

Sermon, Sixth Sunday after Pentecost, June 30, 2013

Hear some words from a poem by Mary Oliver about the mystery of life and death:

...

Of course! the path to heaven

doesn't lie down in flat miles.

It's in the imagination  
with which you perceive  
this world,

and the gestures

with which you honor it.

...

Today's gospel is a matter of life and death, and in particular today we are propelled by the urgency of the passage. This is a turning point, a terrible one, in fact when you consider the first outcome of the journey -- the cross.

Jesus sets his face to Jerusalem, and he's off, and we will "see", figuratively only that profile or the back of his head or the dust he kicks up with his sandals, until we arrive with him on that Thursday evening, Maundy Thursday, when he stops, when he turns to us, when he even takes his outer clothes off, stripping down for work, and kneels at the feet of followers, whom he now calls friends, and washes their feet, our feet.

I have always been struck, struck hard by that "he set his face" to Jerusalem. Being a visual learner, images stick with me. If you told me you "set your face to Jerusalem" I would expect you'd be off on a non-stop flight before the end of the month and be there in short order.

Of course, when you read Luke's gospel, you realize there are many stops along the way to Jerusalem, we'll be hearing about the stops on the way for months! They are stops that in fact make no geographical sense, also close to no "time line sense". What then is the sense of this urgent turning?

The sense is that for Jesus this is the time of teaching as well as testing. He knows he is approaching his end time, his death, and like Elijah, he knows the work to be done is larger than even he is. The in-breaking of this new way of living, and dying, the kingdom of God on earth, has begun with his life, but the work to bring it to fruition has just barely begun.

"So much to do; so little time." I've said that more than once, what about you?, ...But here the stakes are very high.

Like Elijah near his death, Jesus needs to pass on his mantle, but I wonder, as he sets his face to Jerusalem, how much confidence he has in the chosen 12, as in, did I really

choose these men (and not 12 amazing type A's with good memory who wouldn't keep forgetting what I tell them? or 12 women? but I digress...).

I take heart in their failures, those 12, as well as in their more shining moments. We are here after all, the good news has not been lost, is stronger and longer than the first followers; now we are the ones Jesus instructs. as he sets out, his responses to those who come up offering to follow him are told in no nonsense terms, what follower-ship entails.

In his responses Jesus sounds like some of the folks I've been privileged to be with in their last days, or last hours. Before concentrating on parish work I spent several years as a chaplain, in a retirement complex, at the University of Chicago Hospitals and Evanston hospital, all places where death comes more often than in a single parish, praise be.

Those folks who knew their days on earth were ending didn't mess around either. I remember one man who said, "you'd better pray right away, pastor, because the meter's running." He said it in encouragement, not in fear. And he was very clear, get going now!

With really only a few exceptions, what a person wanted to do was to be clear about what they had done (and left undone) and who it was they loved. Mostly it was about loving.

So is Jesus about loving.  
God, after all, is love.  
We may forget that now and again, but it's true.

This morning we hear Jesus giving pretty fierce answers to newcomers who come to him. Fierce but loving. Loving in that he is honest about what living into the Kingdom of God entails.

First of all, the Kingdom is NOW. Now that Jesus is here, so is the kingdom here; here and now. He is the in-breaker of the new order. He is the new order. When he responds to new would-be followers, he says, follow now! Not later. He is not describing a place we go to when we die. He is talking about a way of living, and the living is now. And the highest priority in living is to live into the kingdom; to choose God above all else. All else.

Even wonderful other else; like being loyal to your family, burying your father. Jesus says, yours is not the business of death, it is the business of life.  
Another preacher reminds us this way: "Jesus never said to choose him over the devil, but to choose him over the family. And the remarkable thing is that those who have done so have been freed from possession and worship of family and have found the distance to love them." [Fred Craddock, Luke, p 144]

And we, like Jesus in his earthly ministry, like the people I sat with in the hospital, like you, like me... all of us have only a limited time on earth in which to live Kingdom Lives.

How? First I think you have to imagine what the kingdom looks like in your own life. What's there? What needs to be there? How do you recognize you are in a kingdom time? But that's not enough; I can hear the groans already, not enough?

What I mean is this; you have to start with yourself, but you sure can't end there.... for a few reasons, the biggest being that it can become too private. Jesus wasn't private. The Good news of the gospel isn't private. It's meant for the whole world.

We have Jesus as map for us; he is The Way, and the pattern of his life can always be the test for the pattern of Kingdom living we try to follow.

Let's return to that poem by Mary Oliver:...

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Imagine ....What does the Kingdom of God in Galena look like ? How does the Kingdom of God look in your house, in your life? What does it look like in the wider world?

Well, I have to start with myself. What does it look like in my life? Like you I'm just a beginner, so be patient.

Gratitude: When I can welcome whatever comes with gratitude, and since I'm not there yet let's just say, when I do welcome something that comes, I know it is very different from when I push something away, or minimize it, or deny its presence. Because when I am grateful it's not merely gratitude, but gratitude to God who gives all things, and that awareness suffuses the time with the presence of God. God is at the center, not me.

Prayer: I need more prayer in my life; that just happens to be true at this time in my life, and as soon as I wrote that down I had to laugh because I'll bet that's always been true. I just haven't woken up to that reality till these past few years.

Structures in our common life that encourage us to be the children of God who we truly are: I vote. We live in a democracy and we get to vote.

It is a structure that encourages each of us to live into being active members of the communities in which we live -- the highly imperfect communities in which we live. Since we are imperfect too I guess we deserve each other.

Baptism: our great shared sacrament. I love baptisms. That's another community event, a sacrament, and a structure, that reminds us who we are; whose we are; that we are all loved and included.

You can label one of those a secular event and the other a sacred event. Yes, but the life we live, the kingdom life we live, is a weaving of both warp and weft intertwining, a beautiful tapestry made up of both.

Do you think both can be godly? I do. ...and yes, there's the chance we can turn either into pretty ungodly events.

Sometimes beyond me and not expected, something comes into being that takes its place as a kingdom event for me. This week that is what happened when the Supreme Court ruled on marriage equality. The court recognized that to withhold the ability to marry from people because of their sexual orientation is to cut them off from those benefits and supports so many of us enjoy legally when we are married.

For me it meant we can now structure in community a compact for all of us. All of us now have the ability to order our lives in marriage if that be our calling.

Our bishop, Jeff Lee, put out on the diocesan website, his understanding of the importance of this ruling in the life of faith we all share. This, in part, is what he said:

"In the Episcopal Diocese of Chicago, we offer all faithful couples equality, dignity, support and love, and I am proud that our federal government will now follow suit. Extending those benefits of civil marriage to same-sex couples in Illinois would make it easier for them to order their lives together, to care for one another and to raise children in a stable home. We would all benefit from these stronger, happier households and families.

"These Supreme Court rulings concern civil marriage, not the Christian sacrament. But I invite Christians who may struggle with the decision to consider that the union of two people in heart, body and mind is capable of signifying the never failing love of God in Christ for the church and the world. These faithful unions, no matter the sex of the partners, can be sources and signs of grace, both for the couple and for the wider community. When we see and celebrate those signs, we testify to the love and mercy of God that overcomes all our divisions and differences."

In the past 12 months I have had the honor of attending two such weddings in Iowa. As at all weddings when I am a guest, my joy is to see good friends who are happy get

happier, and happier, and happier. They understand that something new is being created in their taking on publicly their new roles of spouses to one another. In one case the couple had already lived as honored partners to one another for 25 years.

And in all of this, though we were missing the prayer we say at wedding blessings or Eucharists in a church ceremony, I know the words, and they came to me strongly. They are:

“Grant that all married persons who have witnessed these vows may find their lives strengthened and their loyalties confirmed.” [BCP p. 430 ]

When I imagine the Kingdom springing into reality around us, this inclusion of us all into following God’s will for us is central for me. It reminds me of the time, that our national church in democratic convention declared that we who are women who have heard God’s call to ordained life are free to follow that call. For the first time, included and respected like others with the same call.

Not everyone agrees with my images of the Kingdom. This is the Episcopal Church and you do not have to. But I would maintain that all of us need to know that decisions that are reached in the church come out of years of faithful prayer and reflection, theological and pastoral struggle.

Jesus has an urgent message for us this morning. It is about living. It is about living in the ever expanding Kingdom of God. I challenge you to imagine, deeply imagine the kingdom into which you are living. Paul’s words about life in the Spirit keep coming to me as I think about our responsibility to one another in Christ. When someone shares with you their images of the Kingdom of God, you as listener need to listen with “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.” [Galations 5:25]

How do you perceive this world? What are the gestures with which you honor it?

The Reverend Linda Packard

2 Kings 2:1-2, 6-14  
 Psalm 5: 1-8  
 Galations 5:1, 13-25  
 Luke 9:51-62

