

Proper 25/Lectionary 30 + October 23, 2011

Last Thursday, Britt and I gave ourselves a rare treat. We went to the Curran Theatre in San Francisco to see a live production of Richard III starring Kevin Spacey. It was a gripping drama that at least held my attention even if it lasted 3 and half hours. The evening also contained an element of surprise. Let me explain. About 45 minutes into the play the theatre literally began to shake. We were sitting in the balcony and suddenly we felt the entire building move for a few moments. The play went on without missing a beat, as though nothing had happened. Britt and I looked at one another and she said, “Was that an earthquake or was that part of the play?” I know that there is such a thing as special effects, but how in the world could they pull off something like that? Well, at Intermission our curiosity was satisfied. Many folks were consulting their I-phones to check the news and sure enough, what we felt was a 3.9 earthquake. There was another one earlier that afternoon. Needless to say, it was a night of high drama. Drama on the stage and Drama in real life. We were surprised and at least for a moment or two, shaken.

That’s one of the ways I often think about Jesus and what Jesus does in our lives. Many of us here have been going to church for years and maybe at times we presume that life in the Kingdom of God is rather predictable, but Jesus has this way of surprising us, disrupting us, even shaking us up. For example, when we come to worship we generally have a sense of what will unfold as we journey through the liturgy, but sometime we will be surprised. We might hear something in the Scripture or the sermon that will come as a word of challenge that will grip us, cause us to think or even lead to new behavior. Or we may hear of experience something in the singing or the praying or the feasting at Christ’s table that will move our hearts and deepen our trust in God. Perhaps it happens without our even being conscious of it. I do believe that God is busy changing us – changing our perceptions and changing our lives.

That element of surprise is there when we read the Scripture. For even though we may have heard or read these ancient words hundreds of times, they will invariably come to us as a new word and isn’t that especially true when we encounter Jesus in the Gospels?

Now, a first impression with today’s Gospel lesson might leave us believing otherwise. Jesus sounds rather traditional and orthodox as he answers the question of the Pharisees who ask Jesus which of the 613 laws is the greatest. He demonstrates his knowledge of Scripture and the tradition by going back to the Law and citing both Deuteronomy and Leviticus: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.” A second one is like it: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” Yet, I still believe that Jesus’ response surprises. For one, he doesn’t quote just one command but brings together two and by doing that he is getting at the very heart of God’s law. Essentially, Jesus says that to love God IS to love your neighbor. You cannot do one without the other. Thanks to Jesus we are freed from consigning love to a mere feeling, or a generality or an abstraction. In Jesus love is made specific, concrete and particular ... and that is where, I think the element of surprise comes in.

For example Jesus speaks of reconciliation as the way of love. Make peace with your sister or brother. Forgive seventy times seven. Don't waste time judging others. Why remove the speck from your the eyes of your sister or brother when you have a log in your own eye? And the clincher: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you. Suddenly, love is hard and difficult work. I often forget that, especially when my notion of love is merely sentimental and my inclination, of course, is to put off or ignore the hard conversation or, to put it in Jesus' terms, the loving confrontation. Yet, the promise is that when it occurs Jesus is present in a most powerful way.

On a Sunday in November you will hear the parable of the sheep and goats where he lets them know that when they visited the prisoner, welcomed the stranger, clothed the naked, fed the hungry and visited the sick, that they were actually ministering to him. The sheep were surprised. When did we do that? The goats were also surprised. You mean we didn't do that? In either case they were surprised. Here the love of God is made known and made real among those whom it is easy to ignore. I'm usually caught by surprise. Just when I've consigned God to the big and powerful and triumphant, here is God most alive in the suffering ones among us. Here is love.

In Luke's Gospel, a lawyer asks Jesus about the greatest commandment and like what we heard this morning he says love God with all your heart and soul and mind and love your neighbors as yourself. In that passage, the lawyer then goes on to ask, "Who is my neighbor?" That's when Jesus tells the story of the Good Samaritan who helps a man who is dying on the side of the road. Now imagine the surprise or shock of the lawyer. Samaritans were regarded as enemies, loathed by good and pious Jews. But here the one who carries out the love of God is that person whom the lawyer would have least expected. Jesus so routinely surprises us, doesn't he?

Or, what about the Last Supper as it is reported in John's Gospel? Jesus demonstrates love not by taking the assumed order of the world and turning it upside down. Jesus, the Master, the Teacher, the one who is Lord kneels to wash his disciple's feet. Why, should not the disciples wash the Master's feet? Here is a radical reversal of roles and in doing this Jesus teaches us that life isn't about hierarchies but about living as servants. That little band of Jesus' disciples were surely surprised. And so are we.

Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with your entire mind. Love your neighbor as yourself. When Jesus shows us what such love looks we are often surprised and even shaken up and we are transformed.

In his commentary on the Gospel of Matthew, theologian Stanley Hauerwas puts it this way: "To be a Christian is to be called to a life of love, but that calling is a lifelong task that requires our willingness to be surprised by what love turns out to be."

Are we willing to be open to such surprise? Are we willing to be surprised by what love turns out to be? Are we willing to see that the neighbor isn't merely that friend with whom we spend

a lot of time, but the woman or man who with the greatest need? Are we willing to open sometimes the neighbor is that we may not like or even despise? Are we willing to be open to breaking down walls that separate us one from another and to embrace the love of Jesus? Are we open to eradicating the notion that some people are more important than others and to take Jesus' washing of the feet as an approach to all our living?

The good news is that the one who teaches us and shows us the way is the very one in whom we live. God loves us just as we are and gives us the will and the energy to love in the same way God loves us.

As we wrestled with the gospel reading last Tuesday at the Men's Breakfast we thought about what it means to love the enemy or at least the person you don't particularly like and it was our brother David Iezzi who imparted the best wisdom of that morning and for me all week. David said, Pray about it and when you bring that person to prayer, God will soften your heart and show you the way.

That power of God not only surprises us, but shakes us up and changes the world. Are we willing to be so open and so surprised? Amen.