



June 28, 2020

The 4th Sunday after Pentecost • Proper 8A

Genesis 22:1-14 • Matthew 10:40-42

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I am reading Colson Whitehead's novel *The Underground Railroad*, and if you have not read it, I thoroughly encourage you to do so. (If you have read it, please do not tell me what happens with the characters, because I am only about halfway through!) Still, I want to share with you this morning a scene that I was reading the other night, and I will tell it in such a way so as not to give anything away to you.

So, I'll tell you that there is one scene in which a young woman who has escaped slavery on a plantation finds herself alone and trapped in a station of the underground railroad that is beneath someone's house. After she has rushed into that place, she can hear above her that the house is burning, that the slave catchers and patrollers have caught that station agent and probably also the others with whom she was. Unable to come above ground and not knowing anything about when the next train might come, there she is...underground.

Lengths of time pass and she has no way to measure how long she has been in there except by how hungry and thirsty she is—and she grows extremely, extremely hungry and thirsty, when she sees, to her great relief, the light of a train approaching.

The conductor doesn't know that she's there and he actually goes by her before backing up to retrieve her. Once on board, she clearly is starving and the conductor offers her the water that he has, and you get the sense that she grabs his sandwich even before he can say, "Why don't you have my sandwich, too?" – such is the depth of her hunger.

As I read that, I thought of our Gospel today, when Jesus says that offering just cold water is enough: offering what we have in His name, in the name of respecting the dignity of every human being, in the name of respecting one another—all people, "Whoever," the scripture says, "Whoever," as beloved, incredible, amazing, thoroughly cherished creations of God!

These two go on their way on the train, and he has to drop her off at one point. The station agent, the owner of the house above there, comes down for some other purpose and discovers her there and is suddenly both—hear this—is suddenly both filled with compassion and taken aback, because he wants to offer everything that he has but he also recognizes immediately the dangers of doing so.

Even in that danger, he takes her into his home and shuttles her immediately into the attic, where the wife in the home says, in no uncertain or additional words, "Don't move, don't make any noise, because if anyone else in the house knows that you're here, we all will be killed."

As I read that, my breath caught, because I have never been in such a position where I knew acutely that my life would be on the line for extending such shelter and welcome. My breath caught, because the station agent, the wife, and the conductor before them offered the very essence of hospitality.

This is exactly what Jesus was talking about: to offer what you have, what we have. Sometimes, and in those times, it was to offer your home, to risk your life. Sometimes, like in Jesus' time, it is a matter of offering a cold cup of water. Sometimes it is very simple; the act of hospitality itself changes depending on what is happening. But the point I want to offer you right now is that hospitality is always active, always active.

It is, at the very same time, both a giving of ourselves—whoever we are, whatever we have—into the unknown. It is a giving toward justice, a giving toward love, such that we do not know exactly what is going to happen...but we cannot do otherwise.

It is a giving of ourselves into the unknown and, at the same time, reciprocally, it is a revealing of ourselves. It is an offering of ourselves in often very, very deeply vulnerable and uncomfortable ways...letting our true selves be known...our true identities and needs and desires and values...letting those be seen when they have been unseen...revealing ourselves in such a way that we do not know what will happen.

The biblical scholar Emilie Townes (if you don't know her work, please, please look her up) speaks about hospitality as "a spiritual discipline" in which by welcoming someone new, something new, a new idea, we precisely welcome the unfamiliar and the unknown into our lives.¹

And I would expand on that: that if we are giving of ourselves in such a way that we can predict what will happen, that everything will stay safe and essentially the same, we may not be offering the hospitality that Jesus is talking about! Jesus is talking about a hospitality where there is a giving and a receiving, and both parties meet and offer themselves to each other in such a way that it is unknown what will happen.

Justice, love, welcome, hospitality...they are words. Justice, love, welcome, hospitality...they involve words, many words! But they are not only words. Love is a behavior. Justice is a behavior. If we do not act justice, if we do not do justice (as the prophet Micah said), then it does not happen. It does not happen only by speaking; it happens by doing.

Love does not happen only by speaking; it happens by creating. It happens by a mutual giving and receiving, an opening to one another, a dispelling of any sense of otherness. Love is the pursuit of dispelling otherness such that we are changed, and a new creation forms.

In this passage from the Gospel, there is talk of a reward, of gaining or losing a reward. And what is a prophet's reward? What is the reward for the righteous? What is a reward anyway? Jesus did not seem to be one who often was talking about rewards.

Our vestry was discussing this Gospel passage the other night at our meeting, and there were some knowing chuckles about the "prophet's rewards" being rather unsavory; you really didn't *want* a prophet's reward.

But how can you not be a prophet, if you are called to be a prophet? How can you not speak truth, if you know the truth? How can you not be love, if you are called to love? How can you not do justice, if you seek justice? (You can't just *seek* justice; you have to *do* justice.)

¹ Quote and close paraphrase, "Matthew 10:40-42: Theological Perspective", *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Common Lectionary, Year A, Volume 3*, p. 192

And so one reward that I imagine is that our very being changes. Continuing about hospitality, Dr. Emilie Townes continues, “As we extend hospitality, we may well find that we experience new insights and may hear new stories of faith that redirect our perceptions.”² Isn’t that so awesome? Our imagination changes; our spiritual and biblical imagination...it changes.

Consider Abraham, who went up that mountain (in this passage from Genesis 22 that is so difficult). He goes up the mountain imagining one thing and comes down, after meeting with God, imagining entirely another thing, such that he becomes new, and the family of God, which was literally on the line on the top of that mountain, grows and flourishes.

We become new beings. This is the reward that we dare not lose!³

² Ibid.

³ Ibid., paraphrase