah 58:1-12; Matthew 5:13-20; Psalm 112
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A group of good Christians from a well-off urban church had been serving homeless folks so, in a fit of compassion one Holy Week, they decided to experience life as their friends on the streets experienced it, to find the suffering Christ on the streets. As luck would have it, that was the night temperatures fell, so that the combination with soaking rain made hypothermia a real possibility. Looking for shelter, they stumbled across a church holding an all-night prayer vigil. The group's pastor, well known in town for her outspoken social activism, boldly led the way into the vestibule. They were met by a security guard who took one look at their matted hair, disheveled clothing, and runny noses and showed them the door. Speaking from the confidence of their prominent church, the pastor explained they were Christians, that they were miserable and needed a place to stay. Respectfully but firmly the security guard said, "I was hired to keep homeless people like you out," and closed the door behind them. The miserable Christians stood in the rain, having found the suffering Christ, locked out of the church.¹

This is a true story. This is what happens, Isaiah says, when worship is too "right" to allow room for God's work. Those of us who have been volunteering at the Eastminster warming shelter might be able to identify with those Christians, but we've got some questions, too. They are the questions everyone who tries to engage in works of compassion has to face at some point or another. Why do they prefer to eat such terrible processed food instead of the wholesome foods we cook and offer? Should they have cell phones when they're poor? Can't they see how the terrible decisions they make have landed them in this position?

While Isaiah points out Israel's exquisitely pious worship, he also has the chutzpah to say their concern for decently-and-in-order has obscured their real work. Utilitarian worship for the purpose of getting them noticed by God, with the ulterior motive of getting them what they want, is little more than idolatry. What's in it for me? Religious piety is meaningless if it's not connected to lived faith, which is simply justice and right relationship. Israel knows everything about worship except that it should change them, and that's what Jesus means when he shares the Beatitudes. The Beatitudes spell out what that worship-transformed community looks like. Today's passage at the end of the Beatitudes is like what Lilly Tomlin's character, Edith Ann, says at the end of a sentence—*blzzpt!* "How you live makes a difference." It's salt and light, Jesus says, encouraging his disciples to disorder the status quo by doing subversive things like value the dispossessed, care for those who suffer, go out of your way to *do* justice, act with integrity, be peacemakers, stand for what you believe. Subversion we piously label "the Beatitudes," but which Jesus means to be a reflection of God's light so that all people will know God's justice and mercy.

Richard Rohr pointed out this week in his online meditation that "giving people new ideas" doesn't change them. "Believing ideas," he says, "is a way of *not* having to change in any significant way, especially if you can argue about them. . . . If you have the right words, you are considered an orthodox and law-abiding Christian. We burned people at the stake for not having the right words, but never to my knowledge for failing to love or forgive, or to care for the poor. Religion has had a love affair with words and correct ideas, whereas Jesus loved people. . . . We love any religion that asks us to change other people. We avoid any religion that keeps telling *us* to change."²

Words are pretty important, though, especially pronouns. They reflect what we believe as they shape how we act. I've observed my own shift in pronouns as I have been involved in various types of ministries. At first, it's ministry to "them"—third person plural. Objective, lump sum. The Homeless, The Disabled, The Poor, no names, no personal lives. It's all ministry *to* them. But as soon as I sit down at dinner and eat with "them," when I get to know names and faces and see people one at a time, they become "you." And that's good. That is holy ground. When we use second person singular, seeing persons, we live the gospel of Jesus Christ. Pretty soon, sharing a meal leads to learning that homeless people are as proud of their kids as I am, their cough is as pesky as mine. Pretty soon the language becomes "we." That

¹ Andrew Foster Connors, *Feasting on the Word, Year A, Vol.1*, p. 318

² Richard Rohr, online 2/4/11, Center for Action and Contemplation, adapted from *How Men Change*.

is where real compassion emerges. Compassion means “suffer with.” It’s not pity or objectivity, it’s “with-ness.” It is the lived reality that “God so loved the world that God gave us each other.”³

Holocaust survivor and Nobel Peace Prize winner Elie Wiesel writes about his childhood in Nazi concentration camps in the book, *Night*. Once, the camp had been deprived of food and water for three days. “Thousands of Jews were driven out of their barracks at dawn into a thickly falling snow and herded into a field. Forbidden to sit or even move much, they stood in line until evening, waiting for a train that would take them deeper into Germany. The snow drifted in a layer on their shoulders.

“Finally, their thirst intolerable, one man suggested that they eat the snow, but they weren’t allowed by the guards to bend over. The person in front of the man agreed to let him eat the snow that had accumulated on his shoulders, however. That act spread through the line until there, in the frozen field, what had been individuals struggling with their separate pain became a community sharing their suffering together.” (re-told by Sue Monk Kidd)

That act was as subversive as living the Beatitudes. That with-ness of shared suffering, that witness to the truth that the human family will only survive if we are able to say “we.” We must shift from “them” to “you” to “we.” It’s a shift that begins in worship, but it does not end here. Today we begin by sharing a meal together. This is a meal that models all other “with-ness,” because it stands as reminder of the One who loved us enough to personally make that shift from “them” to “you” to “we.”

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³ Sue Monk Kidd, *When the Heart Waits*, p. 200.