

DIFFERENT

Sermon for Pentecost 13A- Mt 16:21-28, Jer 15:15-21, Rom 12:9-21
LPC, 9/3/17

While on vacation a couple of weeks ago I read a book called *Go Set a Watchman* by Harper Lee. I had owned this book for over a year but had been reluctant to read it because a number of friends had read it and disliked it. The book is a sequel to *To Kill a Mockingbird*, a much-beloved book about a family in rural Alabama in the 1930's. The head of the family in *Mockingbird*, Atticus Finch, is a lawyer called upon to defend a black man accused of raping a white woman. The story is told from the point of view of Atticus' young daughter, Scout.

Watchman is set in the same town many years later, after the Second World War. Scout, now known by her real name, Jean Louise, is working in New York City but returns to her hometown for a visit, where she discovers that her father is attending meetings to defy the United States Supreme Court's ruling in favor of desegregation. While Atticus explains that his motives are to protest the interference of the Supreme Court and special interest groups like the NAACP in local affairs, Jean Louise is dismayed to find that her father, who has always been her touchstone for integrity and color-blind justice, is taking a stance that by her lights, amounts to the same thing as racism. Her world is turned upside down with the discovery that her father is not the man she thought he was.

The point of the book, I think, is that Jean Louise as an adult has to find a standard for morality within herself rather than depending on her father to set this standard for her. But I believe the reason why my friends didn't like *Go Set a Watchman* is because they are in the same position as Jean Louise. Atticus Finch does not turn out to be what they thought he was.

There is nothing quite so upsetting that someone is not the person we thought we knew. Usually this disillusioning experience happens because someone we respect and even idolize proves to be human and fails somehow. But not always. Sometimes the person just turns out to be his or her own person instead of the person we assumed him or her to be.

The subject of today's Gospel lesson from Matthew is Peter's beginning to grasp that his Messiah Jesus is not the person Peter thought he was. Peter's world is turned upside down as surely as Jean Louise's was turned upside down, but it doesn't happen because Jesus has failed him. It happens because Peter has projected onto Jesus his own idea of what a messiah should be.

Bear in mind that this episode, where Peter is sharply rebuked for protesting the necessity of Jesus' suffering, comes immediately after the passage we heard last week, where Peter declares Jesus to be the Messiah, the Son of the living God, and is praised by Jesus. Remember? "Blessed are you, Simon bar-Jonah! ... You are Peter and on this rock I will build my church."

But here the tone changes. Jesus knows that his path will take him through suffering, death and resurrection. When he shares this knowledge with disciples, Peter protests but is rebuked. And Jesus then speaks of the necessity of self-denial and cross-bearing, not only for himself but for those who would follow him. This is not only a different kind of Messiah than expected, it is a different way of being in the world than the one we are used to.

As early as the prophet Jeremiah we see God acting in way other than the way expected. In today's passage, Jeremiah calls for God to bring down retribution on his persecutors. Notice that in answer God does not promise to punish Jeremiah's persecutors as Jeremiah has requested, but God does promise strength and protection, salvation and deliverance.

Jesus embodies what this strength and protection, salvation and deliverance look like, and it does not involve the destruction of the enemies of God's people, which is what Peter and many others apparently expect. It involves love, forgiveness, healing and self-sacrifice. Jesus demonstrates these qualities to the extreme of submitting to humiliation and death. He further encourages his followers to do likewise. This is not only a different kind of Messiah than expected, it is a different way of being in the world than the one we are used to.

Paul expands this teaching in his letter to the Romans. Hold fast to what is good. And what is good? Love, respect, zeal, service, patience, hope, perseverance, prayer, generosity, hospitality, empathy, humility, peace. And this is not just the way you behave with your friends. Even with your persecutors. Leave retribution to God.

I wonder what would happen if Christians, we who say we are followers of Jesus, actually ever did this in significant numbers. This is definitely a different way than the one we are used to.

Do not be distracted by that comment about heaping coals on people's heads. That does make it sound as if Paul is saying the reason to be nice to your enemies is because it will annoy them more than fighting back. While this is obviously a possible outcome, being so motivated hardly represents the genuine love of which St. Paul speaks. A Lutheran colleague has suggested another interpretation of this picture of heaping coals. Apparently a coal fire is very hard to start. When your fire goes cold, the easiest way to restart it is with some live coals from somebody else's fire. Thus, heaping coals upon a person whose fire has gone out may actually be an act of neighborly generosity in the time of their need.

In any event, the real challenge in these passages is that Christians are called to live differently in the world than the way we're used to, given the prevailing culture, just as Jesus was a different kind of Messiah than the one expected. As counter-cultural as this teaching is, Christians are called to genuinely love our enemies. This is more than just words. This means loving and respecting people even when in our eyes they don't deserve love and respect. This includes people who post things in Facebook and write letters to the Editor and do things publicly that make our eyes cross with rage.

There may not be a way to feed them literally, but think of what would feed them, even if it's just the minimum of human respect. Here's a clue: merely reacting with outrage is not remotely a feeding, loving reaction. And you know I'm preaching to myself here too.

Jesus is a different kind of Messiah than the one people expect, and he calls us to a different kind of life: eternal life, abundant life: joyful, peaceful and loving.