

Pentecost 18B
Peace, Seattle
September 6, 2015
James 2:1-10,14-17, Mark 7:24-37

WHO MATTERS?

**Who matters? Who is allowed inside the circle and who is excluded?
How wide is God's embrace? And to what degree are we expected to follow?**

Our readings from James and Mark wrestle with these questions; the church—for 20 centuries—has wrestled with these question; and still they remain every bit as germane in the 21st century as they were in the 1st century.

In his book Reasons for Hope, José Luí­s Mart­n Descalzo tells this story:¹

Years ago, he writes, I had a friend who was a member of a small and fervent Christian community. The members used to meet once a week to talk about Christ, their faith, and how to spread its message. Because they worked during the day, they met at night over dinner, and then stay on talking, sometimes until 2 or 3 in the morning. My friend used to leave those meetings with his soul on fire, the light of the gospel burning bright in him, ready to give the best of his life to his faith.....**Until one night.**

It was winter, a biting cold night, and my friend got home close to 3am from the church meeting. When he got out of his car, he saw that across the street from where he lives, a man was asleep on an iron bench, his crumpled body barely covered by a few newspapers.

Something shifted in my friend's soul: on a night like that, a man lying on a bench with only an old overcoat and a few newspapers for protection could very well freeze to death. How could he abandon him just like that?

He heard a voice inside his head shouting that that would be a crime. But then another voice told him that he could not take a complete stranger into his house. What if he was a thief? And what would his wife and his children say if he woke them at 3am to find somewhere for that ragged man to sleep?

As he put his key into the lock, he shouted to himself a thousand times that he was being a coward. But his selfishness was too strong for him. And once he got into his apartment, he deliberately avoided looking out over the balcony so that his conscience would not batter him any harder than it was already doing.

When he got into bed, the blankets seemed both warm and freezing at the same time. He felt as if he were living simultaneously in the burning hell of his selfishness and in the freezing body of the beggar. And it was several hours before he could get to sleep...

When he woke up the next morning, he went to the window in a panic: he was sure that he would see the same body that he had left lying there on the bench, but perhaps dead...

The bench was empty. He did not know whether to laugh or cry.

His shame burned in him the whole of the following week... He did not dare to go to church or take communion... He could not wait for the following Friday to come so he could confess to God and his companions the sin that weighed more and more heavily on his conscience as the days went by.

When Friday came and he told the story...almost crying as he did so, he was amazed to see that none of his companions seemed particularly affected by what he had to say.

¹ José Luí­s Mart­n Descalzo, *Reasons for Hope*. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007) p. 9ff. I have edited the text to compress it.

It was not just that they made light of the whole thing, saying that everybody makes a thousand mistakes a day; it was that they even managed to come up with all sorts of theories to excuse how he had behaved...

My friend left the meeting that night more chilled than ever. And he decided never to return to that community. He did not want to pass judgment on them, much less condemn them. But he realized that something was not right there. - José Descalzo

What good is it, writes James, if you say you have faith but do not have works? If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and you say, 'Go in peace—keep warm and eat your fill,' and you don't supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? So faith, by itself, if it has no works, is dead.

**There is a clear ethic that follows those of us who follow Christ:
God—talk without God—acts is nonsense.²**

The image of the lifeless body of a 3-year-old boy on a Turkish beach stunned the world this past week, and focused attention on the growing crisis that's seen thousands of refugees flee places of conflict in the Middle East, North Africa and Asia hoping for a better life in Europe.

Something is not right here.

3-year-old Aylan, his mother Rehan, and his 5-year-old brother Galip drowned when the overloaded refugee boat in which their family was riding, capsized in rough seas as it tried to make its way from Turkey to Greece. Father and husband Abdullah Kurdi tried in vain to save them.³

One woman, in a letter to The New York Times, articulated what so many of us have felt:

"I cannot sleep," she writes, "after seeing the photos of the toddler washed up like a human shell on the sands of a Turkish beach. It does not help to be the mother of a toddler myself. I cannot bear to look. I cannot bring myself to look away.

In one of the photos, he lies the way my own son sleeps, on his belly, his arms at his side, palms facing the heavens. His Velcro shoes have opened, not from small fingers busily at work, but rather the ferocity of humanity and of the waves.

He has been let down, entirely, by both civilization and nature.

He did nothing but want for life. And we—yes, we—left him to risk the unpredictable seas. I am so ashamed. I want to tell his father how sorry I am, for the sorrow that will cast shadows over the rest of his days; for how simple selfishness and our self-induced blindness can cast aside lives.⁴

Jesus, in Matthew's gospel, was a young refugee not unlike little Aylan.

He was close to the same age when he was scooped up by his parents in the middle of the night and taken on a journey across borders to seek refuge and safety from the predatory violence of a despotic king.

Memory of that event seems to have lodged itself deep in Jesus' soul. For in his public ministry we see him again and again reaching out beyond boundaries and across borders to first notice and then include people whose attributes and circumstances have pushed them to the margins.

² Eugene Peterson's summary translation of James 3:17, from *The Message*.

³ Scott Neuman, NPR <http://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2015/09/04/437514664/drowned-syrian-boys-father-we-are-human-beings-just-like-westerners>. See also <http://www.kpbs.org/news/2015/sep/03/photo-of-dead-3-year-old-syrian-refugee-breaks/>

⁴ Elisabeth Becker, in a letter to the *New York Times*: http://www.nytimes.com/2015/09/05/opinion/a-3-year-old-syrian-refugees-life-cut-short.html?_r=0

That's why his encounter with the Syrophenician woman in today's story catches us off guard.

Unlike every other episode in the gospels where Jesus is asked for aid and gives it, here Jesus starts to utter a NO. But that NO turns to YES when the desperate mother refuses to yield, insisting that she and her daughter also deserve to be fed—even if only with crumbs.

Jesus doesn't come off very well here. And what's remarkable to me about this, is that this story could have easily been tossed out by the early Christian community—censored—as an unfavorable portrayal of the one they had come to know as their Lord and God. **But it wasn't.**

Instead the story was remembered and passed on. And thank goodness it was!

For here we witness how Jesus himself is changed when confronted by a suffering mother who will not let go of her belief that he can heal her daughter.⁵

And if we, dear sisters and brothers, if we can see Jesus himself grow in his understanding of how far God's mercy and healing reach, can we not imagine ourselves, too, being changed, our hearts enlarged, 'til we become people of radical welcome and acceptance—not in word only, not in concept—but in deed?

To be bound to the crucified and living One—and that's what our baptism means—is to see Christ at work in the world, suffering with the unwanted refugee, weeping with childless fathers and orphaned children. To be bound to Jesus is to hear him beckoning us to follow—especially to those places where we would rather not go.

Christ is present in tortured landscapes where people, fleeing for refuge, find their children washed up on foreign shores. And looking at us he says: Where are your voices? Where are your shelters? Have you no room?

As long as war, racism and disaster have featured in the human story—and they always have—there have been refugees in crisis. Often we succeed in pushing them to the edge of our consciousness.

Last week, little Aylan changed that.

Photos of him have galvanized people around the world, provoking them to prod their leaders and themselves to open their borders and hearts more widely; to offer places of safety where refugees can find relief and sanctuary from violence and build new lives with hope.

“I hope this people will be helped, that these massacres are stopped,” pleaded Abdullah Kurdi as he buried his family. “We are human beings, just like Westerners.”

Today God's word reminds us that faith is not a sedentary activity. Faith does not sit still; it ACTS, it MOVES.

Faith is God's love taking action through us; God's hands reaching out through our hands.

Faith is God's compassion being expressed in, with, and through our advocacy for others—including people we will never meet; expressed in the way we care for each other, and in the way we make room for the Aylans of the world.

⁵ Adele Resmer, *New Proclamation 2006* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006) p. 199

There is a place for everyone in the heart of God.

And God's deepest desire is to form us, through the Spirit, into a community, which, pulsing with the Savior's heart, embodies the transforming power of his cross and empty tomb in the world.

Amen.