

HOSPITALITY TO DIFFERENCE

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January 23, 2005*

Matthew 4:12-23

I Corinthians 1:10-18

Dorothy Ricks was an eloquent lay preacher. At a Bible study one day, she told pastors about her ancestors who were slaves picking cotton on southern plantations. She recalled their singing as they worked: "I've got shoes, you got shoes, all God's children got shoes. When I get to heaven, gonna put on those shoes, gonna walk all over God's heaven." She sang the same verse about having robes.

Those ancestor's were much like the people of the prophet Isaiah's time. They were people who had been conquered, taken from their homeland, and enslaved in Assyria. In fact, God had not yet delivered them. Their shoes were in heaven. Their robes were in heaven. But Isaiah knew God had already provided the shoes and robes of deliverance for the beloved people of the covenant while they were in slavery. Isaiah announced the deliverance as a present fact so they would know God's power and keep on keeping the faith. They loved each other and trusted God to deliver them even when deliverance was delayed. The people who walked in the valley had seen a great light. Those who dwelt in a land of deep despair had seen the light shine on them.

Matthew also lived, as you and I live, in a land of deep despair. Yet Matthew is exuberant. In his gospel he wrote of wonderful good news for the people of his day and for us. Like us, they lived after the resurrection. Matthew had seen the glory of the presence of God walking around on the streets of Capernaum, preaching in the Capernaum synagogue, teaching on the streets of the city and on the mountainside.

Matthew had also seen the glory of the presence of God healing people. In a land with no health insurance, he had seen the blind receive their sight, the lame to walk, and the deaf to hear. In a land with no social assistance or disability insurance, Matthew had seen thousand fed with five loaves and two fishes. So Matthew talks about Isaiah's prophecy, "The people who sat in darkness have seen a great light, and for those who sat in the region and shadow of death light has dawned" (Mt. 4:16).

Matthew knew all about living in rough places. In Capernaum, the trading centre and surely the second largest city in Palestine, there was plenty of despair. True, some people got rich from trade with the East and West and many more got jobs from the trading. But the old, orphaned children, widowed women, disabled men, the handicapped – those whom we call mentally and physically challenged – lived in the shadow of joblessness and the homelessness and hunger they found there.

Into this cold place came Jesus, preaching, teaching, and healing. He also went fishing. You may know that his fishers, Peter, Andrew, James, and John went fishing at night. That's when they caught the loads of fish.

Jesus also went fishing in the gloom – among the desolate of Capernaum. In the gospel today we hear Jesus call four skilled fishers – folk who should understand best what he was doing because they fished for a living. Jesus walked among the oppressed who lived in Capernaum. He went fishing for people whom he would weld into a new

covenant. He would make them a commonwealth of God where they would find ways to see that no one would be friendless or in any kind of need. He would make them what they would call the realm of God – a colony of heaven that lived in the light of God’s love in the midst of despair.

Matthew also knew what it would cost a person if Jesus caught he or she in the net of God’s love and drew that person into the light of God’s love. You probably remember Matthew had been one of the most despised people among the Jewish folk of his day. Roman had recruited him to be a tax collector because he knew where the money was. After they got their taxes, they asked no question about how much he added to the assessment for his own compensation. Everyone thought Matthew a leech, a cheat, and a thief. There was no hospitality for what was perceived as his difference.

Matthew knew all about living in the shadows. Then one day he saw the glory of the presence of God walking down his own street in his own city. Jesus reached out and caught Matthew in the net of the love of God.

Matthew changed. Through his teaching, preaching and writing, many other people became different persons. So God built a colony of love and light there in Capernaum and the countryside around it. In that colony, a tiny commonwealth of heaven, people were healed. They stopped preying on each other and stealing from each other. They worked together, fed and helped and healed each other. In every way, every day, they loved each other.

But, but, all too soon, it began. First disagreement, or thoughtlessness or greed, next hurt feelings and resentment, then anger and accusation, followed by slander and smoldering division and finally complete disunity followed by isolation or total war. In the event of Jesus, it was death on a cross.

It is a chain of events that many of us are all too familiar with, a chain of events that occurred in that little colony built with God’s love, a chain of events that often occur, in whole or in part, in our families, in our work places and in our churches, most certainly in our world.

What can we do about it?

How can we become – as the old slogan proposes – part of the solution instead of part of the problem.

It is an important question – one that I am sure many of us have asked when we have looked at our own family squabbles or have had to deal with differences in our neighborhood or workplaces.

The Apostle Paul had to deal with this question when he wrote his first letter to the church in Corinth – a church, which despite all the spiritual gifts that it had received, was gravely divided, with cliques and camps and different groups taking shots at each other and claiming for themselves moral superiority and greater wisdom and righteousness.

Janet Silman, who used to write for the United Church Observer once passed on the advice her choir leader gave to the choir she belonged to – she said:”If you can’t hear the voices beside you – you’re singing too loudly.”

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Harmony requires that we be able to hear others, that we deliberately alter our behavior and our attitudes so that we can hear our brothers’ and sisters’ hearts and voices.

In Corinth at the time of Paul, no one was listening.

They were not listening because each person was fully convinced in his or her mind that he or she was correct – that they had the whole picture – the only right picture – that picture that others needed to have if they were to be truly called righteous, if they were to be truly considered part of the body of Christ.

In fact in Corinth almost everyone was shouting – almost everyone was putting their views, their understanding, their philosophy concerning what was right and good first – and ignoring, neglecting or condemning anyone who differed from their norms and their rules.

I follow Cephas, his is the right way. He knew Jesus.

I follow Apollos; he has been touched by God. Apollos baptized me.

I follow Paul, he knows the way, he understands.

In Corinth almost everyone had forgotten, in the heat of the moment, that long and deadly moment that ultimately stretched into years and years of strife, that they were called to follow Jesus.

They had forgotten that the only law they were supposed to observe was the law of self-giving love, and that they were supposed to practice that law with the people that God gave to them, that church, that community, that both nurtures our faith and tests the quality of our faith.

Where do our loyalties lie? Is our loyalty with God – a living reality which we can only understand imperfectly?

Or is our loyalty confined to our understanding of God – to our small piece of the jigsaw puzzle?

Where does our hope lie? Is it in the risen Christ working his works of love in our midst as he calls each one of us to be workers in God's new realm right here. Or is our hope only in our plans and our ideas of what should and should not be?

Where does our love for God and our neighbors lie? Is it in greeting our friends and cursing our enemies? Or is it in blessing those who curse us and caring for those who despise us?

We are each entitled to hold onto our piece of the picture, in fact it is all we can do – but we are also called to see the pieces which others hold, to listen to the choir – which is composed of many voices, and to appreciate the differences in each of them, the unique gifts that each brings to make up the whole.

It cannot hurt us to do this. It cannot hurt us to listen to the voices that are so different than our own. If I was a betting person, I would be willing to bet that even the voices of the disciples were different. How did the fishers feel when Jesus called Matthew, one of the most despised ones in their culture? It cannot hurt us to recognize that there are other pieces to the puzzle. In fact it can only help us and in helping us it can help the world.

But we can't do that if we refuse to associate with a particular part of the community of faith because they differ from us – or if we reject one group because we think that they don't listen to us well enough – or if we pull away from one part because they don't do what it is we think they should be doing.

Do we want to make a difference in our families, in our work places, in our church, in our community, in the world? Do we want to break down the barriers that divide? I think we most certainly do.

For me that means practising hospitality to difference. Unity would be ideal. Unity has all the earmarks of practicality and sanity; but it tends to overlook the obvious need that human beings have to exercise their individuality. Unity is too easily transformed into uniformity and when we enforce it, we become an exclusive even in the church, keeping people out who cannot agree with us.

So instead of unity I invite us to practice hospitality to difference which calls us to the way that listens to the other voices in the choir, the way that appreciates the other pieces of the puzzle, the way that recognizes evil and resists evil, and at the same time forgive the hurt that is done and continually, because of the love that dwells within, offers the chance of reconciliation and healing.

This morning and everyday, Jesus is fishing right here amongst us. Jesus is calling us just as he called those four fishers, just as he called Matthew, Mary of Magdala, Mary and Martha, Mary of Bethany, his own mother and dozens more during his ministry. We are called to be workers in God's realm right here and now.

Hear the call. Let us be open to being caught and held fast in the net of God's healing and empowering love to enable us to continue building God's realm. That means living out our "hospitality to difference", living with and loving all who think, look, speak, and act differently than us.

What would that look like at Camrose United Church? Amen.