

Sermons at Christ Church

Love, Re-Imagined

Pentecost IV

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For One brief moment I found this love, This love that I had heard of. This love that heals all things; This love that floods my soul. Like the water it finds all of the cracks. It breaks down these things I try to hold. Giving me the strength that my being lacks; A boldness that drives through bitter cold. Amen.

In my father's home were people who were not relations but lived with him and attended to his needs. They did the cleaning, cooking, washing the dishes and clothes among many other chores. In many homes across the city where I grew up and many other homes, were those who did the finger dirty jobs. In spite of their dedication, they were the least recognized in my father's house or any other household. The same can be said of the servants in the Naaman story. Their work was terribly important, they fixed stuff at the home-front, and they did the finger dirty work that neither the general, his wife nor their children will ever do.

Some of these servants could be powerful, and often were trusted confidants of the families they served. They didn't set policy directions, but they were the trusted hands who gave wise counsel to the powerful when no one was listening. They had little to no options in the tasks assigned to them, they did as they were told, and there certainly was no talking back. And so it must have felt incredibly strange when their master Naaman became hysterical over what the prophet asked him to do. Why are you hysterical? Why are you upset? What is this rage about? What if the prophet had asked you to do something difficult? Would you have done it? Yes, you would have. But he simply asked you to wash and be clean. And you have gone bonkers over that?

We live in a world where the likes of Naaman carry with them the leprosy of pride, self-importance and self-centeredness. The likes of Naaman are plentiful-for they think they are something but they forget that they are riddled with leprosy. The likes of Naaman in fact confirm the idea that the harvest is plentiful. And the work of harvesting would involve servants who engage

in finger-dirty kind of work, the kind of work that holds a mirror to our faces and by that provides an alternative narrative and an alternative path for us to walk.

The gospel story tells of Jesus seeing a helpless crowd, faint-hearted and like sheep with no shepherd. They appeared beaten, harassed and brutalized-depressed sheep-the harvest is indeed plentiful. Sheep who are riddled with Naaman's leprosy. Sheep who need the good-news of God's salvation, renewal and new-birth shared with them. Sheep who need to hear that a new creation in Christ is possible and that's what counts.

Harvest is about profusion, plenteousness. Harvest is not scarcity but abundance. Harvest is about opportunities. It means that God has already done the sowing, tending and nurturing, and there's only one more thing left to do, which is to harvest-to do the work of ministry, like the servant, to bear the burden of the household, to share the good-news about the prophet in Judah who can restore Naaman. Like the servant, to ask Naaman the question, would you have done a difficult task if the prophet had ask that of you? Like the servants, to present the Naaman's of our world with an alternative narrative that when you bear another's burden, you not only fulfill the law but you make the kingdom of God come alive.

See, the proclamation of the kingdom is about an alternative narrative. It is a narrative that awakens us to the possibility that we can access the kingdom of God, or the kingdom of God is only made possible when we can fulfill the law. And in fact fulfilling the law is only about the desire to bear another's burden.

Like Naaman who initially rejected the suggestion from the prophet to go wash in the Jordan, Jesus doesn't suggest that all 70 will be welcomed wholeheartedly by those to whom they attempt to share the good news of the kingdom. The fact that not everyone will accept the message reminds me of an argument by Bertrand Russell in the introduction to his book -Proposed Road to Freedom. He writes "The great majority of men and women, in ordinary times, pass through life without ever contemplating or criticizing, as a whole, either their own conditions or those of the world at large. They find themselves born into a certain place in society, and they accept what each day brings forth, without any effort of thought beyond what the immediate present requires. Almost as instinctively as the beast of the field, they seek the satisfaction of the needs of the moment, without

much forethought, and without considering that by sufficient effort the whole conditions of their lives could be changed.”

In his analysis, there are those who out of sheer contentment with their circumstance and that of others, however terrible they may be, will not lift a finger to challenge the status quo. And then there are who bear the burden of others, who, out of a strong belief that a system maybe unfair, unjust, oppressive and corrupt will strive to change that system even at the peril of their lives.

For these people, the ability to change a terrible situation or right a wrong is in itself the proclamation of the kingdom of God, it is about the finger-dirtying kind of work, it is about a new narrative that is geared towards making us whole.

In his letter to the Galatians, Paul argues that it is the finger-dirtying kind of work that will make possible a new creation, a creation where the rules of separation and differences which had prior to been the nature of the law, will be of no effect. It will be a new creation guided by the law of Christ-one which is solely defined by the desire to bear another’s burden. Like the dutiful servant, we can tell of the abundant harvest because the master’s leprosy was her leprosy. Like the dutiful servant we can tell of the abundant harvest because we know a prophet in Judah who can heal him and make him whole again. Like the dutiful servant, we proclaim a kingdom not only by seizing the opportunity to do what is right, but by championing the redemption story, that alternative reality that holds that a rising tide lifts all boats.

There is a story of an author whose father was a finance minister in Sierra Leone- a West African country. Her father resigned his position because of the oppressive nature of the government. When she was about 13 years old, the secret police abducted her father in the middle of the night, later accused him with trumped up charges and then hanged him.

Sensing that the government will come after her and the children, the widow left home with the children in the middle of the night to seek refuge from friends. Every known friend to whom they approached refused to provide any refuge.

After exhausting all her options, she remembered a woman that her husband had talked about but she barely knew. She drove to her house and she readily offered them a sanctuary until the family eventually escaped to England.

Years later, the 13 year old girl returned to her country as an adult, looked for the woman and inquired from her why she took them in when no one would? Her simple answer was, if I had refused, I would not have been able to live with my conscience.

Indeed, an awakened conscience is one of a servant who brings the good news-the good news of bearing each other's burdens. An awakened conscience is one whose fingers are dirtied by the work of the good news. An awakened conscience is one who looks beyond human categories as he or she tells the good news. An awakened conscience is one that provides us with an alternative narrative, an alternative path- that narrative and path which makes possible the kingdom of God. An awakened conscience is one that feels the energy of God's harvest. An awakened conscience boasts of nothing but the cross-the ultimate example of sacrificial love, of bearing another's burden.

Like Naaman, the awakened conscience doesn't accept the status quo-that is, his or her leprosy, nor does he or she countenance its existence-see, you can't change what you tolerate, and the awakened conscience does not tolerate his or her leprosy. For it believes in the alternative narrative of being made fresh, being made new. The awakened conscience believes in the possibility of a new creation because it believes that the harvest always makes a new creation possible. May you dare to embrace God's harvest. More than that, may you dare to embrace your finger dirtying role in that harvest. Amen.