

Peace with Justice Sunday
June 29, 2008

The Syrup Can
Rev. Susan J. Morrison

Matthew 10:40-42

⁴⁰“Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me. ⁴¹Whoever welcomes a prophet in the name of a prophet will receive a prophet’s reward; and whoever welcomes a righteous person in the name of a righteous person will receive the reward of the righteous; ⁴²and whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones in the name of a disciple—truly I tell you, none of these will lose their reward.”

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Eugene Peterson paraphrases the closing verse of our gospel lesson with these words: “Give a cool cup of water to someone who is thirsty. The smallest act of giving or receiving makes you a true apprentice. You won’t lose out on a thing.” And that’s the point of Peace with Justice Sunday. It’s a Sunday that reminds us of the purpose of being a Christian. We are called to be Jesus’ disciple in this world; to be Jesus’ apprentices; to be peacemakers and workers for justice.

At this years General Conference of our United Methodist denomination, the world wide body of delegates voted to change the paragraph in *The Book of Discipline* that states the mission of the local church. In the past that paragraph read that the mission of the church is to make disciples of Jesus Christ. Last month, the General Conference voted to rewrite this to read that the mission of the church is to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.

This means that we gather each week as the Body of Christ to be inspired to partner with God to literally transform the world so that the kin-dom of God will come on earth. At a recent District Gathering on “Inspiring Worship” we were reminded that real worship is an encounter with God. We come together to sing and to pray, to hear the Word and reflect on its meaning and during that time we watch and wait for an encounter with God. Sometimes it is a word that catches our attention; at other times it is an anthem that moves us; yet at other times it is in the silence of prayer or in the simply being together as community that we feel awe and wonder, inspiration and encouragement from God’s Spirit.

But real worship has consequences. It’s not enough to be inspired. We are called to be disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world! We cannot simply breathe in and hold our breathe. We must also let the breathe out of our lungs. We inhale but we also exhale.

And so it is with our faith. We are inspired in order that we can also expire and die to this world in order to be resurrected with Jesus Christ to bring new life, to realize new visions of peace with justice in this world. Breathe with me. Feel the energy of being spirit filled as you inhale. And then as you let out your breathe, imagine it sending forth life giving hope for the transformation of the world.

How is it that we can be agents of transformation? What is expected of us as disciples of Jesus Christ? Our scripture lesson says that we need to start small. We needn't be overwhelmed. In fact, it's best to start small. Give a cool cup of water to someone who is thirsty for instance. The smallest act of giving or receiving makes you a true apprentice.

Sometimes such an act can not only be one of charity, it can also be an act of justice, an act that changes systems and rights wrongs. Tex Sample, writer, preacher and story-teller par excellence tells a story that helps us unpack and understand our gospel lesson on this Peace with Justice Sunday. Interestingly, the last time Tex Sample came through Danvers town was when I was a seminary student. He was here to lead a workshop on justice-making and I remember as if it was yesterday taping windows all over the church with him in anticipation of a hurricane that was soon to blow through town.

Let me share his story of "The Syrup Can" with you. It's a true story and he tells it from the first person perspective since it is his own story.

We were the pipe-pulling crew for a seismograph operation in Pike County, Mississippi. I was eighteen, having just finished high school and working to pay my tuition to college the coming fall. He was African American and I will call him Jim. About 35 or so, he was poor and making along with me 75 cents an hour. Illiterate with little, if any schooling, he knew a lot more about the oil field and work in general than I did, but I was white and he was black. So I was "the trucker," the boss of the rig, and he was the swamper, the helper who took orders from me.

Seismograph crews travel around an area and drill shallow holes. In our area they were 240 to 280 feet deep. They then run dynamite down into those holes and explode it. These crews have tech instruments to trace the reverberations of the explosions on rock formations deep in the earth. Since they can identify rock formations where oil is more likely to be found, seismograph crews are central to the exploration for black gold.

The pipe pulling crew follow along behind the seismograph operation several days later and pulls up the pipe to salvage as many joints as possible. These pipes are 4 inches in diameter and about 10 feet long, so they are valuable and can be reused again and again. Our job was to salvage the pipes and the joints using an A-frame truck with a winch line that would pull up the pipe sticking out of the ground.

The pipes were often hard to pull up and even harder to unscrew the joint. We were working in 90 degree, humid weather and often had to haul pipes in an open field where the sun bore down with relentless, oppressive heat.

On one of these days, before we set out in the morning, Jim and I discovered that someone had stolen the water can off the truck. I made an “executive decision” that we would just head off to the days job and buy water at a store en route. Without saying a word, Jim went around back of the gas station where the truck was parked and returned with a rusty syrup can. He filled it with tepid water from a nearby faucet, got into the truck and set it down between his feet. I looked over to see this water with flecks of rust in it, and the swirl of an oily stain floating across the top. Inwardly I gloated that Jim would make do with such a contaminated substitute. I felt a decided superiority.

We drove 15 miles to the first hole. The night before had not cooled and the morning sun was already weighing in. We dropped the winch line over the top of the first pipe and yanked it up. Jim slapped a wrench on it and pulled. It did not budge. So we both got on the cheater bar. Jim and I both yanked and yanked and sweated through our shirts in the first 15 minutes. It took us almost an hour to get 12 pipes out of that hole. We were both wringing wet with perspiration. Already my mouth seemed full of cotton balls. I was sucking on my tongue to get spit. We climbed back in the truck. Jim picked up that can of water, blew the rust flecks and the oily stain back, and took a long slow drink. Never looking at me, he stared straight ahead. As a black man in that world he hid any gloat there might have been. Meanwhile, I tried to look self-sufficient. When we got back on the road, I knew there would be a country store; and I began to imagine an orange soda or an RC Cola.

Within a half mile we came to the next hole. The hole was surrounded by swamp and the morning sun made it a sauna. We got 15 pipes out of that hole. I remember trying to forget my thirst. I wanted to show Jim that I didn’t need water, that I was an athlete and had pitched in even hotter weather. But by the time we winched the truck back out of the hole, I was trembling and getting a headache. At times I could not tell whether my vision was blurring or that I just had sweat in my eyes. It was now 10 o’clock and I had not had anything to drink since breakfast early that morning.

Getting into the truck Jim reached down and picked up that syrup can and gulped down a third of it, again looking straight ahead. He did not say a word. Having lost hope in finding a store in this godforsaken rural backwater, I was looking for a creek, or some small branch, anything with water in it. My hopes were dashed a few hundred yards down the road when we came to the next marker and hole.

The late morning sun was like a blowtorch wilting what it did not burn. I began to feel woozy and exhausted. We went to work pulling pipe. It went well but it went fast and kept me working without a break. My headache was getting worse. My coordination was not good. Jim was bathed in sweat, and I noticed that I was not sweating much at all, yet I was burning up. I knew enough about heat stroke to know I was in trouble. Somehow I made it through that pipe-pulling session and we crawled back in the truck. I could tell Jim was watching me and knew I was in danger. Again he reached for the syrup can and took a long slow draw.

I had to have water, but I was a white boy who had been told never to drink from the same glass or anything else that a black person had used. My own racism was actively at work in my head, but I needed water more than I needed prejudicial prohibitions.

“Uh, Jim, could Ican Iwould you mind if I ...uh...had...a ..drink from your can?”

“No, suh, Bos, help yo’self.”

With that he handed me the syrup can and again looked straight ahead. My hands were trembling as I took the can and when I looked into the bottom of it, it had rust flakes and a heavy film. But it looked like the finest vessel of water I had ever seen. I drank and did not mind the grit that came with the last couple of inches of water.

And as I drank it hit me. “This is the cup of salvation given for you.” I had been going to church since I was about 10 years old, and my church only celebrated Holy Communion about once a month. So I was not that formed by the practice of the Lord’s Supper, and yet, I so distinctly remember the sense that I was being served Communion. In my stark need Jim became a priest to me, and I felt that I was being given life. That syrup can became a chalice, and that hot water, permeated with rust, comprised with grit and topped with a greasy-looking film became the blood of Christ.

A cup of water can transform the world. It can break down the walls of racism. Wasn’t it Robert Frost who said that there is something that does not love a wall? It can be something as ordinary as a rusty syrup can chalice.

Peace with Justice. We are called to be disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. We are called to pray and live and act in the name of the Prince of Peace as if our very life depended on it. We are commissioned to love our enemy; to tolerate and respect and yes, even to celebrate our differences. Our world is convulsed in division, hatred, bigotry, violence and fear. It’s time for transformation. Black and white must march together; Israeli and Palestinian must live together; gay and straight must be church together; privileged and desperate, wise and foolish, attractive and unattractive, winners and loser, smooth and misfit must drink from the rusty syrup can together and know that it is Christ’s chalice, calling us to transform the world as we seek justice and love kindness and walk humbly with our God.

So be it. Alleluia. Amen.

