

SUNDAY SERMON JUNE 15, 2008

Matthew 10:8  
LIVE GENEROUSLY

I don't know too many people who don't like babies. Babies remind us of everything that is best about us. Babies are open and gentle and vulnerable and spontaneous. Babies don't really concern themselves a whole lot with what other people are thinking about them. Babies are full of promise. They are at the beginning of the journey of their lives. Everything is ahead of them.

You have to wonder, when you look at a baby what it is you might most wish for the baby to have to take along on the journey of life. And where do you really want the baby's journey to lead.

In our Gospel reading this morning, Jesus sends his disciples off on a journey. And oddly, Jesus does not tell his disciples what they should take for their journey. He does not tell them what they should do to get ready for the journey. Instead Jesus tells his followers what they should leave behind when they set off on their journey. He tells them the things they don't need to take. The spiritual life is much more a process of subtraction than it is of addition. So Jesus gives his followers a list of things they can do without.

The list of things to leave behind is made up of things you might think would be pretty essential for any journey. Jesus says, "Take no gold, or silver, or copper in your belts, no bag for your journey, or two tunics, or sandals, or a staff." (Matthew 10:9,10) Imagine that. Jesus says leave your credit card at home. Don't pack a suitcase, or take a change of clothes or even an extra pair of shoes. Jesus is telling his disciples to leave behind all those things that make them feel safe. Leave behind all those things that will give them a sense of confidence on their journey, all those things they might look to for a sense of security, those things that might make them feel capable and competent to successfully fulfill the requirements of their journey.

These are exactly the things we all spend our lives trying to accumulate. We all spend our lives trying to make ourselves feel secure, trying to acquire the skills necessary to help us feel we can do the journey without falling into too many pot holes or getting eaten by lions along the way. Probably if we were to go around and ask people what they would like these little babies to have, we would say we would like them to have the abilities they need to navigate life successfully.

But Jesus seems to suggest that these are the last things in the world he wants his disciples to take along on their journey. He seems to want them to leave behind everything that might help them achieve success on their journey. He seems to want to guarantee their failure. Why would Jesus do such a thing?

Jesus wants us to know that success on the journey does not depend upon our abilities or our skills or our competence. In fact, Jesus says that our skills and our competence may be the very thing that more than anything else get in the way of us succeeding on the journey. Jesus said, “Truly I tell you, it will be hard for a rich person to enter the kingdom of heaven.” (Matthew 19:23) This does not necessarily have anything to do with money. There are lots of ways to be rich. To be rich can mean being smart, being beautiful, being physically strong, or talented in any way. To be rich means to have something we feel we can rely upon to get us through the journey. We are “rich” when we think we can work it out on our own. We are “rich” when we believe that we know how life works and what it takes for us to be successful at the game of life. This is the one belief Jesus says that will prevent us from knowing God’s presence.

If we are going to be a success at the journey of life, we must lay aside all those things that we feel make us powerful, capable and competent. This is one of the reasons why in the Anglican tradition, we baptize infants. Jesus said, “Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.” (Matthew 18:2) The word Jesus uses here to describe these children is “*paidion*” it means infant. Jesus is talking here about the most helpless form of humanity.

It is odd, but as much as we love little infants, in many ways they describe the one thing we most despise. An infant is totally dependent upon others for their well-being. An infant cannot look after himself or herself. An infant is exactly the opposite of the strong, capable competent self-made person we all wish we could become. But, if we are to be a success at life we must be willing to acknowledge one thing. We are totally dependent upon God for our lives. Life is a gift. We did not bring ourselves into existence. We did not create ourselves. We do not sustain ourselves. Every breath we take, every beat of our hearts, every pulse of blood running through our veins should remind us that every moment of our days is a pure gift.

Jesus makes this point quite forcefully when he is sending out his followers when he says to them, “You received without payment.” (Matthew 10:8) Or in the King James Version of this text, “Freely you have received.” God did not make a deal with us when God created us. God simply gave us the gift of life and said here is the gift of life; go and live the life you have been given. This is the foundational thing we need to know about ourselves. There is no human success in life that does not begin with the foundational recognition that your life is a gift. You may make more money than any other human being on earth. You may be more beautiful than any movie star, more powerful than any politician, smarter than a brain scientist. But, if you do not start with the knowledge that your life is a gift and all of your skills, abilities and talents are gifts, you will fail as a human being.

This is why for the entire history of the Christian faith and all over the world, the central act of worship for the vast majority of Christians has always been the Eucharist. The word Eucharist means “thanksgiving.” In this service we embody the fundamental reality that in Christ God gives to us the gift of life and grace and mercy. We are recipients of

God's blessing. In the Eucharist we are reminded again and again that we are fundamentally recipients of God's blessing.

Why is it so important for Jesus that his disciples acknowledge that their lives are gifts? It is important because of the second half of Jesus' statement. Jesus said, "You have received without payment; give without payment." Or, in the KJV "Freely you have received, freely give." The reason it is so important that we understand that our lives are a gift is that it is only as we understand this that we are set free to truly fulfill our destiny as human beings. Our destiny as human beings is to "freely give." And we are only free to truly give when we know that we have been given absolutely everything we need for the journey of life.

You see our fundamental problem is that we still think we have to run around and find our gold, or silver, or copper. We think we need to be accumulating tunics or sandals or staffs. We are so busy trying to pack our bags for the journey that we forget that God has given us everything we need for the journey even before we ask. This is why it is so important that we baptize infants. Even before we can tell what they are going to accomplish in life, before we know how much money they are going to earn, or how smart they are going to be, or how handsome they will turn out to be, we say, you are held by God. You are cared for and loved by the Source of all life. No matter what happens to you, God has called you. God has drawn you into the circle of love and light that is God's grace and mercy. Now go and live from that knowledge that, no matter what you may do, God's love always holds you. No matter how far you may wander, you are loved and cherished by the Source of all life.

You know there aren't very many places you are going to be told what infant baptism tells you. Most places are going to tell you that you better measure up. You better be good enough. You better know the right things, believe the right things, make no mistakes. The world will tell you that you are only as good as your last success. You better not mess up; you better not let anyone down. You better always try to get it right, to be morally upright and always to walk in a straight line.

That's not what Jesus says. Jesus says, come to my table just as you are. Come and eat with me. I don't care what you have done. I am not interested in your failures. I am not interested in your achievements or your great ambitions. Jesus says, I am only interested in hearts that are open to receive the gift of love and life that I desire to pour into you. When we know this we are free to live in true relationships of love and light with all people.

There is an old Anglican prayer we used to always pray before coming forward for communion. One might want to express this prayer in slightly different words today. But, I believe that the core conviction behind this prayer is still deeply important. The prayer says, "We do not presume to come to this thy table, O merciful Lord, Trusting in our own righteousness, But in thy manifold and great mercies. We are not worthy So much as to gather up the crumbs under thy table. But thou are the same Lord, Whose property is always to have mercy." What the authors of this prayer understood is that our

ability to come to the table has nothing whatsoever to do with our worthiness. It is not because we are good enough to come that we are invited to the table. It is because of the nature of God. It is because God is merciful that we can come. It is because it is God's nature to give and to bless that we can come. Like God we love and embrace an infant, not because that infant is the best infant in the world, not because that infant is the cutest or the prettiest or has the most charming disposition. We love and embrace an infant because we see in that infant a gift of God. And that is what God sees when God looks at you. God sees a gift, a wonderful mystery of unfolding light. That is what you are; we are recipients of God's grace.

Some of you may be familiar with the paraphrase of the Bible called "The Message" by Eugene Peterson. Some times this paraphrase is good and sometimes it is not quite so good. But when Peterson came to paraphrase Matthew 10:8, he had an absolutely brilliant day. I think Peterson's paraphrase of Jesus statement here is perfect. Peterson has Jesus say to his disciples as he sends them out on their journey, "You have been treated generously, so live generously."

"Live generously" - that's the vision. That is what you were created for. You were created to "live generously."

What does it mean to live generously? Well ultimately of course, only you can answer for yourself what a generous life is going to look like for you. The model of course for a generous life is Jesus. Jesus ate with tax collectors and sinners. Jesus hung out with those who were outcast and unacceptable. Jesus said, "Do not judge." (Matthew 7:1) He said, "Neither do I condemn you." (John 8:11) He taught his disciples "do not condemn." (Luke 6:37) and said, "if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well." (Matthew 5:40)

Jesus modeled a life of incredible graciousness and openness. To live generously means to live openly. It means to accept the other person exactly as they are, being willing to love and embrace them just as we would love and embrace an infant. It means letting go of our expectations that people should change before we love them, or change in the way we think they should change. To live generously is to create an open spacious place in our hearts that people may know that there is room for them to be just as they are. It means the end of manipulation, the end of demand, the end of rules and regulations. It means we are willing to fulfill in one another's lives the mission for which Jesus came. Paul sums up Jesus reason for being saying simply, "It is for freedom Christ has set you free." (Galatians 5:1)

A generous life is a life that is free to fulfill its true destiny. It is a life that is free to give and to give and to keep giving. It is a life that is free to give because it knows deep in its inner most being that, in Christ, it has already received everything it needs and all for which it longs. There is nothing more to get. The bread and the wine we share are a sign to us that the living presence of God lives in our innermost being, feeding and nurturing us for the journey of life. Therefore there is nothing more we need. We can let go of all those things to which we are tempted to cling, because we now that God has given us

absolutely everything we could ever need or desire. This journey upon which these infants are launched is a journey in which we pray they will discover the true nature of life. We pray they will discover that life is a gift, freely and abundantly given. And we pray that in that discovery they may find that they are set free to live generously to give without demand and to surrender always to the abundant loving presence of God manifest to us in Christ Jesus.