

Epiphany 5 A 2020
Matthew 5:13-20

I don't consider myself an authority, but I have regained new appreciation of those negotiating that territory between adolescence and adulthood, courtesy of my children's period of transition in their education. They are both in college, at very different points in their experiences, and they are both deciding how they want to spend their lives. My daughter, who goes to a small liberal arts college outside Atlanta, is an art major (her music major father can have nothing to say about this) and tells us she wants to teach, while my son, back from a stint as a nuclear engineer in the navy, has decided that he would like to be a pharmacist. Although these interests have been gestating for some time, these decisions have not been easy and they are both aware how fortunate they are to have these choices; for me they have brought back vivid memories about walking through these waters and no amount of reassurance, I've found, can make the process easier for those crossing the threshold of determining who and what they want to be.

I was reminded of the issues surrounding this threshold period in our lives recently through an essay by Frederick Buechner about adolescence and what a mark it makes on all of us. In addition to being an ordained Presbyterian minister and an award-winning author, Buechner taught at many schools early in his career and had a great deal to say about what adolescence means, especially about the stewardship of the experiences we have when we are walking across that no-man's-land between childhood and the beginning of what we want to call our adulthood. I have a deal with myself not to say too much about these young people I know most intimately, but I can talk a bit about my own experience in my early teens, slim-shouldered, mostly arms and legs, more interests than I had time or talent for. What I have retained is the memory of how solicitous, even caring, that many people were when I was battling the demons that I was sure had taken over my body, when I was trying to figure out who I was going to be, not what I would do but what would help define me, what would help me figure out who and what I wanted to become at the deepest part of myself.

Something like this is happening with the disciples today as they listen to Jesus talk about who they are to be. They are still new to this new world they are entering, even as they sit and listen to this odd man who tells them who they are not because of what they are doing but what they are becoming, being molded by someone who knew them better than they could possibly know themselves. They are the light of the world, there to shine before others so that God may be glorified through them. If one of the things we discover in our own adolescence is the ability to handle pressure, it is hard to imagine the weight these people are feeling with these words, that a world they are only beginning to learn about is resting on the narrowest of shoulders, arms and legs. What they are getting is a talk on stewardship, but it isn't like the ones we typically hear about operating budgets and pledge cards. They are being asked to be stewards of something entirely new, something taking shape even as they are listening. The city on the hill, something more precious than anything they have known, is already taking shape as they are listening to Jesus. It is something like the stewardship to which God trusted mankind at the beginning of all things, one centered in the sabbath, where the oppressed shall go free and every bond shall be broken, where we shall become stewards of the lives of all who are around us. It is daunting to be stewards not only of our own lives but of this new thing coming into the world, but it is this role to which we are called away from our own worlds, to be the salt of the earth, the light of the world, even when we cannot imagine what those words mean yet.

What the disciples do know in saying yes to what Jesus is offering them is that it comes at a price, maybe even bigger than the price of leaving your father and the only life you have ever known, with the nets you are mending or hearing about how blessed you are when people persecute you for what you know is right. It is because, whatever our age, we are in some way adolescents and our chief responsibility is to grow, to grow so that we can be a light to others, to risk being open to others so that

we might be open to something that is bigger than all of us. And in case we think it is easy to change our minds like this, what we are really asked to do is to change ourselves, our whole selves, and any teenager can tell you how hard it is to give up the warmth and comfort of being a child for the great unknown mountain of trying to understand who we are and why we would want to live for something bigger than us.

For Buechner, this is real stewardship, what he called the stewardship of pain, which happens to us whenever we grow, when we become aware of things greater than the one individual life we are living. "It involves taking the risk of being open," he says, "of reaching out, of keeping in touch with the pain as well as the joy of what happens, because at no more time than a painful time do we live out of the depths of who we are rather than the shallows". There are no guarantees about this time, but "at least we stand a chance of finding in those depths who we most deeply and humanly are and who others are." If we are sitting on a hillside, hearing that we are the light of the world, a light that cannot be hidden, the knowledge of that pain has to be worth it, because we are a city on a hill and we have to be ready to grow into something deeper than we ever thought we could be. We have to be ready, in Isaiah's words, to share our bread with the hungry, to cover the naked, to risk the pain of being open to the needs and pain of others because it is then that we discover the fulness of joy in being truly human. I think a great deal of the needs and pain of others here, chiefly because we are engaged in confronting them week-to-week. But we are also in the 190th year of this parish and have among us the great cloud of witnesses who have seen the changes in the community and our response to its needs. We are in the happy circumstance of exploring who we might be in this time of changes. We have indeed given freely to the poor, as the psalmist says, but our job is also to grow, to find new ways to witness to the kingdom. We too will have to take the risk of being open, open enough to be an active, vibrant part of this community and it will involve being responsive to new needs. But we are up to the challenge. Flawed as we are, we are just like those disciples and will spend this celebratory year and the ones after it determining how best to meet those needs

When I was an adolescent, I attended a school that was supposed to be for youth who were giving themselves to something, to music, drama or writing, something for which we were to cultivate ourselves. I am grateful for these opportunities but also understand their cost. The people I knew later in life spoke of their time when they were children, alone with themselves and their piano or their violin, simply because of the expectations placed on them. Part of what the adolescents I love are learning now is to grow together, to be part of something greater than themselves, to give oneself unreservedly and to be joyful when others are doing the same. So when Jesus offers himself as the fulfillment of the law, the continuation of the promises made to the ancestors of the disciples, he is also looking toward the future, to the promise of the people we are becoming. That is the light we are, our own city on a hill, and it becomes easier to see when we say yes to one another, when we see that we have one foot planted in our own time and place and the other set in a city of unbreakable promise.