

Time after Pentecost
The Reverend Lee Berry

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Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

Job 19:23-27a; Psalm 17:1-9;
2 Thessalonians 2:1-5, 13-17; Luke 20:27-38

Good morning. Man, was it tempting to stay out there a little longer and just see what you did when nobody showed up! I can see where the pastors get a workout on Sunday morning around here. It is a great treat to be back at Trinity. It kind of feels like coming home for me. The members of your church family have been so much a part of my On Eagle's Wings family in ways that you probably don't even know. On Monday a whole bunch of Trinity folks were gathered in fellowship hall to pack our Advent reflection booklets which we send out to about 50,000 people around the United States; we couldn't do that without you. So the people of Trinity have become a very big part of my life and the life of On Eagle's Wings, and I thank you that you let me come. I know how all of you look forward to having Stu preach on Sunday mornings, so I appreciate that you allow me to come and be a part of your worship. Will you pray with me?

Father, may the words of my mouth and the mediations of our hearts be truly acceptable in your sight, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

I got a letter from a man named Richard who lives in a town called Arenzville, Illinois. I don't know Richard; I've never met him. I looked on the map, and I think it must be a very, very small farming community, because I couldn't Arenzville on the map, either. But Richard wrote to me about a devotion that I had written in one of the On Eagle's Wings Advent reflection booklets, and in that devotion I told the story about summer Bible school and how on one of the days the lesson for the summer Bible school was the amazing story of Pentecost in the Book of Acts; this incredible vision that Peter had of a world of peace and justice and understanding, a world in which all people would be united as brothers and sisters, and it didn't make any difference what color you were, what language you spoke, what culture you came from, whether you were a man or a woman, whether you were rich or poor, but that somehow all of God's people would be united as brothers and sisters. That day after the Bible school lesson, the children and the teachers and I went for a walk along the shore of a magnificent northern lake, and as we were walking along a little native girl named Mary went up to one of her teachers, tugged on the sleeve of her sweatshirt, and asked, "When will the world be like that?" When will the world be a place of peace, a place of understanding?

And so Richard wrote me this little note:

Dear Lee, You had some very encouraging words in your reflection. You were talking about Peter's vision of a new world of peace and understanding, a world in which all people would truly be united as brothers and sisters. This sounds good. But when will this happen? How? And where will this happen? I look forward to this happening a lot. Will you talk more about this and write me back?"

And at the bottom in big letters, he underlined PLEASE.

Mary wanted to know when the world was going to be like that. Richard wanted to know when the world would be like that. So do I. I want to know when the world is going to be a place of peace and justice. I am so tired of turning on the television set and seeing images of beautiful young lives from countries all over the world being lost in senseless wars. I am so tired of seeing the native young people from my part of the world, ending their lives with suicide because they are overwhelmed with hopelessness and despair. I am so tired of seeing the people of the world separated and divided by their color, or by their culture, or by their language, or by their religion, or by their wealth. When will the world be like that? I really want to know.

Something happened this past December that made me rethink some very powerful words of scripture. I was visiting churches in southern California and I was supposed to have lunch with a pastor friend of mine who was a pastor here in Pennsylvania; we were to meet at a restaurant in downtown San Diego (traffic in San Diego is absolutely insane). When I got down there I tried to find a parking place but I couldn't find one anywhere near the restaurant, so I parked many, many blocks away. As I was walking toward the restaurant, getting closer, I could see a commotion going on in front of the restaurant. A man was yelling at people. He had a box in front of him and was begging, yelling at the people who passed by. As I got closer I could see that the man didn't have any legs and was propelling himself around on a skateboard, wearing an old Army fatigue jacket. I thought to myself, maybe this would be a good time to cross over to the other side of the street; maybe this would be a good time to avoid all of the commotion and the abuse, and just kind of walk around it.

But I decided not to, so I kept walking and as I got up close to him I could see that he was wearing an old Army fatigue jacket; he had long stringy hair, and he didn't smell very good, and he was just yelling at everybody. So I reached in my wallet and took out some money, put it in the box and started to walk away. When I had gone two or three steps, I heard the man say, "Hey, you!" I turned around, and he said, "At least look at me. At least look at me and see that I am a human being."

As I read these incredible verses in the gospel of Matthew, I kept thinking about the man on the street in front of the restaurant, and it made me realize that Jesus doesn't just ask us to feed people. He doesn't just ask us to give clothing to those who have none. He doesn't just ask us to give something to drink to people who are thirsty. Or visit people who are sick or in prison. I think Jesus asks us to look at them. To look them right in the eye and to see them as people, as God's people. I think Jesus asks us to look at people and to love them the same way that we would love Him. Let me tell you about some people who have wandered through my life, and I'm sure there are countless people you can think of who have wandered through your life.

There is a young man named James Wedson. James is a Dogrib Indian whom I have known for most of his life. I remember when I first moved to the North twenty-five years ago I would go to James' little village and I'd see this happy little kid with boundless energy, just running around all the time with the biggest smile on his face. And it always amazed me that he could smile, because his mother and father had really bad problems with alcohol. James never had a place to sleep at night; he would just go from house to house, hoping that someone would open their door and allow him to sleep in their home. He had this incredible ability to create beauty with his hands; James was an amazing painter and he could capture the beauty of God's creation in ways

that I just could not imagine. And whenever I would meet James in the village, even from the first time, he would run up to me and say, "Hi Lee! It's me, James!" And now, even after twenty-five years, whenever I see James in his village, he still runs up to me and says, "Hi Lee! It's me, James!" And I finally said to him, "Hey James, I've known you for twenty-five years. Why is it that whenever I see you, you always run up and greet me the same way and say 'Hi Lee! It's me, James!'" And he looked at me and said, "Because I want you to really know me. I want you to know me as a person. I don't want you to just know my name, but I want you to know who I am."

There's a young girl named Lauren. Lauren is an Inuit girl, an Eskimo girl, and several years ago her parents moved to Yellow Knife to try to begin a brand new life. And like James' parents, Lauren's mother and father have problems with alcohol, so Lauren just kind of wanders the streets of Yellow Knife. Years ago, Lauren was in my wife Sarah's grade one class; she has kind of adopted us as her family and at least once a week Lauren stops by our house to just kind of check in. A couple of weeks ago, in fact just the day before I was getting ready to come down here, there was a knock on the door and I opened the door, and there was Lauren standing there and she was hold a birthday card, waving it in the air, and she said, "Look at the birthday card Mrs. Berry sent to me for my 15th birthday!" Then she asked, "Can I come in your house? And will you play happy birthday to me on the piano?" And I said, "Well sure, but aren't your mother and father going to have a birthday celebration for you tonight, Lauren?" And she said, "No. My mother and father are drinking right now. And they don't even know it's my birthday." She just wanted someone to care. She just wanted someone to be a part of her life.

A couple of years ago Sarah and I went to visit our son David in California for Christmas. It's really nice to have a son who lives where it's warm when you live in the Arctic. And on the Sunday after Christmas, Sarah and I decided we'd get up and go to the first church we could find, and it turned out that it was a Lutheran church. It was one of the most magnificent churches you could imagine, absolutely spectacular; the decoration and the design and the architecture of this church were absolutely amazing. When we pulled into the parking lot, it was filled with very expensive, beautiful cars, and getting out of all these beautiful cars were very beautiful people who were dressed impeccably. And when Sarah and I walked into the church and we saw the combination of beautiful people and beautiful church, it was almost overwhelming. And I think everybody was pretty surprised that morning when they found out that the pastor had decided to take that Sunday off and there was going to be a guest preacher that morning. He was a little, wee man, an Hispanic Lutheran pastor from the barrio, the slums, of Los Angeles, and he had come to be the guest preacher for that Sunday after Christmas. When he stood up, he looked so incredibly out of place with his tattered cassock and surplice, and with his very broken English he just didn't seem to fit in with all of these beautiful people in their beautiful church. And when he stood up in the pulpit that morning to begin his sermon, you could hardly see him; he was just five foot nothing and when he stood in the pulpit you could barely see his head above the lectern. But when he began his sermon that day he said something that I will never forget, or at least I hope I never forget it. He began by saying that the people, the poor people of his church and he had a gift that they wanted to give to the people of this beautiful church. And as soon as he said that you could see all the heads in the church start turning and looking around, wondering what in the world this poor little man and the poor people of his church could ever give to them, who had the money to buy anything they could ever want.

But he went on and said, “The gift that the poor people of my church and I have to give to you is that when you see us, you see Jesus.”

When you see us, you see Jesus. At least look at me.

Whatever you have done for the least of these who are members of my family, you have done for me.

When will the world be like that? When will it be a place of peace and justice and understanding? When will it be a place where you don't have to care about what color you are, or what language you speak, or what country you come from, but that somehow all of God's people will be united as brothers and sisters? When will that happen?

I think it starts to happen when people like us, just everyday people, deep, deep down in the very core of our being, have a sense of God's absolute and incredible love for us. I think it begins when people like us have a sense deep, deep down within us of God's absolute and unconditional forgiveness. When you and I begin to have a sense of how much we are loved and how unconditionally you and I are forgiven, then you and I can go out into our lives and in every person you meet, you will see Jesus. Amen.

Shall we pray? Loving God: We find it a whole lot easier to cross over to the other side of the street and avoid all of the commotion. Give us the courage to continue on, to see those people who are different than we are, to not just see them but to know them, and in seeing them that we might see you. Father, give each one of us a deep and abiding sense of how much you love us, and then teach us to love others. In Jesus' name, Amen.