

Sixth Sunday after the Epiphany (A)

February 16, 2014

Haven Lutheran Church Hagerstown, MD

Readings: Deuteronomy 30: 15-20; Psalm 119: 1-8; 1 Corinthians 3: 1-9; Matthew 5: 20-30

Grace and peace to you from God — Father, Son, Holy Spirit. Amen

Pastor Craig Barnes tells a powerful and true story from his family life. His father was a pastor and at the time of these events, he was serving a very tough part of town. Most of his parishioners were living desperate lives. Many were addicted to drugs. Late one night the Barnes family received a phone call from an eleven year old boy in the congregation named Roger. He said he couldn't wake up his parents. Barnes' father knew immediately what that meant and rushed to the projects to find that Roger's parents had died of a heroin overdose. He called the police, who called the coroner. And Roger watched as they zipped his parents in body bags and carried them away.

There weren't any other relatives to care for Roger. Barnes' father told the police he would take care of Roger for the night. Somewhere along the way home Barnes's dad decided to adopt Roger. Those were the days before cell phones, and later in life Barnes' wondered how his mom figured into that decision. But when Barnes' dad and Roger got home that evening, he and his brother were awoken and told, "This is Roger, he will be your brother from now on." Even then Barnes was amazed by the sheer grace of his father's declaration ---Roger was now his joint heir, fully part of the Barnes' family. But it was a grace that was about to lead to big changes in the life of a frightened, angry boy named Roger.

Barnes describes his parents as Pietist of the first order. They believed it was through Christ they gained salvation but they also believed your actions were of the greatest importance to the expression of your faith. As a kid, Barnes would say his parents never met a rule they didn't like. Roger, by contrast, raised by drug addicts, had never met a rule. For years the phrase Barnes most heard in his home was, "No, No.

Roger, we don't do that here." Most of the lessons were taught by his mother, who was pretty much the Holy Spirit figure in their home. And she taught many of her lessons at the table where the family shared meals. Over and over he heard her say, "No, no, Roger, you don't have to fight, or scream, or cry to get what you want. We don't do that here. "No, no, don't grab for the food. We don't do that." "No, no, we don't say those words in this house."

Now, did Roger have to learn any of those lessons to become a part of the Barnes family? No, he was made a part of the family, a joint heir, by the grace of Barnes parents. But did he have to make changes *because* he was in the family? Absolutely.

Ever so slowly, Roger changed. Eventually he no longer acted out of fear and started to act out of who he was — the beloved child of God and a son of the Barnes family. Roger changed not just because of the rules, but because of the love that was always behind them.¹

That is the message in today's readings. Jesus words in today's gospel may be as tough for us to hear as it was for Roger to hear the lessons at the Barnes' dinner table. Jesus is teaching us how to be the beloved children of God, heirs of the Kingdom of God that we are. In God's household there's more than the letter of the law against murder, adultery, using God's name in vain. Here around God's Word and Meal, we fearful, despondent, angry and defiant children hear Jesus tell us again and again the way to act in the Kingdom of God household:

- "No, no, Linda, we don't do that here... we don't let our anger lead us to say terrible, hateful things. Relationships are important. We treat others with respect.
- "“No, no, Barry, we don't look or treat others like they are mere objects to satisfy our physical needs.”
- "No, no, Sherry, we don't treat people as disposable and we make sure the most vulnerable are provided for.
- "No, no, George, we speak and act truthfully so we don't need to make oaths at

all.”²

It's not that Jesus has upped the ante for being a member of the God's family. Like Roger in the story, our membership in family – the Lord's eternal family — is by the grace of God, not our actions. But we are not to be unchanged by that grace. We're to learn from it. We're not to remain the same. Through Jesus we learn the depth and fullness of God's ways AND the love that is behind those rules of the Lord's household. Followers of Jesus trust the love of God enough to obey the Lord's commands for our actions, relationships and attitudes — knowing what is asked is for the our good and the good of creation. And ever so slowly we are changed. We find we aren't burdened by living God's way. We're living differently and with different priorities and with greater meaning, compassion and freedom.

When Roger was twenty years old, he was sent to Vietnam and was killed in an act of heroism, sacrificing his life for others. When his family heard of his death, it was a dark day in their home. Barnes remember's his mother's tears most of all. He remembers her pushing back the tears to say, “A hero? How did that angry, frightened kid ever turn out to be a hero?” Barnes writes, “I knew how [he became that selfless hero]. It was because of the table lessons. And because of his choice to accept my parents love and be their son.”³

How about you and I? What do we choose? We can be a member of Christ's family in name alone, I suppose, and never fully let God's love touch us. Or we can choose life. Accept the fullness of God's love and it's power to change us. We can choose to be teach-able sons and daughters of the Kingdom in which we have been adopted and let Jesus teach us how to act, teach us how to be more like our heavenly Father. “I have set before you life and death.... Choose life... loving the LORD your God, obeying the Lord and holding fast to your LORD.” The rules and the love behind

them are for the good of us and the world and they both can change us for the better and for a better world. What do we choose? As challenging as it may be, choose God. Choose life.

Linda M Alessandri 2/15/14

ENDNOTES

1. M. Craig Barnes, "Supper with the Trinity" copyright 2004 by Shadyside Presbyterian Church
2. Adapted from David Lose's "The Relational God" posted on February 11, 2014 on www.workingpreachers.org
- 3.M. Craig Barnes, "Supper with the Trinity"