

Proper 21 A 2020

Ezekiel 18:1-4, 25-32

Psalm 25:1-8

Philippians 2:1-13

Matthew 21:23-32

Though it seems hard to remember
And even harder to believe,
And harder still to live into,
There is still a good world right here,
Right now,
Growing and changing
And turning, always turning
Towards another day,
A new season,
A fresh wind.
A world touched,
But not yet undone
Even by the disasters that overwhelm us.

A world of births and new beginnings,
A world where artists still make beauty
And invite conversation,
A world of green and growing things,
Of amazing discoveries,
Of falling in love
And recovering from illness or addiction,
A world of gracious leave-taking,
A world of examining the past
And inquiring into the human heart.

The crises of the present moment –
And there are so many crises, of such magnitude,
That it seems hard to make it through each day –
These crises are all too real.
Our call as people of faith is to confront them,
Our call is striving to overcome them.
And our call is holding out for hope,
Because without hope we will never win through
And take hold of the promise:
Freedom, justice, flourishing for all.
Compassion for all.

All this is true –

And there is more.

Beyond the struggle,
There is still this ultimate good –
The salvation of our souls.
The becoming of the selves we are born to be.

We are still on a journey of becoming –
As individuals,
In our closest relationships,
In our church community
And in our civic life.
As inhabitants of the world
And dwellers on the planet.

A journey of discovering ourselves
As beloved children of God.
A journey of discovering ourselves
As friends and followers of Jesus.

And so,
Tempting as it is
To read the lessons given to us for today
As condemnation of our adversaries
And vindication for ourselves and our friends,
I invite you to enter these scriptures
Through a different door.

We can't forget the crises in which we live,
But we can come unstuck from them,
and return to them later,
a changed people ready to foster life-giving change.

Because change –
The possibility of change,
The risk and loss of change,
The promise of change,
Is the promise of God.
Turn, and live,
Says the prophet to the people.
Change your minds,
And believe,
Is the invitation of Jesus.
Let the same mind be in you,
Says the apostle,
That was in Christ Jesus,

Who, though he was in the form of God,
Emptied and humbled himself.
And became obedient, even to the point of scandal and death.

This is one of the very earliest Christian hymns:
At the name of Jesus
Every knee shall bow.
In heaven and earth and under the earth
Every tongue shall confess
That Jesus Christ is Lord.

This is the way of Jesus –
Self-emptying, voluntary change,
Relinquishing everything of value.
And beyond that complete self-offering,
A new life, changed for him, and for us.

He opens for a us a new promise.
A new way of seeing the world,
And seeing the hidden holiness that makes the world
And keeps on loving it.
A new way of seeing ourselves.

When we can wrap our minds around it,
We can find ourselves awe-struck,
Humbled,
By the radical action of Jesus,
Who did not count equality with God
As something to be taken and used.
Instead, he humbled himself.

And that is the way he offers us.
The way of humility.

What can humility possibly offer us –
Ever,
But especially at a time like this?
How, when we feel the need to endure,
To resist,
To confront,
To be strong,
To prevail –
How can we find a gift in humility?

Can humility be an antidote to hopelessness?
Can humility give us strength and perseverance?

Can humility offer courage?

There is no magic here,
And no recipe.

But if humility was the way of Jesus,
And if cloaked with humility he moved through the world
And overcame the worst it had to offer,
Then perhaps we should have a look
At what humility has to offer.

All the old-fashioned virtues are mostly misunderstood,
each is often miscast as a trap
leading to a narrow and limiting life.
But the virtues are an invitation to greater freedom,
to joyful and effective engagement with the world.

Humility?
We often are led to confuse it with humiliation.
But humiliation is a trick of those who depend on power.
Humiliation is the ploy of the weak who pretend to be strong,
The game of those who fear scarcity
And think winning is the only thing.

Humility is a choice,
A stance of loving acceptance,
A clear-sighted acceptance of who we are
And how we live in a world
Where our imagination is limitless
And our existence is finite.

Humility doesn't know the answers,
But still cares about the outcome.

Humility still believes in the good,
But isn't always sure it's right.

Humility trusts in the power of love,
And knows it cannot yet love everyone.

Humility leaves the ultimate resolution
To the one who is beyond us
And more than us.
Humility lets God be at work in the salvation of the world –
In ways that we could never imagine.

Humility is willing to change its mind.
To let its mind be shaped and transformed
Into the image and likeness of the humble one –
The Jesus who posed questions and told stories
And was good news.

It would be easy to hear today's gospel –
A moment from the life of Jesus,
And the parable he told in response to that moment –
As a fable for our times,
Where so many are less concerned with right and wrong
And think only about expediency.
Where some are so totally cynical
That they weigh every question
As a potential trap,
Or an opportunity to gain points for their side,
Rather than a chance for discovery and change.

But what if we could step back from this moment,
See ourselves
Not as beleaguered warriors for justice and truth
Or hapless victims of a looming crisis
But as, now and always,
Friends and followers of Jesus,
Who humbled himself?

Jesus came into a world
In which some people were sure they were right,
And others were always told they were wrong.
He walked easily among them all,
Inviting,
Questioning,
And calling to account.
To those who were sure they were right,
He asked hard questions.
To those who were told they were wrong,
He offered an invitation.
Turn, and live.
Come in and sit down at my table.
This party is for the humble.

Everyone in Jesus' time was hoping for a change.
Some thought change would come
By keeping things the same.
Some thought change would come with a big shake up.
Everyone was thinking

That change would come through power,
Through getting power and using it.

Jesus came and offered humility.
And it was humility that changed the world.

Humility is slow, and silent,
And often can't be seen.
It works from the inside out.

It is the agent of real change,
But not of quick and easy change.
What kind of change do we want?

Change belongs to no one, and to everyone.

What do you think?
There were two people.
God said to one,
Would you like to turn, and live?
And that person said, no,
I will not.
But later,
That person changed,
And said yes.
To the other, God said,
Turn, and live,
And that person said yes,
But later said,
Why should I turn around?
Change is hard, and humbling.
I might lose something precious to me
And I have no idea what I would gain.
But change came anyway,
Unexpected, uninvited change.

Change is beyond our power to choose,
And yet,
We can choose
To be God's partners in change.

This present moment will change us.
It will change us in ways we cannot see,
And ways we fear.
And, God willing, the coming change offers promise.
We cannot know,

And still we work, and hope.
That's humility.
That's the way of Jesus,
Who gave up knowing and controlling,
And still cared about the outcome.
He gave his life to the unknown future,
Trusting that because God was in it,
It would be good.
And that changed the world.

Change belongs to God,
And God offers it to us,
A terrifying gift,
A life-giving promise.
If we accept,
We can turn, and live.