

Rev. Nancy Wakely - October 11th, 2015

There are a more than a few gospel readings that make people uncomfortable and today's reading is one of those.

As a child, I was very literal about what was being said and so was my childhood church. One reading I remember is from Ephesians and it said that we should make melody in our hearts. Therefore instrumental music was banned in worship service, weddings or funerals. It was just one way to take words that were so simple in their beauty and use them to create separation.

As a young adult, when I opened myself up to the idea that maybe this God thing is mysterious rather than always literal, I could still see in that reading from Ephesians the broader meaning and appreciate it.

Paul's notion that women were to remain silent in church and then go home and ask their husbands what they had been taught was obviously something I let go of quickly. The lesson learned was that the customs in the time that Paul was writing were not the customs of this day and time. That women are no longer possessions to be controlled but human beings with voices and ministries that were just as important as the voices and ministries of men.

In the gospel reading today, if we take it into our hearts in the literal sense, people who have a lot of money are supposed to give it away to the poor and become poor themselves or they can't walk through the narrow door.

The phrase "narrow door" means many different things to different people. For some it brings to mind a narrowness of mind...a sticking to the literal word and taking what they perceive to be the hard path...the path that they believe is the only right path because it's "in the book".

To me, that is the wide and comforting door where everything is black and white and wrapped in a neat package of certainty. To enter the narrow door, I believe we have to squeeze ourselves down. We have to make ourselves small...our egos small. And to do that, we sometimes have to leave behind the burdens of our long held beliefs, our rigidity, our literalness about every single word written close 2000 years ago and then give up those burdens and step through that narrow door. What I think we will find is not some sort of reward for following rules on the other side of the door. We will find the beauty of those words, the many metaphors hidden in those words and teachings, and we will find Jesus and the spirit of his teachings.

When Tom and I started attending the Episcopal church over 30 years ago, I had to squeeze myself down and let go of the burdens of my childhood church so I would be free to explore the mystery and try to figure out day by day what God's hope is for us and try to walk through that narrow door into the kingdom here and now.

The current issue that is in the face of the life and ministry of Jesus is one of the scriptures that people seem to take so seriously. An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. And so, many walk through that wide door of certainty where everything is black and white and focus solely on punishment. As a result, families are being torn apart, mothers have to rely on relatives to care for their children, fathers are locked up and forever lose the chance to have a relationship with their children, and children continue to suffer and become orphans because by george, these people need to be punished. That's the easy fix. That's the wide door, the door that we can breeze through so we don't have to think about why drug courts, and mental health facilities, and rehab programs are being underfunded. Focus on family?! We care about Oklahoma families?! I don't think so.

How about “the poor we will always have with us”? Yep, and so we attempt to punish them and legislate or pass ordinances against people begging on street corners because, we say, it is dangerous for them to stand on medians. And panhandle. It may be closer to the truth just to come out and say they make us uncomfortable and ashamed. Yet, as someone pointed out, there will be a new trolley system in Oklahoma City so that people who can afford to ride the trolley...you guessed it...can stand on those same dangerous medians and climb aboard.

It is hard to focus on real problems, to go beyond our comfort zones, to speak truth to power, and to let go of the burden and ease of walking through that wide door of certainty.

I listen to all the talking heads on television and wonder what in the world people are thinking. Someone said, “Well, I know he or she said that but you don't really know their hearts”.

Yet, it was just a few weeks ago in our readings that Jesus was scolding people for worrying about purity laws and condemning others for what they ate. He said, “It is not what goes in to your mouth but what comes out of your mouth that defiles you”. What comes out of your mouth is a reflection of what is in your heart.

One thing I believe is that we have to look with eyes of wonder upon the mystery of God, the mystery of his word, and the message of Jesus. We cannot believe that we can know for certain the mind of God. As others have said, holy scripture is still being written and that there is no end to God's voice in human affairs. If we hold to certainty, we will carry around that burden and we will never take seriously the story about the people that Jesus loved and ministered to.

Another preacher said that it is not enough to eat and drink with the Lord in the safety of this community. We have been invited to the big and sometimes messy banquet that is called “life”. When we leave this building, we more leave God than God leaves us. We must carry what we've learned inside these walls into the world and find God wherever he shows up.

True religion, is lived religion—and to “live it” we must do— we must live and laugh and cry with each other and with strangers. We must let the life of Jesus inform what we say out loud because our words reflect who we are in our hearts. We are called to look into every face, every event, and every life issue—the big and the small, the hope for and the feared, the bad and good—and see God's presence. If we carry the burden of our egos and our certainty with us, we will miss the narrow door that leads us to God's mysterious love, his forgiveness, and his grace. We are all invited to walk through that door and on to a path that leads to Jerusalem, through a garden, past the cross and on to the empty tomb. It is a life in which we are called to love him in his absence, by loving his presence in others. Just that and nothing more—but certainly nothing less. Amen.