

## **THE GIFT OF THE DARK WOOD**

### **6) A COMMUNITY OF MISFITS**

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During the season of Lent we have been exploring the “Gifts of the Dark Wood,” those feelings and situations where we seem out of step with the rest of the world, uncertain of what to do next, lost in a place not of our own making, tempted to settle and not rock the boat, lacking the knowledge or the tools to feel like we can make it.... but occasionally being gifted with glimpses of what might be if we persevere, don’t give up and in some way appreciate what is happening in the darkness.

Somehow what seems to be in each case a loss, proves to be a gift when we allow ourselves to be led by the Holy Spirit to depend less on ourselves and what we think we know or must have for sure, and depend more on the revelations that come to us when we are stripped clean of all of our excuses and defenses.

We discover that in vulnerability we find our strength, in losing our lives we find them; in surrender we gain victory. And through those experiences, we find the last and perhaps best gift of the dark wood, the gift of misfits, ourselves and others, all of us finding companionship as we help one other, taking turns being guides, mentors, and friends.

Jesus and his disciples could be thought of as a group of misfits – a carpenter, some fishermen, a tax collector – all from the country...from the middle of nowhere, trying to be leaders, bringing the unorthodox message that the Kingdom of Heaven is close at hand to other misfits in the world – the poor, the hungry, the weeping, the persecuted, the powerless, telling them that they are actually blessed; they are the ones for whom God has a special affection; that in the midst of the deepest

challenges of their lives, God has somehow placed the most profound joys.

Jesus tells them that the Kingdom of God belongs to the poor; that the hungry will be filled, the weeping will laugh, and those who are excluded, hated, reviled, and defamed can rejoice because their reward will be great. He doesn't idealize or romanticize or spiritualize any of these conditions; they are real evils, communal, social evils, contrary to God's will and love for the world, and he promises that they will be addressed and ended.

These were – and still are – scandalous promises because they upset the way things are. To eliminate poverty, to feed the hungry, to comfort the hopeless, to welcome the stranger – all these things require a overturning of conventional expectations and norms.

Jesus' mother Mary had sung about these things before he was born – *“[God] has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. . . . brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.”* (Lk 1:51-53)

It never ceases to amaze me how scripture can be so breathtakingly contemporary and so uncomfortably political.

As is so often said, Jesus was not crucified because he said “consider the lilies of the field;” he was put to death because of the incredible inversion of the social order that he was proposing....not for some time in the future, in the great by and by, but right here, right now, whether in the first century or in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

In the first century, the ordinary people had no voice, economic exploitation of the underclasses by the privileged was expected. The

working poor were kept poor through restrictions on ownership of land, by taxation, and by indentured labor through default on debt.

And below the working poor, were those in desperate need, unable to help themselves, the beggars, homeless, and destitute.

The tendency then as now was to blame them for their misfortune; they brought it on themselves – which in some way then serves as a reason for not offering assistance – making a distinction between the “deserving” poor and the “undeserving” poor.

The rich were thought to be blessed by God, given special opportunities because of their virtue and hard work... Thus when Jesus-like questions are asked – why are the structures as they are? What can be done to economic systems that will alleviate poverty?...there is immediate objection.

Author Richard Rohr wrote in one of his devotionals, “Because structural sin is accepted as good and necessary on the corporate or national level, greed, pride, and ambition are considered virtues.”

And as Archbishop Helder Camara once famously pointed out, “When I give food to the poor, they call me a saint. When I ask why the poor have no food they call me a communist.”

Indeed as Arch Bishop Camara points out, the teachings of Jesus do not fit into any one political party or ideology.... They go beyond that...

Now the political and religious leaders of the 1<sup>st</sup> century did not call Jesus a communist, or a socialist – they didn’t have those words – but they perhaps labeled him a misfit along with other negative terms like trouble-maker or rabble rouser, and the more directly challenged maybe chose stronger language – insurrectionist and blasphemer.

It is human nature that more challenged someone is, the stronger their defensive language becomes; some things never change. And now this “misfit” had left the countryside, where he was only a distant problem, befriending outcasts, eating with the unclean, defending criminals, breaking all kinds of rules, stirring up the poor, the oppressed, the sick and homeless, the hungry, telling them that God loves them best, reminding them of the old rule in Deuteronomy about loving God and neighbor, but insisting that they not only remember it, but actually do it.

But.... as long kept to the country, he was annoying but not a threat.

Until that one day when the misfit came to town, riding towards Jerusalem on a donkey, with followers galore waving palm branches, placing them in his path and shouting “Hosanna to the Son of David!

Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest heaven!” The stony road into Jerusalem became a spontaneous parade route with loud, poor, insignificant, no account misfits actually having the audacity to celebrate and sing.

It was Passover, the holiday when the Jewish people celebrated their freedom from captivity in Egypt, when God led them out and across the sea, defeating their Egyptian oppressors and giving God’s people a place to call home, which now unfortunately was under the rule of another oppressive regime; this time, the Romans.

Needless to say the current oppressors, were a bit nervous during Passover; they had their own parade of sorts going on the other side of town as they reinforced their legions of soldiers and their supply of arms just in case someone or some group got out of hand with the celebration of their long lost freedom and started to do something crazy. Jesus was headed to the temple and they were headed to the military headquarters which actually very close to the temple.

Jesus must have been afraid as he entered the well-armed city. He was human after all. But he did it anyway. I wonder if it felt as much like a funeral procession to him as a holiday parade. He knew where the road ended. He'd been predicting it all along even though no one believed it or understood what he was saying.

That same road covered with palm branches would soon enough be the rocky road he'd be dragged over, and the crowd would be shouting a different message, "Crucify him!" All because he opposed the status quo and challenged the hypocrisy of the priests and authorities.

He did it anyway because it was the right thing to do. It was what he had to do. And Pilate, too did what he thought he had to do to keep the peace – get rid of one more dangerous misfit.

In their Book, *The Last Week*, Theologians Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan point out that *"it is important to realize that who and what killed Jesus was nothing unusual. As empires go, Rome was better than most. There was nothing exceptional or abnormal about it; this is simply the way domination systems behave. So common is this dynamic that it can also be called the normalcy of civilization. Good Friday was the result of the collision between the passion of Jesus and the normalcy of civilization."*

We today live in a very normal society. The normalcy of our civilization keeps the powerful in power, protects the wealth of the rich, and makes it difficult for the poor to escape poverty.

The normalcy of our civilization keeps certain types of people out; while letting others in.

The normalcy of our civilization gives some the benefit of the doubt and others are always under extra suspicion.

Thus, Holy Week serves as a template today for us 21<sup>st</sup> century would-be misfits.

Sometimes we celebrate, sometimes we stumble over rocks; sometimes we are praised; sometimes we are criticized. But if we want to be a misfit like Jesus, even knowing the cost, we, like him, must press on asking questions, looking for solutions, protesting injustice when we see it. Holy Week, is not just one week, but happens every week of the year.

In February of 2012, San Ramon Valley UMC gave me an incredible gift. Through fundraising this church allowed me to accompany a group of Filipino American Young adults to the Philippines and find out what kind of work the church was engaged in there. This was the first time these second generation Filipino-Americans have ever gone back to the land of their grandparents.

And this was the first time I went to the country as well.

In our two weeks exploring the Island of Luzon and meeting many faithful United Methodists, we soon discovered just how insulated our view is from the United States.

We met with people who were being driven off land that their family had lived on for generations....literally watching their houses being bulldozed.

We visited a community called Smokey Mountain which was literally a huge garbage dump where thousands of women and children lived.

We went to what they call the “Industrial Zone” where people work in what we know as “sweat shops.” We went there with an advocate for safe labor practices....At the gate of the huge compound of factories we were allowed in...not because of our guide....

But because our guide sent me....the lone white, male, American in our group to go up the guards, show them my American Identification and say I needed to head to the bank inside the gates.

When we would go through military and security checkpoints, everyone in our group---guides, Filipino-Americans, Men, Women....would all be patted down and searched...their bags would be opened and inspected....

Well everyone except for me.....Instead they just waived me through and many times would throw me a Salute. It was surreal...

And one afternoon, we had the opportunity to meet with a group of misfits in a secret location. The arrangements had to be in secret because all of these individuals were risking their lives to meet with us and tell us their stories....

One was a young man...in his early twenties who lost many of his fingers in an accident at his manufacturing job that paid around \$1 an hour... and when he got hurt they immediately fired him...

We met a woman whose husband was a low-level manager at one of the factories...and when he started fighting for better conditions for his workers and started making the obscene conditions known he was gunned down in their front yard when walking out to work...

The police did little....and when she started pushing the police to do more, she received death threats and had men in motorcycles ride by and show her they were carrying guns.

Story after story after story of 8 or 9 different individuals who were and are doing everything they can to get the truth out there...as well as continue the fight for their friends and families who work in such conditions.

And I Have to tell you...every single one of the companies who are doing these things....that these people named where ones that I knew....ones that many of us use every day....household names.

Feeling overwhelmed and largely powerless, we asked them what we could do.... Their response: Keep telling our stories to all who will listen.

No doubt, we have all witnessed and will continue to witness injustices being carried out.

Whether it is bullying in the schools...

Or the sales person at the store helping us first because of the way that we look even though there was someone else waiting in front of us...

Or whether it is an unjust action that the city, county, state or country is taking...

Or something we see on a mission trip to Haiti, the Philippines or Africa.

We must be the ones to speak out. Fortunately, we do not do this alone. We have one another; fellow misfits who want to walk fully in the path of Jesus, treating all as persons made in God's image regardless of difference, and acting together to serve, strengthen, and extend God's realm of love, whatever the challenge; whatever the cost.

Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord; Peace in heaven and hosanna in the highest! May it be so. Amen.