

“Johnny Come Lately” 10/24/21
(Jeremiah 31:7-9; Job 42; Mark 10:46-52) Rev. J Koyama

The Good Old Days

Back when I was in my first call in a church on the island of Kauai in Hawaii, I did some home visits to a member in his 90’s. He was a beloved member of the congregation and I particularly enjoyed talking to him, because he had lived there all his life and been through all the changes. And I, not being native to the area, wanted to understand the spirit of the island and its history.

Like many elderly people, his long-term memory was better than his short-term memory. And when I asked him about the old days, his eyes would glaze over with contentment and he would describe the original landscape of his home turf down in “Nawiliwili”, now unrecognizeably changed by commercial development. He talked about good fishing spots and about swimming in the ocean. And listening to him was like listening to Adam describing his days in the garden of Eden.

But when his mind returned to the current reality, his pleasure vanished. He took a dim view of many of the changes and the influx of new people from other places. He would look at me and say, “I’m ready to go, now. All my friends are gone.”

I felt a lot of sympathy for him, even though, on some level, I knew that I was one of those new people, coming from somewhere else. And I knew that there was some irony in the fact that his overlooking my newness, had to do with our common Japanese ancestry. He was born out of a wave of Japanese immigration to Hawaii in the late 1800's, that once represented over 40 percent of the population, but has dropped to about 18 percent today. I had grown up everywhere but Hawaii and only recently appeared. The only thing we really had in common was our Japanese names and a similar shade of skin.

Job

One reason I thought of him this week is because there is something about the ending of the Book of Job, that we talked about last Sunday, that troubles me. And I think that, like many other details in the book, it is troubling by design.

As you may remember, Job was God's example of a man of unshakeable faith, but also someone who enjoyed great success in life and had everything he could want. And God agreed with Satan to test his faith by taking away all he had; to see whether his faith was truly

unshakeable or whether Job's was devoted because of the many blessings his faith has brought him.

What bothers me has to do with the happy ending, that comes after God has spoken to Job and Job has finally accepted that God will not give him the answers he seeks. After taking everything away from Job, God restores to him twice what he originally had. And after a period of mourning, Job appears to be content with this. Really it's his contentment that I find troubling, because he doesn't get back the same wife or kids. And my question is: How can anything make up for the loss of his original family?

“Replacement”

I don't see people as interchangeable or replaceable, as though my heart could just transfer from one person to another without missing more than a beat. The individuals with whom I have shared my life are so much a part of why I feel blessed. Each is unique and unrepeatable and has shaped my own life into an experience of blessing that is unique and unrepeatable. And so, when they are taken from me, it leaves a permanent hole in my heart. As time passes, it grows harder for me to imagine being able to embrace a new life, populated with new faces, as Job did.

I guess this is part of the reason I felt sympathy for my Kauaian friend. The world has changed, and there is much worth rejoicing and celebrating in it. But the people are not the same people and it is all different now. And somehow, it seems to me that he should be forgiven if, at some point in this ever changing world, his ability to embrace the new simply wore out and his heart was once and for all given over to the past.

And yet, even though he has every reason to lose faith, Job goes along with the new life and the new faces that God bestows on him, and his new life turns out to be blessed twice over.

I think that all of this helps us to think about “replacement theory,” which is one of the interpretations of history that is in vogue today on the right and being warned against on the left. The idea is that immigrants are replacing and sidelining the previous occupants and bit by bit making this country into a unrecognizable, and less desirable place.

I know that my good friend saw the story of his own life partially in these terms. He was a kind and gentle soul. But he laid blame for the changes that had taken away his world on successive waves of

immigration, mostly on white people from the mainland US and Philipinos from Asia. And so there was also a kind of racial tinge to his sense of loss.

I think that there must be a kind of natural reaction in which each immigrant group is happy to establish itself, but then views the next wave coming in from somewhere else as a threat and a convenient scapegoat.

It's as though each successive wave wants to close the door on the one that follows. And along with this goes a sort of blindness to the fact that "our" group are not the original inhabitants, but were once on the outside looking in. And that our appearance also disrupted the order that existed before we showed up.

The Gospel Reading

One of the things that becomes clear to anyone who pays close attention to the life of Jesus, is that scapegoating and shutting out the newcomer is not consistent with the message of the Gospel. There is an openness to bringing new people into the community of faith from without that is quite breathtaking. And this openness is continuous with one of the dominant Old Testament themes of extending hospitality to strangers and to foreigners.

The genealogical records in the New Testament highlight that foreigners and outcasts are among the ancestors that represent the inner core of the culture that sustains God's people. And the positive valuation of outsiders is sprinkled throughout. This morning's Gospel reading also emphasizes a positive outlook on outsiders or, in this case, a "Johnny come lately" of sorts, a blind beggar by the roadside.

Scripture

Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem and his procession comes upon this man as they are making their way out of Jericho. Some commentaries note that this in itself is significant. Jericho is an Israelite stronghold, yet it is not inside, but outside of the city walls that the encounter with the blind beggar Bartimaeus takes place.

As they approach him, the recent conversations between Jesus and his disciples must be on fresh on all their minds. Jesus has been repeating to them his message about the cross that must be carried and the suffering and death that must first be endured. But the disciples responses repeatedly show that they are unable to grasp this. They continue to view their journey with him as an opportunity for self-advancement.

But now somewhat late in the game, this blind beggar Bartimaeus, who has not been part of the entourage, calls out to Jesus. “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me.” Those around him sternly order him to be quiet. They are keenly aware that they are under Roman occupation and know that any appearance of an opposition movement based on the monarchy of King David will be violently crushed.

To the rest of the crowd Bartimaeus is unremarkable other than that he has a big mouth that could get them all in trouble. But Jesus must hear something in his voice that indicates a readiness to follow; that he is like ripe fruit that is about to drop. And so he stops and calls him forth. Bartimaeus, for his part, throws aside his cloak, indicating that he comes without concealment, before Jesus. Jesus asks him what he wants. He asks Jesus that he might see again. Jesus restores his sight to him and he takes his place following Jesus on the road. It happens just like that.

You would think that Bartimaeus would have to go through an extensive and rigorous course to get to where the other slow learning disciples are, but he gets it, just like that.

A Positive Vision of Inclusion

The story paints a very positive picture of inclusion that is, I think, very much needed today. So much of the way we think of change and the appearance of new faces today is full of trepidation, and triggers more of a sense of loss and sorrow for what once was, than an excited vision for the future. When something new appears, we very often think “Here comes trouble.” Bartimaeus is going to rock the boat and we are going to have problems.

But the Gospels, in contrast to this, tends to portray new faces, not as a sign of trouble, but as a source of optimism and blessing. Their inclusion is seen as an essential part of the legacy that has shaped our core and that ensures the future. New additions are properly viewed as cause for elation both for the one coming in and for the insider alike.

That optimism is reflected in one of our denominational slogans, “ No matter who you are, or where you are on life’s journey, you are welcome here.” That is a very bold, even breathtaking, statement of hospitality and inclusion. And it expresses a vision, which we receive when, like Bartimaeus, our eyes are opened by Jesus and which is reflected back to us from over 2500 years ago in this morning’s reading from Jeremiah:

See, I am going to bring them from the land of the north, and gather them from the farthest parts of the earth, among them the blind and the lame, those with child and those in labor, together; a great company, they shall return here. With weeping they shall come, and with consolations I will lead them back, I will let them walk by brooks of water, in a straight path in which they shall not stumble; for I have become a father to Israel.

So let us, with Bartimaeus, throw aside the “cloak of despair” that sees change as loss. Let us take the time to grieve with Job over all that has been lost. But then, let us stand like he did, courageously and exposed before God, with hearts open to receive the doubled blessing and the vision which God will bestow upon us through the new faces and new configurations that are introduced into our lives.