

Collin

The Seventh Sunday after Pentecost
The Rev. Dr. J. Stewart Hardy

July 23, 2006
Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

Jeremiah 23:1-6; Psalm 23
Ephesians 2:11-22; Mark 6:30-34, 53-56

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

“Mr. Hardy, I want you to take Collin into your custody, and in six months time bring him back here before me, report to me his progress, and I shall make a final determination on how we’re to deal with him.”

Those words were spoken by a magistrate in the children’s court in New Zealand, when, in another life, I was second in command of a detention center for juveniles — a place in the city called The Boys Home. Not because that was because some sort of euphemism, but that’s exactly what we tried to make it — a home for boys. If you like, a place within the world, but without the world as well, that they might have a chance to be remade and renewed and regenerated.

Which is exactly what Christ is wanting to do with the disciples. They had just returned from their first mission and ministry. They’ve been excited to tell him everything that went on and he can see the tiredness and the strain in their faces. He invites them to something he invites his followers to do regularly — come aside, not to escape — to come aside, to rest and be rejuvenated in his presence in a place where they can experience refreshment and renewal before they continue with their ministry. Which is exactly why we’re here this morning. Is it not?

Oh, I know you might think you made some decisions about coming here, but in actual fact the decisions you made were a response to an invitation from the Holy Spirit that you would come into Christ’s presence here in this place this morning. Come out of the world into this small place, this quiet place. Not a deserted place, but a place where you are in the real presence of the Divine. Where you can rest and be renewed and refreshed and sent from this place with your mission and ministry for Christ into a world that so desperately needs healing.

Collin desperately needed healing. He had a family that hadn’t really cared for him or given him any examples of how he might live. He was easily persuaded by anyone who came around, to do whatever they thought he should do. And it wasn’t surprising that he finished up committing crimes. And so, he came to us — to the home. Not to escape the world, but to be reformed, to be reshaped, to be remade and equipped to meet the world.

It required a lot of work on his part. Boys coming into our institution were initially imprisoned, if you will, in cells, until we had an idea of how they responded and reacted. And gradually in their time with us they were able to promote themselves as they demonstrated trust and responsibility, until they reached the point where being given an allowance on a Saturday evening, they left the institution around 3:00 p.m., had a curfew of midnight, and they could go out on the town, spend their pocket money wherever and however they pleased, as long as they maintained the trust placed in them.

To act as responsible and model citizens.

We also arranged to have the boys like Collin enrolled in the various secondary schools, the various high schools in the city. A high school that would suit them best and help them develop their learning. On Sundays we escorted the protestant boys to a nearby protestant church, and the Roman Catholic boys to a nearby Roman Catholic church. Had there been Jewish or Muslim boys there, I'm sure we would have arranged to escort them to their places of worship on their days of worship.

At the end of the day we had an assembly supplied with endless cookies, and endless glasses of milk. At that time we discussed all the events of day. Who was feeling slighted, who had been wronged, what was unfair, which staff member had done what to whom. It was all settled that evening before anybody went to bed. Taking turns each night, one of the boys would lead us finally in an evening prayer of his own making. I would then make the rounds of all the boys' rooms and sit on the foot of their bed and talk to them as a parent might talk to a child or a son, about how life was going and where they were, and so on. And with those who wanted it, praying a bedtime prayer or saying a Hail, Mary, as I always did for Collin.

The disciples didn't leave the world either. The world, as it was, sort of went ahead of them. I mean, it's rather easy to pick where a boat's going when it's sailing on a lake. And it isn't at all hard to keep up with it, or beat it. And so, the people who knew that Jesus was there with his disciples, went ahead to where they figured it would come ashore, and there they would be in his presence.

Jesus could have been furious, couldn't he? After all, here they were. They were going to take just a short break, maybe half a day, have something to eat, put their feet up. And there were all those needy people out there waiting for them. But Jesus doesn't respond with anger. He responds with compassion and he sees their real need. A deep need for leadership. He talks about them being without shepherds. Sheep without shepherds, with no one who cares.

Is that where we are these days? Coming here this morning doesn't help us escape, and our faith is not escapism. We've come here into God's presence to hear what he has to say to us, so that we might be equipped out there the rest of this week. Look at the problems we face? How is terrorism to be solved? What are we to do with the latest news this morning that Syria threatens an invasion should Israel put land troops over the border in Lebanon?

You know, sometimes I think that part of our problem is that the sheep now think they're the shepherds. It happens politically all the time in our country. Everybody wants to run polls and figure out how they will be. There are trial balloons. They test the wind.

It's the same in church. People who figure their theological education and their scriptural understanding was complete when they left the 4th or 5th or 6th grade Sunday school class, or when they were confirmed. And in the meantime theology has moved light-years ahead. And the church, when it comes to new ways of ministry, and new ways of understanding scripture, has its hands tied for fear that the sheep will revolt. And our shepherds? Why our shepherds can't even agree. Our shepherds can't even go with the majority vote. But we're constantly bombarded with sheep who think they're shepherds.

Jesus understood this, and his immediate response, both to the disciples and to the needy crowd, is to teach them. Mark tells us many things. But if we read the whole Gospel, rather than just pick out this tiny piece, it

isn't hard to figure out what he taught. The basic theme Jesus maintains in Mark is simple. The Kingdom of God is at hand. Repent and believe in the Gospel. God has come to us in the form of one of us — Jesus of Nazareth — whose life serves to be the model of all Christian living. And then we're asked to repent, to change our ways. To turn and be his people. And to believe in what he says — that we are God's beloved. God's not here to beat us over the head. God's here to invite us into a new and fulfilled way of living. Jesus gave us a short-hand way of dealing with this. Simply put, we are to love God with all our heart and all our mind and with all our soul. And we're to love our neighbor as ourselves. The question is, do we really love God. Do we really love our neighbor as ourselves?

We struggled to work with Collin, bringing him out of a background where there was no discipline into a life where there was discipline and order; where there were expectations. Where trust was given and responsibility was expected. Collin responded, and grew, and changed and developed.

So, too, did the disciples. It wasn't until after the crucifixion, until after the resurrection, that they were able to put everything together and begin to understand it. And because of their efforts here we are today. To hear the same promise, and the same story, to be invited to live the same compassionate, loving, caring lives.

In a few moments we'll gather at the table. We'll received the body and blood of Christ. Note well how you receive them first — with your hands open and outstretched — submissive and obedient. Receiving him into hand and body and heart, so that we might go from this place living as his people, touching a deeply troubled, divided, and burdened world. And through that touch Christ will heal.

The majority of the boys who came to the boys home and graduated — although that is a strange term — were released from our care — the majority of them went on to establish sound lives. Some finished up with prison sentences. But not one of those boys left us happy to leave. Some of them we had to assist leaving when the time came. Collin went on to an apprenticeship with a painting outfit, married and had a child. Many years later I received just a tiny sort of crumpled note in the mail. It read simply this. "Mr. Hardy, thanks for all you've done for me. Collin."

May we today say to our Lord, thank you. Thank you for all you've done for us. Amen.

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