

Thelma the Pearl

A Sermon for every Sunday, Pentecost 8A

Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52

Romans 8:26-39

Thelma walked into the Cathedral here in the city of Richmond in June of 1969. She had never attended Mass at the Cathedral before, so she took her time to look at the beauty of the building. Then, she made her way to a pew. There was a family sitting at the other end of the pew, so Thelma had plenty of space to sit down right near the aisle.

And as soon as she sat down, that family got up, left the pew, and moved to another section of the church.

The same thing happened the next week. She sat down, and an elderly man got up and moved.

What was the problem? The 'problem' was that Thelma was an African American Catholic woman.

For years, Thelma had attended St. Joseph's, a small African American parish here in Richmond. She was a respected teacher in local public schools.

For a time, Catholic Churches in Virginia were segregated - as were most southern churches of that era. By the late 1950's, our Bishop said that such segregation was a violation of the Gospel.

But in a classic example of doing the wrong thing for the right reason, the Bishop decided to 'integrate' our churches by closing down the African American parishes and telling the people to go to larger local parishes, which were predominantly white.

The goal of integration was a good one. The practice of closing those small African American parishes brought great pain.

That is how Thelma found herself in the Cathedral in June of 1969. And that is where she was reminded that even people who claimed to share her same faith could not see past the color of her skin.

She kept going to Mass. People kept moving out of the pew.

Thelma had made a decision – she was staying at the Cathedral. When she later told this story to me, she said that no matter how some people treated her, she felt at home there when she walked forward to receive Holy Communion. As she prayed, she knew the truth of what Saint Paul says in his letter to the Romans: that no one, and nothing, could separate her from the love of God that comes to us in Christ Jesus.

By the time I got to know Thelma in the 1990's, she and her husband had become beloved leaders in the

Cathedral community. Times had changed. So had some attitudes.

And Thelma told me that, several years after she arrived at the Cathedral, a man sat next to her in her pew. She realized it was one of the folks who had gotten up and moved when she first went to church there.

And the man shared his sorrow about how he had treated her years before.

Thelma asked him what had brought about this change. Now she told me this story several decades ago, but to the best of my recollection, this is what that man said to Thelma. He said, "I just look at the line of people who come forward for Communion week after week. I look at their faces."

He said, "I've been a member of this church for a long time. So I know that some of the people who come forward for communion are really good and holy people. Others are small minded and angry."

He said, "I know that some of them have cheated on their spouses. Some cheat on their taxes, or are crooked in business. Some are white, some are black, some are Asian, some are old, some are young."

"And," he said, "it dawned on me that no matter how different we are, it is the exact same Lord Jesus who has called us here. It is the exact same Lord Jesus whose Gospel we listen to. It is the exact same Lord Jesus who invites us to eat and drink, in memory of him. And that's true, No matter what we look like."

The man smiled at Thelma and said, "I've spent most of life judging people who are different. Apparently, the Lord loves each of us with the same powerful love. And you, Thelma, helped me to see that."

Thelma had lived so much of her life here in Richmond, which had been the capital of the Confederacy. She taught in legally segregated schools. She shopped in segregated stores, and was forbidden to sit at certain tables in restaurants.

In so many ways, her society had been telling her that she was not a person of dignity, or value, or worth. She had been told, over and over again that her life was not to be valued in the way that her neighbor's life was to be valued. That her mere presence was a problem. That God had made her somehow inferior.

And yet, Thelma was a woman of profound inner strength, a strength which flowed in large measure from her faith.

She had heard the familiar parables in Matthew's Gospel, these parables about the treasure buried in the field, the pearl hidden underground. She heard how someone would give away everything they had in order to make that treasure their own.

And then it dawned on Thelma: that in God's eye, SHE was the treasure! In God's eyes, SHE was the

pearl of great price.

Thelma was a beloved daughter of God – no matter how many times she saw a sign which said “Whites Only.” Thelma was a beloved daughter of God. She was God’s treasure. Because God sent his only son, Jesus Christ, into the world to draw all people – all people – into the heart of God, into the kingdom.

And Thelma – along with every other person of every race, language and way of life – Thelma was such a precious treasure in the sight of Jesus that he was willing to give away everything – including his life – so that Thelma could be God’s own.

Thelma understood who she was in the eyes of God, even when the eyes of her neighbors were blinded by racism. And she understood that Saint Paul was speaking directly to her when he said, “Nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus. Not death, not life. Neither rulers, nor present things, nor future things.

No, Thelma, nothing can separate you from the love of Christ. Neither segregation policies nor long-held hatreds. Not injustice. Not the closing of a church or people who move to a new pew.

You, Thelma, are the pearl of great price, for whom the Son of God paid the greatest price.

Before she died, Thelma told me one more story. During the days of legal segregation, Thelma was having a conversation with a classroom full of African American high school students here in Richmond. There was an anti-segregation protest going on, and a student in her class said boldly, “we have to speak truth to power.”

And Thelma said to that student, “Speaking truth to power is necessary and cathartic. But speaking love to hate takes work and inner strength. Which is why so few do it.”

Speaking love to hate... that takes work. But isn’t that what Jesus calls every person to do? When we all dedicate ourselves to our Baptismal calling, when we follow the Holy Spirit’s lead and ‘speak love to hate,’ it requires that each of us – every citizen – must confront the hate and anger within ourselves that we may not even be aware of. Every human being of every race, language and way of life, has the ability to hate.

And every human being of every race, language and way of life has the God-given ability to love. The truth must be spoken to and heard by everyone. Every person must be converted and changed by the Lord.

As Christians, we must allow the Gospel of Jesus to define what justice is and how we must work toward it. No cable channel, no political movement, no elected official, can replace the Scriptural truth in our lives. If we allow that to happen, we may soon find ourselves speaking words of anger and hate, instead of words of justice and love.

As a pastor, I am called upon to preach the Gospel, and the fullness of our Christian faith. That doesn’t

always make people comfortable. But, the Gospel makes ME uncomfortable several times a day, if I am paying attention to it!

So at this time in our nation's history, first and foremost I am praying to hear what Christ wants to teach me about myself, including the truth about my weaknesses, my sin, my unrecognized judgments.

If I listen, I may take a step forward in his light. If I stop listening, I may just fail to recognize the Jesus who is sitting in my pew.

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