

## Welcome

Pentecost, 17B 2018

St. Andrew's, Kelowna

The Rev'd Anne Privett

+++

**In the name of the Holy Trinity, One God. Amen.**

At 1558 Bloor Street West, in Toronto, you will find Romero House. Is anyone familiar with it? 25 years ago Mary Jo Leddy was working on a newspaper that needed an editor and the person she wanted for the job was a night manager at a refugee shelter. So she agreed to step in for a month as they searched for a replacement. On the first night that Mary Jo was there, she heard a knock on the door and one refugee motioned to her to join them for tea. The women had nothing, money only for rice and beans and this tea. This became a nightly ritual and together they would sit, laugh, put on music and somehow communicate. Over these evenings, they questioned the way the Refugee shelter ran and they birthed the idea of Romero House. It would not be a shelter but a community who would welcome refugees to stay in apartments without internal locks, welcome them as neighbours rather than simply clients, as they sought to establish themselves in Canada. At the heart of Romero House, reads their website, is a fundamental decision to welcome and to say 'I trust you' by choosing not to lock our internal doors.

Our Gospel reading this morning begins as Jesus and his disciples are making their way along the road after a spectacular failure on the disciples' part. We know well that failure and fear are two of the things that can cause us to tightly lock our internal doors. The disciples had just tried to heal a little boy suffering from severe seizures and they couldn't. When Jesus arrived, the boy's father cried out those moving words: 'I believe; help my unbelief!' and the boy was healed (Mark 9: 24-29).

And so they went on from there but they didn't really leave it behind. Jesus began to try to teach the disciples again about the strange wisdom and power of God: that the Messiah must be killed and in three days rise again. But the disciples didn't understand and they didn't ask- it says in the text they were afraid to question, afraid to admit they didn't quite get it- which was so unlike the father they had just witnessed who said help me with the parts I don't get! Perhaps it was because their pride was still wounded from their failure, maybe they needed to feel competent at something or maybe they didn't want to disappoint Jesus again so soon, but whatever the reason, they began a search we have all been on at one time or another: looking for confidence and certainty anywhere but the place we should look...and so the disciples began a conversation about who was the greatest. Not an uncommon response to bruised egos.

After the awkward and slightly juvenile conversation, Jesus offers a beautiful and challenging response that is so full of grace. It reminds us just what kind of teacher we have in Him if we'd just ask our questions and the kind of grace that is offered to us especially when we fail. Jesus looks at the disciples and says: "whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all". You can imagine the silence as the disciples tried to understand this paradigm of greatness. Whoever wants to be great must be a servant of all. Jesus then brings a child into their midst and I wonder if the disciples saw the child as

a reminder of the one they could not heal. Jesus hugs the child and says, "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me." In other words, 'it's not about you but who you are welcoming. Don't look at others needs as an occasion for your greatness, or your failure, but rather just receive them and in so doing you will receive me and begin to understand what I am trying to teach you'. The Greek word for 'welcome' is better translated as 'receive', or literally 'take the hand of'. Considering that children in Jesus' time were non-persons, really nothing more than property of their fathers, asking to receive them as a sign of greatness made no sense. And even more so, it made no sense to teach that you receive God Almighty through the smallest and weakest of all.

The reading we are given from the Wisdom of Solomon this morning tells us that those who don't understand the wisdom of God spend a lifetime building their own greatness- eating, buying and consuming everything at the expense of the poor, the widows and the aged- living by the mantra: "let our might be our law of right, for what is weak proves itself to be useless." That mantra is one that is alive and well in our culture, in our ideas of success, in our economics and means of production that walk all over the small ones, including the environment, to increase profits and build up the rich. And it's here the logic of the kingdom of God confronts us and calls us to live from a different paradigm.

How do we do that? Start with questions, start with the questions even the disciples were afraid to ask because God is at work in the questions! It was God at work in their questions that grew Mary Jo Leddy, Jean Vanier, Martin Luther King Jr., Oscar Romero, Mother Theresa, Thomas Merton, and all the saints you can think of, into those in whom we see an undeniable, humble greatness because of their welcome of the small. Questions have lead financially successful people in this congregation to give extraordinary amounts of their resources for the sponsoring of refugees. God at work in the questions leads people in this congregation to spend their time caring for the sick or the small. As the church, we speak loudest when, as Wisdom describes it, our "manner of life is unlike that of others, and [our] ways are strange."

Strange... just like a God whose almighty power is shown in weakness, who came as a child and died on the cross. Strange just like how resurrection and new life came from what looked like death and failure. Strange how a whole people decide to make promises to live in God's pattern of dying and rising for the rest of our lives. The truth of baptism, writes one of the brothers of SSJE is "is revealed in what it does and who it shows us to be, cleansing us, not from dirt but from separation: separation from God, separation from ourselves, separation from one another." An unlocking of our inner doors. Our life's work is to hold those inner doors open in welcome for the Spirit of God and for each other.

"Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me," says the Lord, "and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me." Amen.