

Epiphany 4 Year A 2011

Donald McCullough tells the story of how one day Gandhi stepped aboard a train as it started to move, and one of his shoes slipped off and dropped on the tracks. Unable to retrieve it, he calmly took off his other shoe and threw it back along the track to land close to the first. When an amazed passenger asked why he had done that, Gandhi smiled and said, "The poor man who finds the shoe lying on the track will now have a pair he can use." "With the eyes of his imagination," ..., "Gandhi saw a man with bare feet, saw him coming across a lone shoe and desperately searching for the other, and saw the disappointment on his face when he didn't find it; seeing these things, Gandhi did what he could to help."

How well do we imagine with the eyes of compassion? Here we are in the middle of the Season of Light, the Fourth Sunday of Epiphany, seeking a way to live out the message of Christ through our inevitable humanness. And yet, when we read the message of the Prophet Micah to live justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with the God who has redeemed us, it is easy to respond: How can we with all of the impossible problems of our world today? Who is smart enough to chart a course of action through this quagmire?

We ourselves surely are part of an endless human cycle of failure, remorse, and death. Who can doubt it when we wake up to, and end our day with moment-to-moment CNN coverage of worldwide atrocities, threats of potential global extinction, and reports of just plain pettiness and cruelty that infect our society on every level? In reality, the prophet's words give us the exact key that is needed to help us walk, to take even the next step (or open our eyes for one more morning)—in the face of intractable national animosities, insoluble dilemmas, and just plain angst that threatens our daily life. That key is to remember that we do not walk alone. God has sought us out. That is the whole meaning of Scripture. God is still asking, "Where are you?"

We hear God's cry in the midst of winter darkness, and we catch a glimmer of what the Light of Christ can mean to our world, trapped as it is in its monotonous patterns of shame and blame. If we have this light to offer, why are we not shouting it from the housetops?

The question becomes: Do we have even one shoe to offer? How can we make a difference? According to the Apostle Paul in our Epistle for today, we shouldn't be surprised when God works through us. God is always in the business of raising up the weak and the unlikely to amaze the "wise" and the "noble."

The real power that enables life to go on, that strengthens individual souls to rise above the endless rut of shame and blame, that confounds nations and brings light to the people—is the power of Jesus'

Cross within us. It is not rational arguments or measured solutions or scientific data. Of course, God is pleased to use all of these as they are useful for the redemption of human life day to day. But ... a small child who gives her life to God at the end of a Sunday school prayer ...the housewife who intentionally seeks to practice one act of kindness every day ... the businessperson who decides not to use their power unfairly against a rival—these are the blessed. These are the new bearers of wisdom. These are the ones who will inherit the Kingdom. By partnering with God in seeking to stand up against the darkness, they spread the Light. And that Light is always Christ.

St. John of the Cross said that "In the end we shall be examined in love." And that is the true test that reveals to whom we belong. We belong to a God of love.

Last Sunday a good number of us reflected on the Parable of the Talents and we talked about consequences. The question we asked ourselves is this: What do we believe about God and how does that inspire or hinder us? Do we believe in a God who is harsh and stingy or generous and loving? Do we believe in a God who does not help us or who is ever-present and blesses us? Do we believe in a God who uses us or who has called us in his image? Do we believe in a God who wants us to be afraid and fail or a God who calls us tenderly by name to succeed? There are consequences according to what we believe and how we behave and work for the Kingdom of God.

The Beatitudes that we heard this morning in Matthew's Gospel are also about down-to-earth behavior that has Kingdom consequences. If we

are about the Kingdom of God then we have work to do. And so what can that work be?

Clarence Jordan has written something called the Cotton Patch Version of the Beatitudes and I think it makes some of our present work clearer to us:

When Jesus saw the large crowd, he went up the hill and sat down. His students sat around him, and he began teaching them. This is what he said:

“The spiritually humble are God’s people, for they are citizens of God’s new order.”

“They who are deeply concerned are God’s people, for they will see their ideas become reality.”

“They who are gentle are God’s people, for they will be God’s partners across the land.”

“They who have an unsatisfied appetite for right are God’s people, for they will be given plenty to chew on.”

“The generous are God’s people, for they will be treated generously.”

“Those whose motives are pure are God’s people, for they will have spiritual insight.”

“People of peace and good will are God’s people, for they will be known throughout the land as God’s children.”

“Those who have endured much for what is right are God’s people; they are citizens of God’s new order.”

“You all are God’s people when others call you names, and harass you and tell all kinds of false tales on you just because you follow me. Be cheerful and good-humored, because your spiritual advantage is great. For that’s the way they treated those of conscience in the past.”

Clearly each of us has a choice to make in this walk with Jesus. Clearly this church has a choice to make in this walk with Jesus. Will we join up with this band of Jesus followers? Will we take a risk for the Kingdom of God, to become on earth as it is in heaven? Will we give of our time, our treasure, and our talents and make choices and decisions to take actions for the Kingdom of God? Will we take up our citizenship in this Kingdom and take the necessary risks to live as we have been entrusted according each to

our abilities? Will we? Do we have even one shoe to offer? Or maybe even a pair of shoes. Amen.

Excerpts taken from Synthesis and Isabel Anders.