

“Priorities”

Isaiah 49: 8-16a      Matthew 6: 24-34

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This particular passage from Jesus’ sermon on the mount has always raised mixed feelings for me. It has offered, on the one hand, a most comforting and encouraging vision of how life could be, with its images of beautiful lilies in the field and the air filled with songbirds. On the other hand, it has been discouraging because the practicalities of “putting the realm of God first” has always seemed so far from how our social and economic structures actually work. Early in my ministry, when I would attempt to preach on this text, I would either get direct comments about how impractical the vision was, or, even worse, I would hear statements like: “That was a very interesting sermon, Pastor, but you’ll know better when you grow up.”

Well, here I am, 30-some years later, still trying to make the case for “putting the realm of God first” and trying to understand how it could be that everything else you need will come to you. More recently, I have come to a somewhat deeper understanding of this text, and while this new approach doesn’t make it any easier, it at least moves the idea of the “realm of God” into “the realm of possibility.” I have come to realize that this text (and perhaps many of the gospel texts) are not meant to be read from an individualistic perspective. When you as an individual read it, then it can only be seen as a test of your moral excellence. And almost all of us will fail the test! Unfortunately, once in a while someone will come along – like Mother Theresa or St. Francis – who passes the test in flying colors. It’s like that hated fellow student in the class with the professor who grades on the curve. You know, the one who gets a higher grade than everyone else and single-handedly ruins the curve. As best we make such people into Saints, and at worst, we take their superiority as evidence of our inferiority. This is not a helpful state of affairs, and it is not at all what the Jesus’ Gospel message has to tell us!

I am increasingly convinced that Jesus is not addressing individuals. He is addressing a community. He challenges all of our tendencies to set ourselves up against each other in competitive ways. Now, it may be that for tens of thousands of years, humans have believed they had to compete with one another for survival. And it may be that human insecurity has created a fertile field for human suspicion, enmity, and war. It may also be that humans have learned to measure success only in terms of their ability to move up in the world. But none of that has anything to do with the Gospel message of Jesus Christ. If anything, Jesus challenges that way of thinking. He communicates a vision of God’s will that is not competitive, but is radically invitational and inclusive. “Why are you so worried? Don’t you know how much love is in the world? Why do you separate yourselves from one another? Don’t you know that if you care about others, then everyone can get what they need – everyone can survive, even thrive?”

Then the Apostle Paul takes up the divine melody. “Don’t you know that in Christ, there is no male or female, slave or free, Jew or Gentile? All participate in the body of Christ, and we’re all not only important, but absolutely vital to the health of the whole.”

So, I’m suggesting that the Gospel message is not primarily about sacrifice, particularly not the sake of sacrifice itself. We don’t gain points for an eternal reward by being better than others.

We gain the Realm of God by learning to become better ó that is to say, more mature in relationship ó than we can ever be as individuals.

Culture teaches a certain set of priorities. And on the surface, they all seem to make sense. For example, study hard in school ó so you can get a good job. (Translation ó the only way to make it in this world is to be better than those around you.) Or, make sure that you contribute to your 401K and keep your insurance paid up. (Translation ó don't expect anyone else to care about you. If you don't take care of yourself, you will be abandoned.) Or make sure that you develop and maintain a good reputation. (Translation ó show the world what it wants to see, because if they knew how you really were inside, they would reject you and condemn you.)

These are the kinds of belief that have always made this passage so very difficult to preach about. On the surface, the sermon sounds simplistic, naïve, utopian, and foolish. "That was an interesting sermon, pastor, but you'd know better when you grow up." Well, I've grown up (I think), but I don't know better ó at least not in that traditional way.

What I know now is that winners need losers, "good people" need to identify bad people, financial security can make people more suspicious, not necessarily more trusting, and being at the top of the pile only means that there is always someone ready to knock you off. And that's true for governments and businesses as much as it is for individuals.

Even the Roman Empire ó that epitome of world domination and social climbing ó felt threatened by a small religious sect, called Christians, not because they had any significant temporal power, but because they lived according to such a radically different system. And what was it that represented their greatest threat to Rome? They cared about one another so well, that Rome with all its might, resources, and opportunities for social climbing was completely unnecessary for them. They rejected Rome's priority system and replaced it with the Realm of God. Individual property rights didn't matter anymore ó because they cared for each other. Political power didn't matter anymore ó because they no longer needed to be better, stronger, or smarter than anyone else.

Perhaps it is true that Christianity (as Jesus or Paul might have envisioned it) will always stand as a challenge to the status quo. In fact, if history teaches us anything, it teaches that early Christianity thrived while it held to its radical values. But, in a way, Christianity lost its soul when it became politically and socially acceptable. What crucifixions and wild beasts in the arena couldn't accomplish, social acceptability achieved in no time.

I've known about the priorities of the Gospel and the Realm of God for a long time, and they can still terrify me. I will never be able to convince myself, much less you, to live according to those priorities ó at least not if we have to do it as individuals, even competitors. But perhaps if we put our energies into building a new kind of community ó one where people matter to each other ó where people take the time and make the effort to get to know one another in deeper than surface ways ó where the well being of the wider community is at least as important as the well being of the individual, then, perhaps then, we can get a hint of this extraordinary vision that Jesus brought to us. To focus our attention on God's Realm and righteousness is not an act of individual morality or piety; it does not result in some of us being better than others. It means

stepping back to get a broader perspective ó even God's perspective ó on the sacredness of all life. For the Realm of God is not just about humans ó it's about the totality of God's creation, including the lilies and the birds. Our priorities have less to do with our individual acts or values and more to do with the quality of our relationships and the quality of our ability to be a community.

But, this sermon is useless if it simply deals with the idea of community. It needs a practical application. So, in the Fall, we are going to do some work on learning how to relate more deeply, and on how to see ourselves as a living system that is more than the sum total of the individuals that make it up. We will learn how to use our communication styles as acts of love, and hopefully that will help us become a community that is seeking first, the Realm of God. I look forward to learning with you.