THANKSGIVING SUNDAY/STEWARDSHIP SUNDAY

Nu’uanu Congregational Church

November 15, 2020

*“Unexpected”*

This has always been one of my favorite stories—I have never been sure why. I think it has to do with the way the sheep are surprised when told they have seen and served Christ.

*“Lord,* [they ask] *when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?”*

I like the thought that one or two of the sheep are standing there and hearing this and thinking to themselves look over their lives and they suddenly realized and they slap their slapped their hand to their forehead and say, “Wow, that was *you?!*”

Instead of scenes of awesome glory, they remember something quite different. They remember a flooded town and people reaching toward them for food, and warm, dry clothes. Another will remember reaching through prison bars to take a hand of a stranger and offer a prayer, or picking up a hammer to help build a house, or standing up in solidarity with people demonstrating for better working conditions or a living wage, or taking a knee beside others to protest racial injustice in their country.

Still others will remember more intimate scenes: visiting a nursing home during a holiday, preparing a meal for a shelter, helping someone carry their groceries to their car, cutting the lawn of an elderly neighbor whose children live far away.

So, I like the way Jesus’ story calls to mind those times in our lives when we went an extra mile to help a family member, a friend, or even a complete stranger. Most of us have such memories. Some of the stories we have are quite involved and may have actually been a bit of disruption in your life, but you did it anyway—you went out of your way. Some stories are small, but equally as satisfying.

One of my own small stories happened many, many, many years ago. I do not remember where I was going, but I do remember where I was. I was sitting on a bench at a bus stop on Date Street, just ewa of University Avenue. If you know the area, the bus stop was situated on the sidewalk, between Date Street on the makai side, and a canal on the mauka side.

As I sat there waiting for the bus—that is how I know it was a long time ago, because it was before I owned a car. Anyway, as I sat there, two or three children from the neighborhood stopped by and began playing on the sidewalk. They had like a net or something attached to a string that they started dropping into the water. At one point, they dropped it but the kid holding the end of the string let go of it.

The three of them stood looking down into the canal, and talking about what to do about their lost belonging.

I had been trying to ignore the three of them as they played their game. I must have been on my way to work and it would have been after a full day of classes at UH. So, I just sat there hugging my purse in my lap and watching for the bus.

The next thing I knew, one of the boys had climbed over the short barrier and lowered himself into the canal. It was shallow, so I was not worried about him being in danger in the water. However, it was about five or six feet below the sidewalk and the boy was small. He was no more than eight.

As I continued to sit there and ignore them, the boy in the canal began to climb back up. Well, of course he could not make it. He could not come back up. There were no footholds or and handholds to grab on to, and it was very steep. It was a sheer drop down. I could hear splashing and worried noises coming from all three.

Finally, I turned around and looked at the kid in the canal. He was wet and covered in mud up to his knees.

Without a word—without a conscious thought—I stood up, leaned over the barrier, I pretty much had to double myself over, and extended my hand to him. He was as light as a feather as I hauled him up out of the canal. He mumbled a thank you in my direction, and then the three of them disappeared back into the neighborhood. I sat down and continued to wait for my bus.

I think that was one of those times when I was a sheep—not really because of what I *did*, but because of what I learned, and because of what was affirmed to me.

First of all, it affirmed that I had a gift to offer. It was a small, humble gift. It was the gift of being the biggest and strongest person on the scene. But it was also a reminder of other gifts I have been given; other gifts I have to offer. Finally, it reminded me that the gifts we are given are meant to be used.

Second, I remember thinking afterward, that because I had been the only adult on the scene, that made me responsible in some real way for those children’s well being in that moment. It may have been only for an instant, but their small, momentary need laid a claim on my attention and effort that I could not ignore. It revealed a mutuality; and a bond that our humanity creates and maintains with others.

Third, finally, is that the truth of the matter is that sometimes I get to stand with the sheep, but sometimes I do find myself with the goats. We all do. Life goes by very quickly and is often crowded with all sorts of interruptions and disturbances.

Sometimes we will try to make our way past our own lives in order to enter into solidarity with others, but it just will not always be possible. It does not help that we do not always know or have the presence of mind to recognize Jesus in, what Mother Theresa referred to as, “the distressing disguise of the poor.” And even if we do have the presence of mind in that moment, it is entirely possible that we will still fall short.

A lot of the time, most of us are like the woman I was so many years ago: sitting at a bus stop, sort of leaning into the work and travail that will be coming upon me in the next moment. Our attention is elsewhere, insulating us from the moment at hand and the people around us. In those moments, we are truly alone.

Then, something happens. Something will happen that lifts us out of ourselves and allows us to connect with another person or persons. Sometimes, this happens only for an instant. Sometimes, the connection lasts longer and deepens.

The quality of the experience is the same for both: that is both have the potential to increase our interest and understanding for one another. Both have the potential to inspire us to wonder what it means to have the experience that Jesus alludes to in the story: the experience of seeing the face of Christ, and responding. So, there is hope for all of us—sheep and goats.

Most of all, we have this story that Jesus left for us to read and re-read, and pray over. He told this story to the disciples to prepare them, even as he was preparing himself for his last trip to Jerusalem. As we know, Jerusalem will bring an end to his earthly life, but it will mark the beginning of eternal life for all who know and love him.

Before he leaves us, before he goes to the cross, he tells his disciples a story about how they have a choice. They can be like those who have allowed their lives to be shaped by the love God has freely given. But he knows and wants us to know: there will also be those whose lives were shaped by other priorities, other concerns. This is a story he has been telling for some time, now—each time hoping and praying that we will hear it and be prepared to see him again and again. Indeed, I cannot help but believe that Jesus’ dearest prayer for us is that we will *look* for him in the faces of other people so that we may know the true communion he wants to create in our lives.

One writer put it this way:

*“I hear Jesus’ words today reminding me that I simply don’t know when I will encounter the face of Christ next: thus making nearly all ground holy ground. And in the end, maybe that is precisely what* [his] *words are meant to do.”*

To which I can only add: Amen.