Sermon on Proper 23 2015

I don’t like being taken; too many times a charming voice greets me when I pick up the phone and then within 30 seconds I’m being sold something I don’t want

I get uncomfortable when on the street, or, truth be told, here in our building somebody I don’t know comes up to me and asks me for money?

Sometimes I sit with someone for 30 minutes and at the end of a long story all that is being asked of me is money.

At all times, I try not to offer a caustic, non-hospitable response, though sometimes I’m rehearsing the words in my mind; at other times I’ve felt guilty and forked over a five, a ten or sometimes a twenty; even though earlier in the conversation I’ve said something like, “just to be up front, we don’t give money here.”

Maybe you can relate to this? Maybe you feel the same way I do; confused about the issue of poverty in our society. Confused because indeed in a democratic society in which everyone is given a certain amount of opportunity we should all be able to make our way, right? At least that’s what I was taught.

But then we remember that many people come from non-supportive families, maybe have experienced abuse, maybe have turned to drugs, maybe are struggling with mental or emotional illness

Maybe we remember incidents when our laziness or our incompetence or maybe even a wilful misstep wasn’t punished by a firing or a banishment or worse.

Recently President Obama became the first sitting president to visit a U.S. prison and he said, very self-revealingly and honestly that he had just met men who were in prison for mistakes that were very similar to ones he had made as a young man.

One imagines that was President Obama’s way of admitting that he’d experimented with drugs as a young person.

Perhaps we feel guilty about our defensiveness; perhaps we wonder, how does God feel about it all? What is the correct approach to poverty, or since that’s so abstract, what might it mean to treat the poor we do meet with the hospitality of Christ?

The suite of texts assigned for this day expose this story, this hugely important issue in our lives and society.

And I use the words “hugely important” purposefully. This is an issue and a theme that unites the story of Israel and the worldwide church because it unites the First and the New Testaments as our readings today demonstrate.

The few verses that are drawn from chapter 22 of Proverbs are illustrative of chapter 22 as a whole which might be titled “When Rich and Poor Meet.”

The first two verses call us to remember that both the poor and the rich have the same Creator. This is the reality of all of our lives regardless of our station in life; it is this reality that informs all that comes next.

This is then followed by the important political reality that though God has created all humans, both rich and poor, it is not God, just as truly as it is not often the poor themselves, that determine their station, rather it is the case throughout human history that the rich determine the economic rules of any society.

As our text says, “the rich rule over the poor, the borrower is the slave of the lender.”

This is as true of the modern world as it was of the ancient ones. It is the privileged who set tax codes, create the tax exemption loop-holes etc.

That doesn’t mean that those rules are always unjust; but it is important to remember that these rules are set from a certain perspective. We see how this works its way out in progressive societies like Canada and the U.S. where every fifty years or so there is a spasm of social conscience and the marginal tax rate is set higher.

Then, over the next decades we see the marginal tax rates get whittled down by successive political leaders who know that one sure-fire way to get elected is the promise: “I’ll lower your taxes.”

The third little couplet of verses drawn from our first reading points talks about what happens when “the afflicted are crushed at the gate.” The gate of the city in ancient Israel was the symbol of welcome, of business transaction and trade, of safety and sustenance.

If a society persists in ignoring, further dehumanizing or refusing to share with the poor and the afflicted that society in return will be become exploited and afflicted because the Lord is emotionally invested in crafting justice for everyone.

These words from Proverbs are not deterministic; they invite us to work out the implications politically and economically. They do not proscribe one right way of dealing with inequity; they do not tell us which party to vote for in the next election.

But they do challenge any easy equation between our actions and our financial state. Things are more complex; there’s more good luck in the lives of the wealthy than they’re often prepared to admit and there’s more misfortune in the lives of the poor than the simple equation that claims they don’t work hard enough.

Indeed both Israel and the Church made sure to focus on actions towards the poor as a test case of faith and faithfulness.

Christian faith cannot be reduced to our actions of social justice; our worship, our study, our prayer, our actions of love and learning, our choice of vocation and how we generally treat people from day to day are as important as how we treat the poor.

But if we do all those other things well and mistreat the poor we have not understood what following Jesus Christ means.

This is the point of our second reading. How relevant James’ letter sounds! Yes, it’s relevant because of the grave refugee crisis; and yes it’s relevant because of the occasional homeless person wandering into our services.

But it’s also relevant for our congregation! Not every one of us finds enough to eat in our fridge every week.

As a community we are called to be aware of each other’s needs. This requires the difficult but important question: How are you doing, really? It requires honest questions and honest answers. It requires those of us who are in need, in whatever way, physically, emotionally to make our needs known.

Sometimes I’m put in the awkward position of finding out about a need after the fact. We may have been able to help as a community but nobody knew.

All of this requires humility both on the part of the asker and the helper.

Which brings us to the remarkable gospel reading, and here, I must say, is very good news indeed.

Jesus’ response to the Syrophoenician woman could be helpful, I dare say, to our own political process around refugees and poverty, just as I think it can help us with our own dilemmas and choices when it comes to helping folks around us.

Often Jesus is portrayed as “knowing something before it happens;” this fits with our picture and sense of divinity: reasonable, in control, all knowing.

But here, in possibly the first of the gospels, we have a story that reveals something very different from this understanding.

Here, we catch Jesus in a kind of halting mid-step in his thinking and speech. The author has dared picture that open space of dialogue where ethnic pride and prejudice comes to a fork in the road.

We see Jesus confronted by the equivalent of someone of a different religion and language coming into the middle of our service and asking for help.

Jesus’ first reaction is the relaxed and familiar “of course, would love to help, what is it you need ma’am?” No, it’s not is it? It’s something very uncomfortable, something far more like the defensiveness you and I may feel but try not to say when accosted by a panhandler or someone who dares intrude on our well-planned life.

He asserts Jewish elitism, echoing the lines of the Pharisees towards Gentiles and especially the *poor* Gentiles, “it is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.”

But, astoundingly, the woman responds not by admitting that she is one of these dogs but with a saying that ties deeply into what God has taught Israel about how to live with the poor and the alien refugee in the midst.

“Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.”

Mark’s gospel is famous for its use of the Greek word *euthus*, which means “immediately;” “Immediately Jesus went here or did this etc.

It’s as if Jesus knows he has limited time and things better happen now or not at all!

But, here, the phrase that is used is not “immediately Jesus said to her…” but “Then he said to her;” it smacks of a surprised pause, of interruption, of…learning, or recognition that the Kingdom of God is calling for a change of mind.

You have here the quintessential reality of God’s New Commons, not in some abstract economic theory but how it actually works its way out as we’re confronted with a person we haven’t planned for.

Eugene Peterson translates this moment with “Jesus was impressed, You’re Right!”

 If it works this way in the Son of God how much more so in our own learnings as we stumble through our days! If the Son of God goes through a process of learning to cooperate with God’s way of love and justice what fabulous good news for us!

Whether we are confronted with someone asking or even demanding something of us in terms of material or emotional need or if we’re thinking more globally about the global refugee crisis, the biggest since World War II, the Spirit of God allows for room, room to think, room to respond, room to change our mind and then room to adjust our thinking and our planning!

Two quick examples, the German Chancellor, a practicing Christian has recently changed her mind on how she treats refugees, she was famously filmed telling a little Palestinian girl that she wasn’t welcome in Germany; now she is helping the nations most influenced by Christianity open their hearts and pocket books to the refugees.

This morning we awoke to Pope Francis calling on every parish in Europe to sponsor one refugee family.

I wonder what St. Matthew could do in partnership with a couple of other parishes?

You’ve been given room to change your mind! By the Spirit of God, by God’s Son! So don’t be discouraged by that defensiveness you feel, even by the hidden prejudices that are exposed! That’s how learning happens; that’s how love and compassion and justice grow; that’s how each of us will find ourselves, as we follow Jesus, doing our part so that together with all who call Jesus Lord we say “He has done all things well!”