**17 Pentecost**

**September 20, 2015**

**In the name of the God of all Creation,**

**The God alive in us as God was alive in Jesus,**

**And the power of God known in the Spirit.**

**Amen.**

There is a way the world looks at things, and then there is the way that God looks at things. There is a culture of the world, and then there is the counter-culture of God. There is a wisdom of humans, and then there is divine wisdom. There are worldly values, and there are God’s values. Today’s lessons are about these contrasts.

As many of you know I have had more than my share of doctor visits over the past year. Caren has accompanied me on many of those visits and her being with me has had many benefits. She remembers things that I forget … she asks questions that hadn’t occurred to me … and she often hears things that in my anxiety seem to go in one ear and out the other. However, having Caren with me … at times … has had its cost. Every once and a while she will ask a doctor a question and they will then begin a discussion about me as if I am not there … and I’m sitting right between them. It is as if I have existentially disappeared. Usually, all it takes is for me to clear my throat … umumugh … and the doctor will start talking to me. But just for a moment it is as if I don’t exist.

I imagine that some of you have known something similar. I think it is safe to say that all of us, at one time or another, have been in situations where we felt we were existentially dead … as if we didn’t exist … as if we had disappeared. It happens when we are ignored, or when we are stereotyped, or when we are labeled and cubby-holed. It happens when people are lumped together and then dismissed, or discounted, or defamed. Ironically, it is not about us personally. That’s just it, we are not persons. We are not looked in the eye. Our words are not heard. Our thoughts don’t count. We are treated as if we have no value. We are treated as “nobodies.”

In a just released movie, *Time Out of Mind*, Richard Gere portrays a homeless man whose days consist of panhandling, drinking, and looking for shelter. The Director, Oren Moverman, films Gere from afar so that the camera doesn’t interfere with the people around the actor. In one shot Gere is panhandling on a corner and he thought the filming would last for all of five minutes before he was recognized. He sat there for forty minutes, and other than a few coins and dollar bills dropped into his paper coffee cup, no one even acknowledge him. He remarked that it was “worse than being invisible, rather like being in a Black Hole.”

The idea of being invisible and having no value is at the heart of the lessons that were read this morning. The reading from Proverbs … if read solely through our 21st century eyes and sensibilities … seems rather sexist. “A capable wife who can find?” Interestingly, the Hebrew words that are translated here as “capable wife” also can mean “strong woman.” However, in the context of the culture at the time the Book of Proverbs was written … hundreds of years before Jesus came on the scene … this passage was actually giving visibility to otherwise invisible women. By in large, women of that culture only had value for what they could produce … meals, clothing, crops ... and children. Over and over again in our Holy Scriptures we hear how the culture of the time was that women were invisible.

Yet those same Holy Scriptures give us a counter-cultural alternative. In biblical book after book we also hear stories of how God acts and speaks through prophets and others to say that all humans have value … and how we are to treat all human beings with respect and dignity. That same counter-cultural view is shown by Jesus in the reading this morning:

*Then he took a little child and put it among them; and taking it in his arms, he said to them, "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me."*

In the political language of today, children were “takers” not “makers.” They could not produce anything that didn’t need cleaning up afterwards. And they “took” food and time away from the rest of the family. They had no status other than potential for the future. They were … well, just children. Yet Jesus picked one up in his arms and told the crowd around him that they too needed to be like children.

The cultural wisdom is that some human beings don’t amount to much and can be ignored or dismissed. In God’s counter-culture we humans are all the same. In God’s eyes nothing makes us different from one another. We are all made in God’s image. And we participate in God’s kingdom when we live into this counter-culture and acknowledge and affirm every human being we encounter. In our baptismal covenant we promise to “Respect the dignity of every human being,” and when we see the woman or child, or person who dresses differently, or has a different color skin that ours, or speaks a different language … the stranger, the homeless man or woman standing on the street corner with a sign, the immigrant … when we see them as a fellow child of God then we are alive in God’s kingdom.

We all know the golden Rule: “Do to others what you would want done to you.” However, the cultural norm is more like “Do to others the way you have been done to.” So when we are ignored we ignore others. When we have been shown disrespect we are disrespectful of others. When prejudice has been shown against us then we show prejudice to others. We know that isn’t the “right” way … but many times it is the way that it is. In the Letter of James it would be characterized as “human wisdom.” But “divine wisdom” is counter-cultural … it goes against the culture. God’s counter-culture says to stop living by “human wisdom” and participate in “divine wisdom” … a counter-culture wisdom that accepts and affirms all of God’s children.

Living this alternative counter-culture is not always easy. Living into God’s values can be awkward … often difficult. It is sometimes much simpler to just look the other way or just pass by another without saying hello. When I’m at the supermarket or the post office and I feel rushed it is not the time I want to catch someone’s eye … I fear they may recognize me and want to chat. Believe it or not, I’m an introvert … so I can always use that as an excuse.

But just because it isn’t easy is not a reason not to do it. If we want a life of abundance … not necessarily material abundance, but an abundance of peace, and self-worth, and trust, and joy … if we want a life of abundance then the cost of participating in God’s kingdom … in the counter-culture of God … has its rewards. Taking the time to affirm the bag boy at Publix, or talking to the homeless woman on the other side of the serving table at Dining with Dignity, or just saying hello to one of the men who hang out in front of the Mission House, are all ways of saying you see them … and you see them as a fellow child of God. Each time we look another in the eye they are looking us in the eye also. Every time we listen to another we are offering our compassion through empathy, and we are reminded of our own times of having someone listen to us. When we value another we are reminded of our own value in the eyes of God.

I began this sermon with the story of being in a doctor’s office and hearing a conversation … by two people who care about me … but talking to each other as if I weren’t there. In situations like that I am reminded of my own existence and how easy it is for me to overlook someone. Yet it is with the intentionality of seeking to do to others as I want done to me … to acknowledge others as I would like to be acknowledge … to listen to others as I would like to be listened to … to recognize another as I would like to be recognized … it is in those acts that I feel that I am participating in God’s counter-culture … the one that Jesus talked about and lived.

I will end with what I feel is one of the best poetic expressions of God’s counter-culture and divine wisdom … the Prayer of St. Francis:

**Lord, make us instruments of your peace.**

**Where there is hatred, let us sow love;**

**Where there is injury, pardon;**

**Where there is discord, union;**

**Where there is doubt, faith;**

**Where there is despair, hope;**

**Where there is darkness, light;**

**Where there is sadness, joy.**

**Grant that we may not so much seek to be consoled as to console;**

**To be understood as to understand;**

**To be loved as to love.**

**For it is in giving that we receive;**

**It is in pardoning that we are pardoned;**

**And it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.**

**Amen.**

When we participate in God’s counter-culture we give visibility to those who are invisible in the world’s culture. Remember, we are all children of God, and all of us … in our many varieties … are made in God’s image. There is a way the world looks at things, and then there is the way that God looks at things. There is a culture of the world, and then there is the counter-culture of God. There is a wisdom of humans, and then there is divine wisdom. There are worldly values, and there are God’s values. I invite us all to be intentional participants in God’s kingdom of counter-culture.

Amen.