

SEEING THE SIGNS

A sermon preached by the Rev. Dr. Nadene Grieve-Deslippe on August 15, 2010

Crossroads United Church

Isaiah 5: 1-7

Luke 12:49-56

An anonymous source once said, "When Columbus started out he didn't know where he was going, when he got there he didn't know where he was, and when he got back he didn't know where he had been." In many respects this just about sums up most of my days. In the rote routine of any given day we can be oblivious to so many things- taking the unfolding drama of any given moment completely for granted- so much so that the awesome eclipses us. I think that I have told you before of a group of professionals who were attending a workshop on the sacred, and as a part of the seminar watched a slide presentation of sacred images. They saw icons, and masterpieces in oil and embroidered cloth, sculpture and stained glass. At one point they saw a bronze representation of a dancing Shiva.

Shiva, the masculine aspect of the Hindu God, was dancing in a ring of fire. The hands of his many arms hold examples of an abundance of spiritual symbols. As he dances one of his feet is high and one rests on the back of a naked man crouching in the grass and giving all of his attention to a leaf that he holds in his hands. At the conclusion of the presentation most of the professionals in the room were curious about the little man holding the leaf, and asked the facilitator what it meant. The facilitator began to laugh in irony at the question. The facilitator answered that the little man represents those so caught up in the study of the material world, that he fails to notice that the Supreme God is dancing on his back. Which is the point that Jesus was making to his hearers in the gospel lesson for today in his reference to the weather.

We glimpse Jesus at his exasperated best this morning-almost shaking his head in disbelief at what his hearers seem oblivious to. Like the man focused on the leaf in the preceding example, the people of Nazareth had witnessed signs and wonders that were executed at the hands and lips of the carpenter turned teacher. The leper has

been cleansed, the paralytic has been restored, withered hands made whole, and the dead raised. He has engaged with his talk and fed the minions with loaves and fishes, and yet the people are better able to discern the meaning in a cloud and a south wind than who it is that they keep company with.

They can read the signs in the weather but are blind to the signs from God- the Son of God stands among them-eating with them, providing for them, healing them, restoring them, engaging them, offering them the Kingdom in the name of God, and are they the least bit cognitive of who it is that stands among them? It is almost as if Jesus is growing weary of the selective understanding in the people. When he proffers food, and healing and calls the tyrant to accountability; when he preaches justice and humility and the reversal of fortunes for the haves and the have not, then he is perceived in full messianic expectation. When he suggests that there is some responsibility required of the individual in response to the message, his hearers are oblivious. Clouds in the sky that bring rain and breezes from the south that will result in scorching heat become more consuming.

The teaching on the lips of Jesus for his hearers in his day, as for us in our generation, is not an easy one to bear. How we might prefer the image of the sweet Jesus meek and mild that went about doing good and seemed impervious to the shallowness of his followers. Jesus who never said no when a request was made of him; Jesus who was able to stretch a meager offering into food sufficient for the day; Jesus who was patient with his disciples and who took the time to explain the point of a particular parable, or to demonstrate what was paramount; Jesus who seemed never to be dictated to by ego, nor constrained by his humanity; Jesus who lived for others- putting the haughty in their place and uplifting the lowly. This is a Jesus that is attractive and inviting to us, but this Jesus makes us gulp and shy away from making a decision. This is a Jesus who finds himself in a critical moment in a most critical time as he prepares himself for a most demanding baptism.

Fred Craddock in his commentary writes that Jesus is the crisis of the world. He writes that crisis does not mean emergency but that moment or occasion of truth and decision about life. To be placed in the situation of decision is critical, for to turn toward one person or goal or value means turning away from another. God is acting through the man and message of Jesus to create a crisis- that is a point of decision- and making a difference-such that lives and families will be effected. The status quo is being shaken, and one needs to use the windows of the soul to perceive it and understand it. We continue to stand at the crossroads of decision in the living and acting of our faith in our generation, and it can yet and still be critical for us.

I was the officiant at a wedding recently where I was reminded again of how small this town is. The mother of the bride spoke to me at the rehearsal about a particular person that we once both held in common. Both of us have receded to the past in the life of this individual. As we spoke together I noticed more tension and passion in my voice than I intended-and it was obvious to me that I had some residual anger and disappointment towards the third party. As I made my way home I resolved that on the next day I would apologize for my passion.

Scant minutes before the wedding was to begin the mother of the bride entered the room with her husband and daughter and I took her aside. I began to say, "I want to apologize for...and before I could finish the sentence she finished it for me and said, "your rant, Yesterday." I immediately felt as though I had been caught with my hand in the cookie jar and in embarrassment and as a way of explanation I began to say, "Well I wouldn't call it a rant." The irony is that had she not referred to my remark as a "rant" I may not have continued to muse my less than Christ-like demeanor. It was only one sentence but her judgment and assessment of me caused me to ask myself many questions about the way I live my life in faith.

Am I able to forgive when someone hurts me deeply and unnecessarily? If I hold some residual disappointment and anger towards one that has hurt and disappointed me, does that mean that I have not forgiven? How do I live that line in the prayer that

Jesus taught, "Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sins against us?" Is there more expected of me because I am a minister than is expected of others who are followers among the laity? If I keep my opinions to myself in the wake of being hurt but still harbour the hurt, does it mean that my forgiveness is cheap and insincere?

As I placed that situation under the figurative microscope and pondered it in my heart and soul I realized that it was the still small voice of providence incarnate that was asking me to make a decision. Was I solidly on the side of the gospel or was I concentrating on leaves in the grass, and clouds in the heavens and breezes on the wind? Was it the material world- with its sham, drudgery, broken promises and hurt that was consuming me or should I take note of the Supreme God dancing in my midst, and in the life of the one who had hurt me?

I have not been one to hold grudges, and while I may never again have a relationship with that person, I can be forgiving, and forgetful and strive for the kingdom. Who among us has not been hurt and disappointed? It may ground us as securely in the human family as much as love and grief-that similarly know no restriction on race, border, experience or creed. As I felt the negative emotion well within me I recognized it as a sign that maybe I was not seeing things as Christ would have me view them. It was the storm clouds and the sting of hot air that was superceding the power and presence of the Christ in my life. Had the mother of the bride called my statement anything other than a rant I may have missed the sign altogether even if one person's idea of a rant is another's idea of honesty. The wisdom of the Christ resounds in the rhetorical, " You hypocrites! You know how to interpret the appearance of earth and sky, but why do you not know how to interpret the present time?"

Perhaps Columbus did not fully comprehend where he was going and where he had been. And like the naked man in the bronze Dancing Shiva, and the people that Jesus was addressing, we too may be more focused on the material and the temporal than on the eternal, but the signs abound if we but open our eyes to see and our hearts to ponder. Sometimes it is in the glorious when we are awakened to the presence of the

Kingdom and sometimes it is the inglorious where we are brought to our knees. In the disappointment of Good Friday and in the celebration of the resurrection Christ is the Lord of the Dance. Thanks be to God. Amen.