

Lectionary 13 A 2017
The Rev. Donna M. Wright
St. Matthew's Kellers Church
July 2, 2017

Grace, mercy, and peace to you, from our Lord and Savior, Jesus the Christ. Amen

On Facebook this week I shared a video of a knife-wielding man who entered a police station in Thailand, threatening to harm an officer. The officer, a rather large man, sat down on the corner of a desk, to make himself smaller and less intimidating, and began talking to the man. Calming him. Finally encouraging the man to give him the knife. Which he did. Then the officer held his arms out wide, wide as Jesus on the cross, slowly approached the man, and gave him a big hug. And the man started crying, with remorse and relief. When the man had sat down, other officers gave him water. The one who first spoke with him took him out for a meal. They welcomed him. They shifted the focus. And what a difference it made!

Our readings for today track a shift in focus. Jeremiah responded to the hopeful and pleasing words that his fellow prophet Hananiah proclaimed, saying, "Wow, that would be great if all the stuff you prophesied actually happened!" But we know that Jeremiah had his doubts that everything would be as peachy as Hananiah foretold. Jeremiah reminded his audience that most prophets sent by God had a different mission: to warn of war and other dangers that would result from God's judgment. Prophets generally did not say pleasant words that the people want to hear. We who are God's people have special responsibilities to the truth: to seek it out and to speak it. Kindly, if at all possible. Angrily, if necessary. And to do as God wills once we know the truth. Those of you who have read the book of Jonah know how quickly the people of Nineveh repented once they heard the words of warning from Jonah ~ may we be so eager to respond to the truth of how we need to repent!

In our second reading, Paul expects his readers to shift their focus from sin to righteousness. He contrasts the situation of being a slave to sin with being a slave to righteousness. Of course it is disturbing for us to hear the word "slave" being used at all. Especially on this day, when we remember Gettysburg, one of the worst battles of our nation's Civil War, fought over the issue of slavery. Let me shift focus on that word "slave." You know those videos where cats are chasing the red laser dot? Cats always chase the dot. They can't help it. Cats are fascinated by those red laser lights to the point of being captivated. Held captive – the cat has no free will to just walk away and leave the red light alone. Paul proposes that is how we should be in our relationship with Christ – we should be captivated, made captive, by Christ and Christ's righteousness. So that we are compelled to do nothing but care for others as Christ did. If only following Christ were as easy for us as following the red dot is for a cat! Yet, I pray we are so captivated by Christ that where Christ goes, we go.

In our gospel reading there is a shift of focus from Jesus' disciples to those to whom Jesus sent them. The ones who welcome the disciples will be the ones who welcome Jesus. They don't even know the effect of their welcome. As the police officer in Thailand had no idea the effect of his calm welcome on the desperate man with the knife. In Gettysburg in the days before July 1st, when the first shots were fired, the Southern troops were arriving. Some people left the area, taking some of their horses and other treasures with them. I imagine many of those who left were among the 8% of the local population who were free blacks. If I were a free black, and heard that Southern troops were coming, I would have left. Others stayed, watching as the rebel troops took over their homes and outbuildings, their well water and food stores. During the battle some of the townspeople came out of

their homes and provided water, food, and other goods for the Union soldiers. During and after the battle, homes and barns and yards and fields became hospitals, for the wounded from both sides. And a shift happened, as many cups of cold water were delivered to the mouths of both Northern and Southern wounded. Showing the mercy and love of Jesus.

What happened in those days, before, during and after the battle at Gettysburg, were the real needs of real people. Wells ran dry. Food was scarce, as was fabric for bandages and to cover the wounded and suffering. No one was shining it on. No one was pretending that everything was fine when it was not. As none of the police officers in Thailand pretended everything was fine with the man who came in with the knife. If you watched the video to the end, you found out his story: although he was a musician he had been doing security work for a man who hadn't paid him for three days. His guitar had been stolen. He had not eaten or slept. A desperate man. Captive by his hunger and stress – and by the economic injustice done to him. Fortunately, he received a righteous person's welcome from those police officers.

Our words or acts of welcome will not always be well received. As the words of true prophets are not always well received. The congregation my husband and I served in Omaha, Lord of Love, had some active gay people before we were called there. After we were called, and they heard how we interpreted being captivated by Christ's gospel of grace, they were relieved. Before too long, other homosexual couples started attending, and joining. Now years earlier Lord of Love had been picketed by Westboro Baptist Church, who even came inside the church one Sunday morning. A pictorial directory was taken, and every family in the church received a horrible postcard on Christian Eve that year. Because of that, there was a rule that no one received a member directory until they became members. One family who joined and then received a pictorial directory promptly left – because they saw the photo of the lesbian couple. They realized that their values were different from the values of the congregation they had just joined. But let me shift focus in this story. Dana and Kathy had come to Lord of Love after not even attempting to be a part of any church for a long time. One grew up Roman Catholic; the other grew up Jehovah's Witnesses. Pretty far apart theologically. And neither desired to return to her childhood church. One was a school speech therapist; I forget the other's occupation. After being at Lord of Love for a couple of years, increasingly active, one morning they announced that they were moving to California. The reason? They knew the needs of the children in California for a speech therapist were much greater than the needs of schoolchildren in the Omaha area – and they wanted to make a bigger difference in their lives – ***because they were captivated by the Spirit of the living Christ.***

God provides God's people with all we need – to provide a merciful welcome, to seek for peace while being keenly aware of dangers around us, to be captive to the Spirit of the living Christ, who will give water and food and speech therapy and whatever else desperate people most need. May it be so with us! Amen