

Homily Presented at WNMC (by Bert C. Lobe)

October 21, 2018

Missing the Mark

Texts: Isaiah 53:4-12; Psalm 91:9-16; Hebrews 5:1-0; Mark 10:35-45

Introduction

Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem with the 12; after having been together with them for three years he is clear what awaits him. How is it that after three intense years together there is this huge gap in understanding among them? As Jesus faces a return to Jerusalem, he is clearly anxious about what might occur there. The twelve seem not to understand what lies ahead! The Romans and the religious establishment are both fed up with Jesus' constant critique. It is not unlike Jamal Kashoggi's fearful and tentative walk into the Saudi Embassy in Istanbul and we know where that went.

The vast majority of the population of Palestine was made up of rural and urban poor, with Jesus generally relating to the rural poor. Many were peasants, making their living off of land owned by wealthy elite. Many were driven off the land and into the cities into yet deeper desperation, poverty and disease. Many of these poor were day labourers or share croppers on estates owned by absentee landlords. This breaking of ties to the land strained, and often broke family and kinship ties and left persons isolated and without networks of support, without an essential and basic sense of security.

Jesus parables take on special resonance within this world, a world of unequal power and wealth, of economic vulnerability and fierce competition among wily survivors. Jesus' popularity was largely due to his concern for the little guy; his invitation to the rich young ruler to give all that he had to the poor (Mark 10:17-22) was not a critique of rich people as much it was of what wealth has the capacity to do to us...to make us greedy. During the last week of my father's life I asked him, "dad, what are the big lessons life has taught you?" "Three things" he said: "Don't be greedy; spend more time with your children and treat others like you want to be treated. " Greed...it eats at us!

Mathew and Mark describe Jesus as suggesting that we ought to "look to stuff that lasts and not to transient goods." But, that is not to say that he downplays the needs of material existence. Everything about Jesus way of behaving points in the direction of addressing real poverty and real illness. In a provocative way he is suggesting that true treasure is not found in the accumulation of wealth; it is rather heaped up in responding to human need...done without the need for reward, without having to have our "name on the door." The invitation to the 12 was to join a movement and mode of living that is released from

anxiety, free from greed for material goods and totally devoted to justice. This is not anti-materialism; it is a different vision of why one is involved with material goods.

The Misguided Request of James and John: Mark 10:35-40

Each time Jesus predicts what will happen in Jerusalem the 12 respond as though they have not heard or understood him, indeed do not believe that he is viewed by many with hostility.

In a bazar shift, James and John make a request for preferred seating beside Jesus in glory. They want to be top of the short list! There is a great argument among the 12 as to who is the greatest...who will be the lead minister? Who will be principal? Sound familiar? Their misguided request is characterized by their need to control, recognition and honor.

To drink the cup is to submit to God's will, to say yes to follow Jesus (see Shirin Ebadi story attached or Dag Hammarjold's profound words: "At some moment I did say yes to someone or something and ever since my life has had meaning") and doing so does not happen without profound struggle.

Joan Chittister (*Scarred by Struggle, Transformed by Hope* c 2003) puts it this way:

"Struggle forces us to confront our illusions both about the world and ourselves; it requires us not to simply seek hope but to become hope ourselves. It urges us to move beyond the cages that entrap us in the past in order to live with imagination...hope suggests that we discover in struggle all the layers of life within us that go basically unseasoned in times of plenty but wax in times of lean. Struggle is, in other words, the gift of new life in disguise. A hard gift, perhaps but also a strong gift without which we run the risk of going to our graves only half alive...we must engage struggle for the sake of expansion of our own small souls. It gives salt to life. In our struggles we come to understand, to taste deeply the rest of life. Hellen Keller, herself deaf and blind wrote that 'the hilltop hour would not be half so wonderful if there were no dark valleys to traverse...there is beauty in the dark valleys of life. It is called hope."

"Every segment of life is both gift and challenge, both endowment and responsibility...the delicate interplay between the two has the power to rock us back and forth between total confidence and abject despair. We lurch through life between doubt and faith, between security and uncertainty, between the enrichment that comes from differences and the divisions that come from fear. It is learning to cling to a sense of alleluia (All hail to the One who is) for both that carries us through life to that moment when everything in us has come to fullness and our only next step is immersion in God."

Uncommon Gratitude by Archbishop Rowan Williams & Joan Chittister ©2010

Baptism may have been used in the first century as a metaphor for coming to terms with great anxiety, with having to face choices and consequences...a time and place to commit deeply given one's own understanding of one's own fragility. Koyama describes this as the

struggle to be in the world in the manner and spirit of and Jesus, bent over and with open hands; without a clenched fist, with a crucified posture. Communion today represents participation in the death of Jesus and the celebration of the new way of being in the world. In our tradition communion is not only the acknowledgement of individual commitment to Jesus but also commitment to a community...a commitment to BE in the world in a different, bent over way. Mark seems clear that someday the 12 will understand but it takes time and softening.

Leadership with Service: Mark 10: 41-45

The request for preferred position by James and John is met with anger. Are the 12 disgusted because they did not ask first? Jesus does not address their anger but addresses their power-mongering and glory seeking. Just before reaching Jerusalem he reminds them again that service is greatness. Jesus proceeds to his Waterloo in Jerusalem, modelling a radical submission to power without a violent response. This is the model, the way we are to be in the world.

Isaiah 53: 4-12

Here the sufferer bears the sins of others. This is the lesson of grace...He bears our griefs and carries our sorrows...this speaks of a radical offloading. ***It is evil doing which results in suffering but it is this kind of suffering which often inspires reconciliation and restoration. That which breaks our spirit has the capacity to make us whole.*** Quiet endurance of wrong is impressive...Mandela. Indeed IF we have made the Lord our refuge, evil and greed will not have the capacity to consume us.

Conclusion: Hebrews 5: 1-10 Jesus the Compassionate High priest

Jesus is described as priest of the order of Melchizedek...he learned to obey through suffering...he became, for those who understood, the embodiment of hope; his final weeks tell the story of struggling to embrace the little guy, and to speak for her well-being and thereby discover the mystery of love, patience and gentleness. What we have here is one who understood that if the end it truth, and the end of greed and privilege, than the means must best be bent over love.

Communion is more than a potluck; there are important times when those who are dead serious and committed gather in community, meeting in-camera to remember, assess, set things straight and determine to go forward with renewed courage and hope. That is what we are about to do this morning and it is terribly important to be ready for this celebration.

Bert C Lobe

October 18, 2018

Shiren Ebadi's **Iran Awakening**. This 1997 Nobel peace Prize winning memoir chronicles the story of Shirin Ebadi's life from childhood through to studying law and being a Judge under Khomeini. The 1978 revolution in Iran left her family traumatized and her mother constantly fearful, ill and anxious. Afraid that her mother might die, and what that might mean for her and her two younger siblings, one day she crept into the attic to make a quiet appeal to God.

“Please God, please, keep my mother alive so I can stay in school. Suddenly, an indescribable feeling overtook me, starting in my stomach and spreading to my fingertips. In that stirring I felt as though God was answering me. My sadness evaporated and a strange euphoria shot through my heart. Since that moment my faith in God has been unshakable.”