

Scripture and Sermon for Sunday, August 28, 2016

Jeremiah 2:4-13

Hear the word of the Lord, O house of Jacob,
and all the families of the house of Israel.

Thus says the Lord:

What wrong did your ancestors find in me
that they went far from me,
and went after worthless things,
and became worthless themselves?

They did not say, "Where is the Lord
who brought us up from the land of Egypt,
who led us in the wilderness,
in a land of deserts and pits,
in a land of drought and deep darkness,
in a land that no one passes through,
where no one lives?"

I brought you into a plentiful land
to eat its fruits and its good things.

But when you entered you defiled my land,
and made my heritage an abomination.

The priests did not say, "Where is the Lord?"

Those who handle the law did not know me;
the rulers transgressed against me;
the prophets prophesied by Baal,
and went after things that do not profit.

Therefore once more I accuse you, says the Lord,
and I accuse your children's children.

Cross to the coasts of Cyprus and look,
send to Kedar and examine with care;
see if there has ever been such a thing.

Has a nation changed its gods,

even though they are no gods?
But my people have changed their glory
for something that does not profit.
Be appalled, O heavens, at this,
be shocked, be utterly desolate, says the Lord,
for my people have committed two evils:
they have forsaken me,
the fountain of living water,
and dug out cisterns for themselves,
cracked cisterns
that can hold no water.

Luke 14:1, 7-14

On one occasion when Jesus was going to the house of a leader of the Pharisees to eat a meal on the sabbath, they were watching him closely.

When he noticed how the guests chose the places of honor, he told them a parable. "When you are invited by someone to a wedding banquet, do not sit down at the place of honor, in case someone more distinguished than you has been invited by your host; and the host who invited both of you may come and say to you, 'Give this person your place', and then in disgrace you would start to take the lowest place. But when you are invited, go and sit down at the lowest place, so that when your host comes, he may say to you, 'Friend, move up higher'; then you will be honored in the presence of all who sit at the table with you. For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted."

He said also to the one who had invited him, "When you give a luncheon

or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, in case they may invite you in return, and you would be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous."

Let us pray...Amen.

The two themes that stand out for me from today's Hebrew scripture and Gospel lesson are fidelity and humility. Now, these are pretty common themes coming from the bible. Ancient Hebrew traditions dictated how a family should respond to a traveler, and even to this day, cultures all over the world strive to provide hospitality to those who are visiting. The New Testament gives us plenty of evidence that Jesus lived out his beliefs regarding humility, and he advocated for a humble approach to the faithful life.

But in modern western culture, we have seen a steep decline in the ability of any given family to be prepared to provide hospitality to our own family members, much less those we don't know well. And I believe that our culture also gets in the way of our ability to practice humility in our faith lives.

If you ask members of the New York Conference delegation who have visited our partners in Frankfurt Germany about their experiences, they will tell you in glowing terms about the families that provided amazing hospitality. They will tell you that the families that hosted individuals from the U.S. pretty much made their visit their priority for the duration, and that local American families find it difficult to match that level of hospitality.

Betsy and I can tell you about her relatives in Austria, and how their hospitality almost made us feel uncomfortable. And we would have to admit that we probably couldn't match that level of hospitality should her relatives visit us.

I've traveled to India, and to Trinidad and Tobago, and the approach to hospitality in both of those places puts our culture to shame.

In many places around the world, where families have less resources, less space, less food, less money, hosts are able to make visitors feel welcome, comfortable, and cared-for.

Don't you think there is something about our culture that has eroded our ability to be hospitable hosts? Even though we as a culture tend to have more resources, more food, more space, and more money than many other countries?

And what I want to know is, what is it about our culture that prevents us as a society from living and acting humbly with integrity?

Here's what I think: I think people who live and act in humility, do so from a deep well of confidence and faith. I suspect that our culture of celebrity and fame gets in the way of our ability to live that way.

Our culture spends an amazing amount of time and money on sports and entertainment. And we attach a huge amount of importance on our famous sports figures, our famous actors, our famous musicians, our famous politicians. We expect many of these individuals to be role models for us, for our children, and yet, as basic human beings, they are as flawed and faulted as we are. So when they fail, when they make a mistake, or act in a way that is unflattering, we sometimes criticize them.

When we hold our celebrities to impossible standards, what does that mean for us 'normal' people? If many of us are striving for our own 15 minutes of fame, if we're looking up to the famous crowd as role models, how can we ever find the confidence and strength to live our lives with humility and integrity?

Sports figures will use performance enhancing drugs to stay on top, musicians and actors will use recreational drugs and alcohol to stay on top, politicians will bend and break rules to stay on top. And yet we look up to them as role models?

The traditional values of hospitality and humility fly in the face of our current cultural model of celebrity worship. What does Alex Rodriguez or Kim Kardashian or Paris Hilton or Lady Gaga know about humility? And how would we know? We don't know them, we only know their public personas. My observation is that they are very busy maintaining their public personas so they can remain popular.

I know it's no longer in vogue, but it seems to me that if we replaced all our heroes, all the people we look up to, the celebrities, the sports leaders, the pop stars, with one hero, Jesus, we just might find ourselves striving for 15 minutes of humility instead of 15 minutes of fame!

Now, there are many humble people living out their lives here at FCC UCC, Malden Road UCC, and in Camillus and Mattydale, and in NY State, and in the US. But we don't lift them up as role models, do we?

They aren't the famous ones. We don't take the most humble person we know and give them millions of dollars just to be themselves.

Our children and our grandchildren don't wake up each day and wish they were Jesus, do they? They want to be a celebrity, or sadly, be married to a celebrity.

The road map to the future is a challenging one if we can't find a way to help our young people discover that it's ok to emulate Jesus in his humility and sensitivity. The road map to the future will be nearly impossible if whole generations of young people grow up striving to be famous, aching to be fantastically rich, desperate to be adored by screaming groups of young people!

So how do we communicate to them that the real life, the faithful life, the meaningful life, is based on hospitality and humility, not celebrity?

Some churches have made rock stars out of their pastors. As appealing as this might be, that's just not the answer! Those mega churches fall hard when their pastors prove to be flawed and human, and error prone.

Some churches have begun protesting events in popular culture. We'll probably never extinguish the human need to be fascinated by celebrity and popularity.

The path that seems most clear to me is the one where we openly acknowledge the fun and entertainment value of sports and music and movies, but share the truth with our young people that celebrity does not always mean integrity. That fame does not guarantee humility. Those are traits that develop over time in an environment that is steeped in respect, love, patience and critical thinking skills.

The world will begin to change when more and more generations of young people learn that humility and hospitality are more important than fame and riches.

You know that. I know that. But for some reason, we've failed to communicate that properly to the generations behind us. What we might have considered entertainment, what might have taken up just a small portion of our time has now become a way of life, a major focus of many a

young life. Paul and Jesus call us to reclaim the faithful life, the life based on hospitality and humility. Let's do what we can to emulate that for the generations to come, to set that bar high so that the culture of celebrity won't even be able to compete.

Amen.