

Sixteenth Sunday After Pentecost
September 24, 2006

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Emanuel Lutheran Church (ELCA), Dallas, Texas, USA

Scriptures: Jeremiah 11:18-20; Psalm 54; James 3:13-427-8a; Mark 9:30-37

The message from the texts for today revolve around a pretty basic aspect of Christian life, the understanding that it's not about getting ahead. It's not about being the head honcho. There is story after story, of the millionaire who finally figures out that all his riches don't bring him happiness. Happiness, true joy, comes when he, or she, decides to give away their time, energy, and money to help someone else, to help the poor, the sick, the lame.

The message of the Gospel text today is that Christian life really is about being a servant. It's about welcoming the little ones among us in Jesus' name. I get that. As a whole, we here at Emanuel get that. But it takes some wisdom, the kind James is talking about, to know exactly what that welcoming looks like. It's the day-to-day decisions that confound us.

The Food Pantry is a case in point. Several times in the previous few years we have puzzled over how best to minister to the homeless people who come to us. They get "non-kitchen" bags, because hungry is hungry. It doesn't matter if you are black, brown, or white, young or old, male or female. You still get hungry.

Once you start to get to know some of these folks, you figure out pretty quickly a couple of things. The first is that there are, in fact, a few folks who are homeless because they prefer the life of no responsibilities no commitments, and no bosses. But the vast majority of folks who are homeless have an addiction, or mental illness, or both. And the addiction has stolen every other resource these people had: a steady job, support of family or friends, their talents and intellect.

At some point along the way, most homeless folks have used anything, or anyone, to put together enough cash to buy another fix, another can of beer. In the process they lose their identity, nobody cares about them as an individual human being. They become just another person lumped into group labeled simply, "the homeless problem."

A journalism professor from UT did a study of homeless shelters in the Washington D.C, area. He posed as a homeless man for several days and went into a variety of the shelters in that city. No one, the whole time, asked him anything about himself or how he came to be homeless. Not even anyone at the shelters run by Christian organizations.

Well, back to the dilemma. The dilemma we have is that we are pretty clearly that we are not helping in the long run if we give the homeless food that they can then go and sell for a few bucks. But hungry is hungry. What does it mean to be their servants? What would a wisdom that is pure, peaceful, gentle, willing to yield, have us do. What does good fruit look like in this case?

Some say that if we stopped helping the homeless in our community, they would go away. I'm not sure that helps anything, or anyone. Least of all, the people who live wherever "away" is.

The thing I most respect about the members of Emanuel is that you truly do get that we are called to be servants. I don't see any of us heading down a path to quests for power or prestige. In fact, last Sunday, Will shared the comparison of church and fire. He said, "Mission is to church what burning is to fire." Mission just is what churches do. I got that part.

I struggle with you now as we ask ourselves again, "How should we be servants? How do we best serve our neighborhood; even as the neighborhood continues to change? What does God want us to do? What does submitting to God's will, or welcoming the child, look like in 2006.

In 1966, it was all a little clearer. Welcoming the child became the Emanuel Daycare Center. In those days, that by itself, made the news. It also drew protests of those who opposed such a ministry. But in 2006, there are plenty of daycare centers around. So we need to be asking ourselves, who are we being called to welcome now?

Are we being called to welcome the not-so-little child who doesn't have a safe place to be after school? Or are we being called to welcome the lost, lonely, homeless grown-up child? The far away from home looking for a better way of life children? The children having children children? The lost in the material world young adult children? The list we could make for God's children who need a warm welcome in Jesus' name is so long. It would be easy to get overwhelmed.

I don't pretend for a minute to have "the answer." I'm quite clear that we can't do everything –but – we can do something. The church house and Eriscon Hall are not going to sit empty six days a week because that simply is not who we are. We will need to pray, and listen, for direction to the something we can and should do.

And we probably should avoid thinking small. We might miss the bounty God had in mind. As one missionary to the Middle East, named Karen Watson, put it:

"Care more than some think is wise.

Risk more than some think is safe.

Dream more than some think is practical.

Expect more than some think is possible.

(we are) called not to comfort or success but to obedience....

There is no joy outside of knowing Jesus and serving him."

Which leads to one last thought: whatever we do – we do in Jesus' name. Whoever we welcome, we welcome in Jesus' name. We are servants of the King. We are working to bring about a little bit of the Kingdom of God, here at the corner of Peak and San Jacinto.

In the weeks and months ahead we will see lots of activity as our facilities receive a much-needed makeover. At the same time, I ask you to join me in prayer, prayer for discernment so that we might know what it is that God is calling us to now, that we might know how best to continue welcoming, and caring for some of God's children. I trust that, when the time comes, God will answer that prayer and we will know what to do next. Thanks be to God. Amen.