

“But, First...”

There are scriptures that I love to preach about. “Beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news” is one of them. Esther 4:14, “Perhaps you were born for such a time as this” is another.”

Today’s Gospel lesson is not one I like to talk about. It’s a difficult lesson. It’s confrontational and it doesn’t leave much, if any, wiggle room. “No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.” We are either looking toward the kingdom or we are not. We are either responding to the call of life or we’re not. We’re either open to the coming future or we are not.

Jesus is calling us into question and that’s never easy, fun or comfortable. He is calling into question the direction of our lives, the values we claim to hold, and how we are living and embodying those values. He is asking us to look at ourselves rather than the Samaritan that we want to call down fire from heaven on.

By Samaritan I mean those who look, act and believe differently from us; those who do not hold our particular religious or political beliefs; those who are not from these parts; those that we are opposed to or in conflict with, for whatever reasons.

And if you’re not sure who your Samaritans are, just look at your social media feed and who posts the articles and comments that push your buttons. Turn on the news channel you refuse to watch, picture the face of the one you crush and defeat in the arguments that go on in your heart.

Today’s gospel won’t let us turn away from the people and situations that are right in front of us or the future that is coming to us. Jesus recognizes and holds before us the tension that we live in. On the one hand we say to him, “I will follow you wherever you go.” On the other hand we say to him, “But first let me go and...” You probably know what that’s like. I know I do.

When have you experienced that tension? When has it felt like you were being pulled in two directions, the way of Jesus and some other way? In what ways have you said, “But first, let me go and...?”

It’s easy and simple to follow Jesus, in principle. Love your neighbor as yourself, love your enemy, welcome the stranger, visit the sick and imprisoned, feed the hungry, clothe the naked, give the thirsty something to drink, turn the other cheek, forgive not just seven times but seventy times seven.

These are values that Jesus holds. That’s where Jesus is going. That’s the direction that he’s set his face. That’s the road to Jerusalem and it sounds good. Most of us probably agree with those values. It’s the road that we, too, have chosen to travel, in principle.

But it’s so much harder and messier to follow Jesus in principle and in real life. I suspect we are all in favor of love, hospitality, forgiveness, and nonviolence until we meet the unloveable, the stranger who scares us, the unforgiveable act, the one who throws the first punch or the Samaritan in our lives. Then it’s a different story and that story usually begins with “But first....”

Jesus, however, puts no qualifications, limitations or exceptions on where he is going, who is included or what he is offering. He doesn't seem to care who we are, where we are from, or what we have done or left undone. Republican or Democrat, citizen or foreigner, Christian or Muslim, gay or straight, transgender or non-binary, black or white, good or bad, believer or non-believer. It just doesn't seem to matter to Jesus. For him there is no why, no conditions, attached to love, hospitality, forgiveness or giving. He doesn't allow for a "but first" in his life or the lives of his followers.

"But first" is the way we put conditions on the unconditional.

Yes, I will love the other but first let me go and see who the other is, whether they are deserving of love, whether I like them, whether they agree with and is agreeable to me.

Yes, I will open my door to welcome and stranger but first let me go and see who's knocking, how different they are from me, what they want and what I am risking.

Yes, I will forgive another but first let me go and see if they have acknowledged their wrongdoing, are sorry for what they did, and have promised to change.

Yes, I will give to and care for another but first let me go and see why I should, what it will cost me, and what's in it for me.

In our scripture for today, when it comes to Jesus' needs are not being met by the Samaritans. Even though in the next chapter, we find the parable of the good Samaritan. In today's scripture, Jesus will not be welcomed in the Samaritan village.

"Foxes have dens and birds have nests, but the Chosen One has no place to lay his head."

The disciples and all who follow Jesus will have to be prepared for the same fate; to practice hospitality or God can mean the hospitality of others will not be extended to them. The good we do can be the very reason other's turn us away.

You remember when we took in the Rranxburgaj family in? We had hateful phone calls, hateful letters and people calling the bishop and district superintendent when we walked to Lansing. I remember having Drew walk me to my car on a couple of occasions after some hateful things came my way.

Radical hospitality is risky and scary and it's ok to be afraid to engage in it. But that's what makes it so important – the risks are only there because someone is facing danger.

To be truly hospitable, as we have seen in the life of Jesus, is work. It's labors of love. It's resources. It's risk. It's energy. It's changing the entire order of things.

And on top of all that, it's really difficult to admit, "I'm afraid." It can feel shameful to be honest about our fears, even though they are inevitably coming from the messages we have received and experiences we have had. They require tending and self-compassion. They require exploration. Learning and unlearning. But that work can't be done without the kind of space

where those fears can be named. It's much easier to say we can't afford it, it's not in line with our mission. It's not good timing, it just won't work, etc.

But there are so many like Jesus, without a place to lay their heads, in need of our doing something different.

What a challenge! As those who profess to be followers of this Jesus, finding ourselves in this period of political and environmental urgency, what might Jesus say to us today? About the things that keep us from showing up in full – our church building or our denominational affiliations or our fears or our desire to avoid conflict or financial security.

While many are becoming affirming of LGBTQIA+ people, the costs for doing so are much less than they used to be except maybe in Texas and Florida. During the AIDS crisis, for instance when thousands of gay and bisexual men and trans women were dying, being shunned by friends and family and churches and having their medical crises neglected, it was costly to affirm LGBTQIA+ people. Affirming the community required some of the social costs associated with being with the community. And when it was most costly was also when it was most needed. The two go together.

When matters of justice are most urgent, they also tend to be most costly. Likewise, when we fail to see or feel the urgency of a situation, we are also the most unlikely to share in the costs of those who do. When we're distant enough from the pain of those who are suffering, the risks seem to outweigh the call to action. Our privilege makes our inactions seem and feel reasonable, while those suffering wonder how it is that inaction can possibly come from those who care.

There are currently over 52,000 people detained by ICE on average each day.

There is a very small window of opportunity to make a difference in the climate crises.

Trans women of color are being murdered while very few people take notice.

Mass shootings are more normalized than ever.

We can't do it all. And we can't even bear it all. And Jesus doesn't call us to.

But we are called to do something. And in moments of urgency we are asked to break our normal patterns. To do things differently. To step something up a notch. To push ourselves past the kind of action taking we are usually comfortable with.

Last Monday night, I woke up at 2 in the morning and couldn't get back to sleep until about 4-5. So I was pretty tired. I took a shower and when I got out of the shower, my phone was ringing and it was Debra, our office administrator. Now, it's never good when Debra calls me at home first thing in the morning.

So, when I answered she let me know that a pipe had burst on the fourth floor and an alarm had gone off. The fire department had arrived and turned off the alarm. She said it was a mess.

Now, my first year here, we also had a pipe burst before Sunday worship and it was bad. This was worse. When I arrived, the flood recovery people were talking about tearing out ceilings and knocking down walls and testing air quality for asbestos and lead. Then another company came to talk about how to dry out the archives that were soaked, and how to bring things to the gym for drying out and inspection for insurance.

Deaconness Anne's office was underwater, the accountant's office was under water and when I went to check on the labor library and the archives room, the water was above my shoes.

Remember, I had had about 4 – 5 hours of sleep maximum. It was an overwhelming day.

Our refugee family had asked me to meet with them at 5:30 and so after I made dinner, I dragged myself back to the church. It was worth it.

Pierre and Noella and They have been with us for almost a year from Cameroon. They had been seeking asylum because Pierre was tortured by the government. Their lawyer contacted me and of course, we let them move in. Pierre wanted to thank me for all the church has done for them. They have an apartment in Grosse Pointe that they are almost moved into.

When Pierre came to us, he was suffering from PTSD. He was scared all the time. What he said to me is why we do what we do. He said, I got asylum from the church, not the government. By the grace of God, we found the church and you saved us."

You did that. You did that! The wonderful thing about Central is that we don't say "But, first." We love, we give, we welcome and we forgive without a "but first."

It's risky and its scary and yes sometimes it seems pretty crazy. But as I look at the world, read the news and listen to the lives and stories of others, the world is already risky, scary and crazy. So I am so thankful that we took risks, we face our fears and live into a kinder craziness?

This church just doesn't hang banners that say Peace and Justice. It is our way of being. And for that, I am forever grateful! amen.