

The “Upside Down” Gospel

One of the things you may have noticed about the teachings of Jesus is that he likes to take our usual approach to a situation and reverse it or turn it on its head. He does this when he is talking about the rich and the poor, about outsiders and insiders and also about children and grown ups. And he does this to defy our expectations and make us reconsider things we take for granted.

Samuel

When it comes to children and grown ups, Jesus would have been familiar with older Bible stories that already turn our expectations upside down, like our reading from First Samuel. In that story, God doesn't come to the old priest Eli, as we might expect. Instead God comes to the young boy Samuel in the night and makes him the chosen messenger for what is to come. And the message God gives Samuel to deliver is a harsh condemnation of Eli's performance. And it is interesting and to Eli's credit, that he does not dismiss, but takes seriously the words God has given to this little boy.

Much later, when Samuel himself has grown old, God commands him to select a new King from among the sons of Jesse. And here again our

expectations are reversed. Samuel walks down the line of Jesse's sons from oldest to youngest without success. And it is only when Jesse's youngest son David, who was not even considered worth putting in the line-up, is brought before him, that he discovers the one who is to be anointed.

It is God who prompts Samuel to make the surprise choice of choosing the young David. But my guess is that it was not a surprise to Samuel himself, because he would have remembered how God had come to him and chosen him in his own youth.

So, we also should not be surprised, when, in this morning's Gospel, Jesus overrides the grumblings of his disciples who are upset that he is wasting his time laying hands on the children who have been brought to him. Clearly they feel that none of these children have either the maturity or the status to warrant receiving so much attention from a grown up as important as Jesus.

It could be that Jesus, like Samuel, was in part looking back on his own childhood and remembering how he himself had received wisdom from God at so young an age. He would have remembered how he had spoken for three days with the elders in the temple and how they had been amazed at his understanding. He will have remembered that even

his own parents, Mary and Joseph, didn't recognize his significance, because it took them those three days to even figure out where he was.

These stories turn upside down one of the expectations that undergirds our traditional institutions. And that is, that the things that are most important to pass on, are the things that are passed from those who are older and supposedly wiser, to those who are younger and less experienced.

Not a One-Way Street

Actually, this was my understanding when I introduced the theme of the "Passing on of the Baton" in the way that I did. I do think that an emphasis on the "relay race of life" being run in the direction from elder to younger, is correct. It is correct because that is the direction in which life moves and because the future is theirs, not ours. And the young will need to be equipped with the best wisdom we can share, so that they too may avoid the many traps and pitfalls they are not yet fully aware of.

But it is also true that the love of God is not a one-way street (or a one directional race). Our God is a God of relationships. And relationships by definition, run in both directions. Someone who is in relationship always assumes that he or she will receive something of value by

listening attentively to the other. And this applies also to the hierarchies that govern our lives. In other words, parents who love their children listen to them, just as God listens to us.

Jesus himself, in response to the pleadings of a gentile woman, changed his approach and decided that everyone, not just the people of Israel, were deserving of his attention. And when Jesus changed his mind in response to her words, the door was opened to Christianity becoming a universal religion.

And so I think it is important that, as we think about the “Passing on of the Baton” that we take a page from Jesus and turn the relay race on its head and recognize that the saving word, is not just something we pass on to our children, but that it can also be something they pass on to us. And the same would be true for anyone whose gifts we are prone to dismiss.

Childhood Experience

When I look back on my own childhood, I do think that I was able to see some valuable truths that become harder to see as our minds grow more cluttered with grown up concerns and our capacity to see our own corruptions dims, as it did for the old priest Eli.

When I see my granddaughters Kailee and Riley, lining up their teddy bears and stuffed animals, hugging them and telling me each one's name and all about what each one likes, I am suddenly reminded of the precious love, so tender and fragile, that is the Gospel.

I also remember one time, in my own childhood in Thailand. This would have been in the mid 1960's, when I was 5 or 6 years old. We had our own car, which was something most locals didn't have. And once, when we were on a day long drive south to the beach for vacation, we stopped for a break.

As we were leaving, a beggar poked his finger in the window. I guess he thought I was a healthy looking kid and wanted to pull my cheek. But his finger went into my mouth. My Dad went ballistic and drove away furious. And I sat there in the back seat wondering.

I guess I understood that my Dad believed in being kind to people. But what I saw was a man acting out of anger toward a poor and probably well meaning beggar. I felt badly for that man and quietly never forgot that moment. As I grew in understanding, it occurred to me that while we had a car and were going on a family vacation, the poor beggar probably had nothing. It is a valuable memory and reminder to me of childhood innocence and adult insensitivity.

I'm not telling you this to be critical of my Dad. I consider him to be the single greatest influence on my life and his memory inspires me constantly. But it was a moment in which the tables were turned. It was a moment when God spoke to me, the child, and not to my Dad, the man.

My guess is that, if you think back to childhood, you will remember some moment of innocence, like this, when you witnessed the hypocrisy of the adults that towered over you. You were able to see a disconnect between their words and actions that felt somehow wrong; that they were avoiding being good under the cover of pretending to be good. You saw things that made an impression on you then, but that we brush aside more and more, the older we get.

My point again, is that it seems to me a mistake to assume that the "relay race of life" is only to be run in one direction, passing the baton from older to younger and that what the younger will receive from us is more beneficial to them, than what they might pass on to us.

But let me make this point with a more extreme example.

Why do we have wars with the kind of unforgiveable carnage and unspeakable suffering we are seeing in the Ukraine and now in Israel

and in the Gaza? Were they started by young people? You know the answer. They were started by people our age; people who are in power and control. but who cannot see themselves, because they live according to a one way view of communication.

These wars are always initiated and run by elders who stuff the batons with their own prejudices and faithless attitudes; so that the batons they pass on might as well be grenades that will blow up in the faces of their own children. It is the older generation that teaches the young how to discriminate and who to hate.

Why should young people today listen to the “wisdom” of an older generation that has consumed so much that is allowing our ecosystems to collapse, a generation that will leave them holding the bag with the national debt, a generation that is unwilling to elect younger people who are more capable of evolving to meet the needs of the future?

I don't think the answer lies in a rejection of either what is old or what is youthful. I think the answer lies in our willingness to hear a saving message, regardless of where it is coming from, and to take it seriously, even when it comes from the youngest or least among us

Jesus's habit of turning everything upside down forces us to face the question, "Where do I get my truth from?" And our answer as faithful Christians is, firstly from Jesus himself. But then we must remember that whenever we speak of Jesus, we are not simply talking about a man who lived 2000 years ago.

We are also talking about a Universal Spirit of love that can be present in any person at any time, and can speak to us from any mouth or gift us through any pair of hands he chooses. As Jesus put it, when asked by Nicodemus, "the wind blows wherever it pleases, you hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going!"

And so, while I do think that, although the church exists to pass on what is best in the faith that has been handed down to us, Jesus leaves us with a caution, not to become too fixed on the usual direction in which the baton is passed. When someone speaks or acts in what we recognize to be the Spirit of Christ, even if it is a couple of little girls playing with stuffed animals, we are to sit up and take notice and give thanks, because through them, God has saved us for another day.

