

Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time: January 29, 2017

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“The Beatitudes”

A black waitress in Virginia was left no tip by a white male customer. But he did leave a note on his check. "Nice service, but blacks don't deserve to be tipped."

A white patient in an Oregon hospital demanded that he be cared for only by white nurses.

A Latino student, born in Texas, was told by her classmates that she would soon be deported because she was Mexican.

Hate crimes have increased in the last six months. White supremacy is on the rise. These are stories we have seen in the news the last few months. Everyone wants to blame this on our recent election when we saw the one presidential candidate call some Americans "a basket of deplorables," and the other refer to people he dislikes as "fat, disgusting pigs."

What has happened to our country? What has happened to our world? This is not simply the result of one nasty, polarized election. This storm has been brewing for a long time.

It is the logical progression of our self-indulgent society. The result of our "what's in it for me" thinking. Our self-centeredness, caring only about, "What serves my needs and the needs of my family?" rather than, "What is best for the common good? What will advance human dignity, lift up the lowly and protect the voiceless and powerless?" We have seen this storm brewing for a long time and we should not be surprised at where we are at this moment in history.

But the Good News is that today's readings offer us a remedy, but I need to warn you - it is radical. It was radical when the prophet Micah spoke his message to the people of Jerusalem warning them that their city would soon be destroyed because the rich and

powerful were acquiring more while the poor were being forgotten. It was considered absurd by the Corinthians when Paul wrote to them about a new way of thinking and living – one not based in power and prestige, but in sacrifice and service of others. And it was certainly shocking to the crowd gathered for the Sermon on the Mount when Jesus spoke about the poor and lowly entering kingdom of heaven first.

What is the Good News? What is this radical remedy? Micah told the people of his age, "The Lord will protect those who are humble and lowly and those do not speak with a deceitful tongue." Didn't you grimace a little when you heard these words? The Lord protects those who do not speak deceit, who do not slander their neighbor, spread "fake news" or bully others. The Lord will lift up the lowly, the forgotten, the despised, and the little ones. The word in Hebrew for the lowly is the "anawim," which literally means "overwhelmed by want." The prophets describe who are among this group: the poor, the widow, the orphan, the homeless, the sick and dying, the refugee, the foreigner and the stranger in our midst. These are the favored people of Yahweh; not the rich, powerful, prestigious people who think they can do it all by themselves without anyone, not even God.

This worldly wisdom, which is rampant in our society today, I Corinthians tells us has been turned on its head by Jesus, who became the "wisdom of God." And what is the wisdom of God? God chooses the foolish of the world to shame the wise. He chooses the weak to outmaneuver the strong. He chooses the lowly and despised, who count for nothing, to reduce to nothing those who think they are something. The wisdom of God is the great irony that we do not become great and save ourselves by placing ourselves first and stepping on and over our neighbor to become number one. The wisdom of God is that when we realize we are totally helpless and rely on God for everything, then we are lifted up and saved - not by ourselves, but through God's love.

This is the full meaning of the Hebrew concept of "anawim." It is not only the sense of people being overwhelmed by want, it is also their realization they are totally dependent on God. This is the foundation for what is means to be "poor in spirit." Blessed are those who recognize their utter poverty and that only God can provide for their deepest wants and longings. This understanding of the relationship of the anawim to God is really the story of salvation history. God favors the lowly and those who recognize they are in need of being saved.

We have seen this anawim story illustrated over and over in the Sunday scripture readings this last month beginning with the nativity and epiphany. Jesus, the Son of God, is born not in a palace, but in a stable and laid in a manger. The angels announce the good news of his birth to poor shepherds, the lowest and most despised class at the time of Jesus. His glory is revealed and recognized by foreigners, the magi, before it is seen by the so called “faithful.” He and his parents become refugees and migrants as they are forced to flee into Egypt to escape the murderous King Herod. Jesus then grows up in a working class home, not some privileged place. He calls his disciples from the ranks of fisherman, tax collectors and others who are not considered wise, powerful or prestigious. And his message is heard and accepted by sinners, prostitutes, and those considered “unclean.” God has a special love for the anawim because they recognize him and their need for God.

So where does this leave us? The radical remedy, the healing that our world needs, is not found by being smarter, richer or more powerful than all others around me. Hasn't humanity tried that approach enough times to see that it always results in fear, prejudice, division, violence and war? The solution God offers is counter-intuitive. God's wisdom is not the world's wisdom. Jesus tells us that unless we become like little children, totally dependent on God like the anawim, we will not enter the Kingdom of God. He tells us that those who wish to be great must serve the needs of the others. And serving our neighbor is not only people who look like us and think like us, but it is also the foreigner and people who are different than us. The remedy our world seeks will only be found by the meek, the humble, the lowly, the peacemaker, the merciful, the pure of heart and those persecuted for the sake of what is right and good. This is the path to a more sane, civil and loving country and world.

If this message is hard to hear and accept - that is good. This message has always been radical. From Micah to Jesus to St. Paul It is a radical message meant to shock us to conversion and a reliance on God's grace. It is a message meant to bring comfort to the disturbed and to disturb those who are comfortable. So if we are uncomfortable right now, that is good. God has our attention. How will we respond?