***Lutheran Church of the Epiphany, Hempstead, New York***

***Grace Lutheran Church, Uniondale, New York***

***Marianne K. Tomecek, Interim Pastor***

*The Fourth Sunday after Pentecost Proper 8A – June 28, 2020*

*Jeremiah 28:5-9 Psalm 89:1-4, 15-18*

*Romans 6:12-23 Matthew 10:40-42*

*Grace to you and peace, from God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.* ***AMEN***

You’ve probably heard the story of the star thrower by Loren Eiseley, but it’s short and worth repeating. The shore was just covered with starfish that the high tide had left stranded. A man came upon another man who repeatedly bent down, picked up a starfish and threw it back into the water. The first man asked the other why he was doing that. The second man replied, “If they don’t get back in the water soon, they’ll dry out and die.” “But there are ***thousands*** of starfish here – you can’t ***possibly*** hope to make any real difference,” said the first man. The man who was throwing the starfish into the ocean stopped, stood up, looked around, picked up another starfish and said, “To that one, and all the others I throw back, it makes all the difference in the world.”

Jesus reminds us that “[w]hoever gives even a cup of cold water to a disciple because she or he is a disciple, welcomes her or him (Matt 10:42). “A cup of cold water” is a Semitic proverbial expression for a minor service. (“Left Behind and Loving It,” Monday June 23, 2014, p. 6 <http://www.leftbehindandlovingit.blogspot.com/>) So even a minor service is welcome to a disciple.

Yesterday morning I heard that U.S. District Judge Dolly Gee had ordered US [immigration](https://www.upi.com/topic/Immigration_Reform/) officials to release children who had been held in U.S. detention facilities because the government had failed to provide health protections against [COVID-19](https://www.upi.com/topic/COVID-19/) for them. Judge Gee has had a monitor checking on the children’s conditions since she originally ruled in 2018 that immigrant children separated from their parents at the border could not be held longer than twenty days.

Now, this decision may be akin to the man saving starfish on the beach. Because as of June 8, only 124 children were held at three Immigration and Customs Enforcement detention facilities in Texas and Pennsylvania and another 507 children were in Office of Refugee Resettlement shelters. But, since we know that some young children exposed to COVID-19 seem to be affected by an inflammatory syndrome, it may make “all the difference in the world” to those 631 children to be freed from detention. Compared to the thousands of people who have been seeking asylum at our southern border and who have been sent back into Mexico to live in shelters (if they’re lucky) – or on the streets, in danger and poverty – these children being released are very few migrant people being welcomed by our country.

We might look at this as a type of hospitality, akin to the cup of cold water given “to one of these little ones” about which Jesus instructed his first disciples. (Matthew 10:42.) And, if not for the Supreme Court’s ruling this past week that President Trump hadn’t followed the required procedures to terminate President Obama’s Executive Order allowing temporary legal residence of young adults who had been born elsewhere and brought to the US as children (the so-called DACA policy), this ruling might have been the ***only*** welcome extended to people attempting to enter our country seeking asylum from persecution and violence. But, with this new ruling, now there are about 700,000 young adults who will have at least some measure of our hospitality for a while, until either President Trump can figure out how to stop the DACA welcome according to the law, or until he is no longer in office.

But actually, Jesus’ instructions weren’t really about the welcome we disciples give to others. He was talking about the type of welcome the disciples, who he was sending out as apostles to proclaim the Gospel, would receive from the people of Judea. They were vulnerable and exposed in their missionary status. They were facing potential rejection from any house they stopped at to share the Gospel. We can hardly imagine what that endeavor might have been like.

But the saving grace for them was that their status as Jesus’ followers overcame any other trait they might have had. So when they were welcomed as prophets “in the name of a prophet,” they were being accepted ***precisely because*** they were prophets proclaiming God’s word of grace; or as righteous persons “in the name of a righteous person,” again, ***explicitly because*** they were righteous, that welcome would result in the person who extended hospitality being rewarded for their generosity. This benefit of “reward” was built in for the people to whom the disciples were proclaiming the Gospel – an unexpected “prize” that would follow in the disciples’ wake. And maybe their reward would result in their becoming proclaimers of the Gospel themselves.

The growth of the Gospel in the first century was tremendous – we might say that it spread “like wildfire” or “like the coronavirus,” except that those expressions have such negative connotations. It brings to my mind the extent and the rapidity of the recent spread of the call to make “Black lives matter” in this country among many people of various origins. And it also recalls the sudden actions of governmental units to enact controls over police for the use of violence, especially against people of color – and to create consequences for any violation of those controls. Statues glorifying leaders of the Confederate States of America and the use of the Confederate flag have been coming down, not only by protesters’ actions, but also by official, sanctioned, governmental measures. This is a movement that should remove daily, larger-than-life reminders of the sin of slavery as a foundational economic basis for this country’s development. It is also an undertaking by the people of this country to work in new ways and novel directions to make anti-racism the atonement for past white sin. In that mind-set we will develop structures and methods to achieve true equality and the shared privilege of all humanity in our country.

It seems to me that it is as if the white members of our country’s society had not heard Paul’s message in his letter to the Romans before. But we know the power of sin: it blinds us to the truth and co-opts our lives. It invites complacency in such a way that we haven’t thought that sin has anything to do with us. We white citizens who call ourselves Christians have construed sin as individual in such a way that we have been blinded to the communal, systemic, institutional nature of our racial sin. This has kept us from recognizing it, from repenting of it and from atoning for it.

But, as Paul assured the Romans, we “have been freed from sin and enslaved to God.” (6:22.) Our acceptance of that relationship is a voluntary enslavement. Of course, this bond we have with God has been so since Jesus’ crucifixion and resurrection, long before our forebears engaged in the sin of slavery. And it was part of Christian faith centuries before this country practiced Jim Crow policies, racism and discrimination. But, God invites us to live the redemptive life, so we have the opportunity now to “become obedient from the heart to the form of teaching to which … [we] were entrusted [that is, the Gospel], and that … [we], having been set free from sin, have become slaves of righteousness.” (6:17-18.) I pray that we will live as much enslaved to righteousness as we have been enslaved to sin.

These days, we are not meeting inside our church buildings because of the virus, but God’s Spirit is at work in the world. In fact, it is not in the church’s nature to be contained. It also is not in God’s nature to be contained. It is my hope that the Spirit moving freely in our country will awaken those of us who have been asleep; that it will give sight to those of us who have been blind; and that it will set us in motion to take actions that will heal our society, that will restructure our institutions and that will purify our interactions so that we all treat all humans with dignity and respect.

Let us pray. Dear Lord, open all eyes to the harsh realities that exist in our homeland. Open all ears to the truth of your gracious love and acceptance. Open all hearts to achieve healing, renewal and the creation of a society of free, equal and whole human beings who work together to achieve your will. In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. C: AMEN