

“In the Mess” – Andy Wing, 5.17.09

In my second year of seminary, I went with a class to Jamaica for a month. We visited several places while we were there, but one visit we made in Jamaica was particularly tough. That visit was a visit to the children’s home at Missionaries of the Poor. Missionaries of the Poor is a group of four houses in which mentally and physically handicapped people, who have been abandoned by their families live, and are taken care of by 19-25 year-old Jesuit monks who had come to Jamaica from the Philippines. But, this visit was powerful to me and it changed me for the better. Through it, you could say God turned on a light-bulb in my heart!

It was particularly tough because the conditions felt dirty, and crowded. The children (infant to twelve years old) were packed in close together; some were throwing up, some crying. It seemed overwhelming to me. I wanted to do something, not just stand there and watch like I was a tourist. While a volunteer walked us from bed to bed and told us about the Missionaries of the poor, wanting to feel a part of it all, I touched the children. But my feeling of unease did not leave. These children were much older than ones I am used to seeing drool and cry. One nurse was cleaning a child’s bed. She asked me to hold him. I said I would like to hold him. He was so small that I was surprised he could possibly be 12 years old. I felt pity as I saw that his legs were permanently bowed and he was very skinny, maybe weighing no more than a healthy three year old. When he was an infant, his mother had not realized how serious his fever was. I felt pity for him but I felt strange and out of place at the same time. I had not been around children who looked like this before. The boy had just been changed, but was drooling and had a runny nose. I didn’t really want to get the drool and stuff all over me,

so I took him and held him under his arms and supported him with my forearms. I looked around and saw no towels. If I put his face on my shoulder, my shirt would be a mess. A mess, and I had only been there for 10 minutes. But I thought about how I had seen the monks on their knees cleaning floors and changing the diapers of very big boys (big enough to be teenagers) and I thought, they are not just a mess, but they are in the mess. I moved the boy into my chest, supported his head on my shoulder, and hugged him tight. I wanted to be in the mess too.

I discovered something about myself right then. I discovered that only when I held the children close and got dirty too, could I become any help to them; could I really feel the tangible love that could be experienced.

My view of the place started to change at that moment. When I could feel the boy's warm skin on mine, the reality that the place was crowded and smelly didn't bother me. I continued to look around and thought this is what must keep these Philipino monks, who take care of these children, going. In my heart, I remembered this scripture that we have read today.

Christ Jesus, who though he was in the form of God

did not regard equality with God

as something to be exploited,

but emptied himself,

taking the form of a slave,

being born in human likeness.

And being found in human form,

He humbled himself

And became obedient to the point of death-

Even death on a cross.

I think this passage in Philippians is saying that Jesus came to be in the mess. We know that God is not far away from us, feeling sorry for us, but right here with us.

On the one hand it seems Jesus is so completely different from us. He is God with all the status and privilege that goes along with being God. But, on the other Jesus chooses to be the same as us. Jesus allowed human beings to treat him as if he didn't have that honor that goes along with being God. It says "though he was in the form of God, he did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness...he humbled himself."

Jesus gave up all that status, gave up honor and worship...to be with us, to be unrecognized. "He humbled himself...to the point of death...even" the shameful "death on a cross." Jesus chose the only way he could be united with us...that is to come to us as one of us.

And though he humbled himself when he was with us, now Jesus is "highly exalted...the name above every name...our Lord." We always have a place with God because of Jesus. Jesus stands with us always in solidarity. Jesus is in the mess of our lives, going along with us. He will never leave us. And it is our call to let that sink in...how much Jesus loves us and respond in gratitude doing what grateful hearts full of love do. We are to have humility in the face of Christ's humility. We are to trust that there is solidarity in our relationship with God and then look out, reach out to those whom we see and seek to build them up...to have relationship with them.

I realized a lot about ministry from holding that child. You don't have time to feel sorry for the children and you don't have the opportunity to forget they are there when you are dirty with them. You can't help but pay attention and only then can you can really love them.

Our life of faith compels us to be involved in the flourishing of each other. We should know what Desmond Tutu says, **“My humanity is caught up in your humanity, and when your humanity is enhanced—whether I like it or not—mine is enhanced as well. Likewise, when you are dehumanized, inexorably, I am dehumanized as well.”** This what we are called to do, whatever ministry we find ourselves in, whatever mess we find ourselves in the middle of, and ministry and mess are interchangeable, we are called to be in the mess.

What I experienced in my few minutes with that boy tells me this. What I have experienced throughout my life of being loved with such compassion from God, from Jesus tells me this! We can only love this deeply when we are in the mess of it all when we stand in solidarity with the lowly of the world...those who cannot take care of themselves.

As the church gathered here, we are reminded that our identity is in Christ. If we are in Christ, then we are called to be in the mess with the people around us. We are called to be people who humble themselves and do whatever it takes to serve Christ and each other. Serve each other because you are in Christ. In serving each other, you will glorify Christ. In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit forever and ever. Amen.

Appendix

A good quote

“My humanity is caught up in your humanity, and when your humanity is enhanced—whether I like it or not—mine is enhanced as well. Likewise, when you are dehumanized, inexorably, I am dehumanized as well...Anything that eroded this central good is inimical to all, and nothing is more destructive than resentment and anger and revenge.” To forgive is a release. (Bishop Desmond Tutu)

When Paul wrote these verses in his letter to the Philippians, he was addressing the problem of selfishness in the Philippian church. Philippian society at this time was based on shame and honor. The rich in society would shame the poor inviting them to dinner, but having them sit in lower banquet rooms and eat low quality food that one should really offer to an animal. Meanwhile, the rich would eat high quality food and sit up above these poor nobodies of society. And to Paul’s astonishment and ours, the Christians were doing some of the same things. The rich would eat up all the good food before worship services, the poor nobody Christians would get the low-quality garbage.

And then, amazingly the rich would think that everybody could have church after the meal and celebrate communion, the Lord's supper. To this, Paul says No, sir! No maam!

The first point Paul makes is that to God, and to Christ we, the Philippians and us today....We were all nobodies once. Paul, in all of his letters makes this clear, with Jesus Christ, we are all somebodies. When Paul asks the question is there any encouragement in Christ, any consolation in his love, any sharing in the spirit, any compassion and sympathy?those questions are rhetorical. And the answer is of course YES! The Philippians had known it before... how rich or poor, we have no real place in the world except that Christ has come and put his arm out to rescue us, and give us a place. They had known it before, but they had forgotten it. The Philippians, with their mistreatment of each other, had forgotten that it is in Christ that we have a place in God's heart. They had forgotten.

And, what do we do when people forget something important? We remind them about events in the past. We give them a story from their past.

Or we give them a song. We sing Jesus Loves Me and we remember we all remember the times in our lives when that has meant something strong.

Paul gives them a song that was familiar to them all. That is the verses we were reading today. Paul gives them a song to remind them why they should not be selfish- preferring rich over poor. They should not because be selfish because Jesus wasn't selfish. Jesus gave himself for them.

The song goes:

Christ Jesus, who though he was in the form of God
did not regard equality with God

as something to be exploited,
but emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave,
being born in human likeness.
And being found in human form,
He humbled himself
And became obedient to the point of death-
Even death on a cross.
Therefore God highly exalted him
And gave him the name
That is above every name
So that at the name of Jesus
Every knee should bend,
In heaven and on earth and under the earth,
And every tongue should confess
that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.

We are reminded of our place in the world as Christ's followers. We belong to God. We should act like we belong to God. Another way we are reminded of the importance of our position in Christ is through the personal experience of our lives.