Homily

January 29, 2023 Epiphany IV

One evening this last week our friend and parish treasurer Barb Sopko and my, now *our* friend Ron Schmidt, owner of a CPA firm here in town, spent 5 hours together (5 hours!) working on reformatting our financials for the annual meeting. They did this so that the financial report could be readily understood by everyone. They began the work in the Worman Room at 4:30 pm and ended the meeting at 9:30pm. I know this because I was there- as witness, cheerleader, and caterer for the meeting, *which means I went out for pizza at the opportune time*. Their meeting together taught me, again, how challenge can be transformed into blessing when people show up, engage challenge together with open minds and open hearts, and seek a positive outcome for all.

Barb has been blessing us for years with her particular gifts and skills, her faith, and her devoted service to our community. She shares her gifts and skills freely and she always shows up. Ron is a person of faith, a friend but not an “official” member of our community, who simply offered to help us because he could - help us synthesize our complex financial data into a report format that would make sense to us non-CPA types. Each of them exemplified servant leadership that evening, in the image of Christ, and it was a beautiful thing to see and experience.

Barb and Ron transformed what could have been a tedious meeting into sacred space by their **presence**, their **positive attitudes**, and their **skills** applied to the task at hand. Even though columns of numbers generally make my head spin, it nourished my spirit to be with them for the meeting, to witness their complementary skills at work, and see them create together a report that will help us, St. Andrew, Mentor, find our financial way forward in the months and years to come.

Barb and Ron are blessed people and their work in the world, their very presence among us, is blessing. Where have you experienced blessing this week? Who carried that blessing to you? What was your response?

Jesus announced his ministry to the world by telling the people that the *Reign of Heaven* had come near. Then he proclaimed blessing, everlasting blessing upon the most vulnerable among us as well as the powerful – blessing that is manifested in each of us, all of us, when we serve one another with compassion, in imitation of Christ.

Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount, our gospel lesson for this week, is all about blessing. Jesus preached it, *proclaimed it* might be a better word, to his disciples, and to the people who surrounded him that day, seeking help in the midst of trouble.

Jesus’ proclamation of blessing showed the people what the Reign of Heaven looks like.

In the Reign of Heaven, the vulnerable are blessed-those torn apart by the cares of the world, the sick of body or mind, the lost, the isolated, the troubled, the frightened, those who feel worthless, those who are devalued or diminished by others, those overlooked-**all those people are blessed by God.** Tyre Nichols, the young man beaten to death after a traffic stop last week, the young man who loved his mama, and took beautiful photographs of the world around him, is blessed by God. Remember, in the reign of heaven, the last will be first.

In the Reign of Heaven the helpers are blessed, all those who act in the world with compassion-the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers, those persecuted while trying to do good, those persecuted for their faith. In the Reign of Heaven compassion is lifted up and not ridiculed, and compassion, born of Christ in us, is the medium that transforms the world that is, into the world God dreamed for us.

I read in the paper this week that Brandon Edwin Chrostowski, restauranter and founder of the non-profit Edwin’s Leadership Institute and Restaurant in Cleveland, was named a James Beard Award semi-finalist in the catagory of “best restauranter in the United States”. He learned of this great honor while in Ukraine, where he traveled this month to help distribute supplies and feed those who have been impacted by the war.

Since 2012 Brandon has worked on his dream to provide a means for incarcerated and formerly incarcerated people to make a successful reentry into society. Over time this dream became a business plan, funding was secured, and ultimately the dream, born of a desire to help, led to the founding of Edwin’s, a non-profit restaurant and culinary training program for formerly incarcerated people. Enlisting the help of many, Brandon’s dream became a reality, and his program has trained over 300 formerly incarcerated people for positions in the fine dining and the culinary arts industry. It is notable that the Edwin’s culinary program boasts a 95% employment rate.

Interestingly, this dream began after Brandon, when 18, was charged with resisting arrest in a potential drug-related matter in Detroit. The presiding judge apparently saw something in Brandon and chose to sentence him to probation rather than the up to 10 years of incarceration he could have received. This exercise of justice and compassion sparked something in the young Brandon, he paid it forward, and the rest is history.

I have no idea whether Brandon believes in God or subscribes to any faith tradition, but I know he is a child of God, is blessed by God, and is a blessing to the world. Christ is at work in him, just as Christ is at work in each of us, blessing us so that we can bless others. Every blessing we receive, and every blessing we share with others when we show up and help where help is needed, brings the Reign of Heaven ever closer to our reality, for the good of all of God’s creation. **Thanks be to God**.

This week, let us all consider our blessings, and, in response, choose to fully **embody** the blessing we are to the world. May we each embrace the work that the Lord requires of us, and, in whatever place and state of being we find ourselves - **do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with our God. Amen.**