

A Sermon Preached

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June 27, 2010 – The Fifth Sunday after Pentecost

The Church of the Holy Spirit, Lake Forest, Illinois

I grew up in Alaska in the 1970s. My family spent as much time outside as we could during the summer months – we camped, we canoed, and on at least one occasion, we panned for gold. My parents treated this as a recreational activity, as something that could connect us to the history of the land where we lived...but I was pretty sure as a six-year-old kid that I was going to strike it rich. My sister and I stood in a stream, with this thing that was kind of like a sifter. We'd scoop up some water, and a little of the streambed, and shake it out...what was left behind would always be a bunch of rocks to pick out – but, if I was lucky, there would be one shiny little piece of gold, enough to fire my hopes that I was *definitely* on to something.

Well. I bumped into more than a couple of rocks in reading today's gospel. In it, Jesus begins by setting his face toward Jerusalem. He knows that his time in this life will end soon, and he sets out toward Jerusalem. The Samaritans in a village refuse to welcome him; when the disciples offer to retaliate, Jesus chastises them and keeps moving. People offer to follow him along the way. To one, Jesus says that even animals have a better place to live than he does. To another, a man who wants to bury his father before joining Jesus on his journey, Jesus makes a less than sympathetic statement: let the dead bury their dead. To a third, one who just wants

to go say goodbye to his family, Jesus says that anybody who looks back isn't fit for the kingdom of God.

There doesn't seem to be much to kindle the fires of our hope, here. Instead of finding a companion and leader who is about the work of reconciliation and redemption, Jesus appears in this passage to provide challenge instead of comfort. He's all edge, and no center. He forces choice and priority. This is no Precious Moments big-eyed Jesus, telling us from Matthew 18:6 that whoever welcomes a child in his name welcomes Jesus. This Jesus speaks from the other side of that passage, foretelling the doom of anybody who stands in a child's way.

Jesus is on the move. He knows that the stakes are high, and the urgency is great, and his Kingdom is the goal – our comfort, in the meantime, is not.

So I went back to the gospel passage for today, again. I shook through it, and I looked...and I prayed. And the piece that rose to the surface to me was from the first sentence in today's Gospel: Jesus set his face toward Jerusalem. He knows what this will mean – he knows his time in this life is nearing an end; he knows that Jerusalem will be a place of confrontation for him, a place of his suffering and his pain. He doesn't avoid it. He doesn't deny it. Instead, he sets his face toward Jerusalem and he heads that direction in a hurry. He doesn't have time to settle scores with inhospitable Samaritans. He doesn't have time for anything else, really.

Gary Hall is a good friend of this congregation and used to be the dean at Seabury, where I attended seminary. He preached a sermon last week in which he said that one of his beliefs about Jesus is that "he always calls his followers into

greater maturity” (<http://figbag.blogspot.com>). I think that’s exactly what we see in action in today’s Gospel lesson. Jesus doesn’t have time for anything except the advent of his kingdom – and in a pretty stark way, he expects his followers to step in line behind him. It’s very clearly not a place of comfort, for him or for us. He forces decision and action, with real consequence. He refuses to allow his followers to remain as they – and as *we* – are. He expects us to grow. He expects us to join him.

This is that shiny piece for me, this is the thing that gives me hope – because I believe that as Jesus sets his face toward Jerusalem, we can set our faces toward Jesus. And as we fix our gaze on him, we can live in the knowledge that we will experience discomfort and loss...and that discomfort and loss will not be the end. Joining Jesus on this journey means that we will be changed.

The week before last, I had forty young people teach me that lesson in Rushville, Indiana. The teenagers of this parish arrived on site at the work trip in a place where they had to get to know a whole new circle of people, people they would work with during the course of the week as they painted houses and tarred roofs and mended fences. Rather than remain in the company of folks they already knew, our youth built relationships with people while they scraped and primed. They found ways to get to know people very different than themselves. They found ways to speak graciously to people who found it difficult to receive they help they gave. And they learned the mercy and dignity of people who know how to receive with grace, and return the gift of love.

The work trip is run by an organization with a different vocabulary for faith than what many of us are used to as Episcopalians. So, in the midst of working in a new environment and getting to know a whole bunch of new people, our young people also struggled to find a language that fit their experience and understanding. And they did it. On Thursday night, our youth group celebrated communion together, and they *were* the sermon. The young people of this parish family stood up to tell about their own God sightings during the trip. They spoke of the blessings they had experienced in being welcomed as the stranger, and of the blessings they found in having the chance to welcome the stranger. They spoke the words of their faith in ways that made me realize once again the privilege it is to serve as a priest in their midst.

Our young people confronted loss as well, on the trip to Rushville. It's tradition, on the last night, for the youth of CHS to gather to say goodbye to their graduating seniors. One by one, the people who have been part of that body and are now preparing to leave it, each take a turn in the center of the circle. Their classmates and friends tell them what they have meant in their lives. And they say goodbye.

It was a week in which I saw our group of young people grow closer as a body. I saw individual people grow in their own understanding of faith. Yes, there was discomfort and frustration. Yes, there was an aspect of loss. And, yes. There was transformation.

Today's gospel makes it clear that following Jesus does not mean that we will avoid loss or discomfort. The good news that I hear, though, is the promise that Jesus will be with us throughout it all. We will grow, in that beautiful Prayer Book language, "in the knowledge and love of faith."

I invite you to set your face on Christ, at the heart and center of who we are as a community. Christ here in our midst, at this table, in the bread and the wine. I invite you *through* the losses we have to face as individuals and as a community. I invite you to set your sights on the new Jerusalem, that great and bright and shining hope, the place in which we grow ever nearer to one another and ever nearer to God.

Amen.