

Twenty-seventh Sunday in Ordinary Time – Oct. 4-5, 2014

Harriet Burke

Reflections on Isaiah 5:1-7; Phil. 4:6-9; Matt. 21: 33-43

Many years ago my husband Chuck and I spent two weeks in the Philippines. We went to help present two Marriage Encounter Weekends. During the week we were housed with families in Manila. We trained couples and priests in the area so they could become self-sustaining. For the retreat weekends we had over a two-hour drive out to what then was a poor area, Batangas. Many, maybe 15 of us crowded into a Jeepney, an old Jeep with artwork colorfully painted all over. There were no windows – everything was wide open to the warm November weather.

The surprise of the ride was that the locals serenaded us the entire way enveloping us in harmony. What a warm welcome and reception! Our hearts were full.

Later, one of our hosts told us that the love songs we heard were the same we would hear on the radio; but they were also the same songs sung in church – their songs were meant to give praise to God, telling of great love and also of transgressions. In their society, it seems to me, it was all one: living, loving, relationships, forgiveness and dying.

Both today's first reading and gospel made me think of that wondrous experience with the Filipino people.

In the Isaiah reading we hear things were not going well; it is the story of the tug and pull that existed between Israel and God. Isaiah reminded the people of all the things that had been done for them—the exodus, the covenant, and God's protection, and yet the chosen people of Israel kept turning away. Today Isaiah, in an attempt to call them back, sings this love song It's a

kind of ballad – you could hear the musicality in the reading that Genie did. It was meant to take away hardened hearts and open the ears of the people.

As you heard, an almost identical story is told in Matthew's gospel as he attempts to move people to open their hearts and welcome Jesus. Jesus quotes the Isaiah love song but adds at the end a quote from Psalm 118 saying "the stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone." Matthew, when he tells this story, hopes to point out the signs of the times, different than in the time of Jesus. This was in the mid '80s and he adapts it to his community.

He is concerned about tensions within the Jewish community; he fully believes that Jesus is the promised one, the messiah. Yet, many have not accepted that belief. Matthew sees the gap growing wider and wider and the possibility of two communities developing. Rome, the power of the day, accepts the Jews but not what we might call the *new* "Jewish/Christian community," who have been banned from the synagogue.

The characters Jesus tells of are only thinly veiled. God was the landowner; the vineyard symbolized the people. The tenants or caretakers were the chief priests and elders who were to have taken care of the people, and of course Jesus is the son of the landowner who is killed.

Matthew ends this reading today with what sounds like a fear tactic or a power play. "The Kingdom will be taken away from you and given to people who will bear fruit." Most of us grew up with the kind of faith that depicts a vengeful God, one who

might strike us down if we did not follow the rules or pray in the right way or in the “right” religion.

I was just looking again at Richard Rohr’s book, *The Naked Now*, in which he writes about one of his favorite topics, dualism. Who is in, who is out? Who holds the real faith? Who are the pretenders?—which certainly fits with our readings today.

But in the book he tells a story of Mother Teresa, who began *The Home for the Dying* in Calcutta. It was a place where the people dying in the streets of Calcutta were given medical attention and allowed to die with dignity according to the ritual of their faith; Muslims were read the Quran, Hindus received waters from the Ganges and the Catholics received the Last Rites. Mother Teresa, who lived her faith so passionately, would not allow her sisters to talk about Jesus or even promote Jesus to the sick and dying. She told them, rather, “to *be* Jesus.” What an example of bearing fruit!

Father John Shea came to mind as I was preparing. He is an Augustinian priest, theologian, and a captivating storyteller who decided in 2012 to step aside from his public role of priest until women’s ordination is a reality. Shea, who is now in his 70’s wrote to his Cardinal and several other leadership men saying, “our male-only priesthood that views women as not fully in Jesus’ likeness, is a heretical teaching. It implies women are not fully redeemed.”

I find it so interesting that his decision came from being in India in the 1990’s. While there, a priest from Thailand asked his advice how to address the practice of killing baby girls because the family would not have enough money for a dowry. From that he realized how difficult the church would find it to respond since the church also talks about the inferiority of women.

Bearing fruit sometimes means speaking out boldly and bravely, which is difficult in the atmosphere of our church, even with our wonderful Pope Francis.

Today is the feast of St. Francis of Assisi, who was a man of great non-duality. What fruit he bore by passing on his spirituality and his sense that all is holy—our earth, the cosmos, all of us, plants and animals. When we pray the Prayer of Saint Francis we ask that we be a channel of God’s peace and then go on to reflect the many ways we can do that. Francis lived the values that St. Paul wrote about in the second reading – truth, respecting all that is honest and pure, and being decent.

Could the question for today be, “What might God find in *our* vinyards?” Before our visioning day we were asked to write in response to three questions as a preparation. I found it to be an emotional trip down memory lane to reflect on the pivotal moments on my spiritual journey. So many people who have come into my life and walked a short or long way with me came and sat with me as I wrote. Practices and rituals that took me from rote prayer onto a variety of paths came up for me. It brought up the varied ways of seeing God, speaking to God and listening to God.

At our retreat day many spoke so stunningly about being generative and prophetic and how we bear fruit through our inclusivity and welcoming. The day was a great testimony to our “rich harvest” as we talked about our many involvements in social justice work.

The prayer and *lectio* of the day reminded us that it isn’t just in the *doing*, but in the *heart behind the doing* that brings holiness to our ministry, to our community.

We are a community with a very large heart. Amen!