
CHANGING OUR VIEW

Today's gospel reading lead me to recall a mission trip made by the high school youth of a church I served in Wisconsin.

- It was to work with Zion Lutheran Church in Rockford, Illinois.

Zion sat on the edge of the downtown area of Rockford.

- Over the years this downtown area had transitioned from a thriving and charming business district to a neighborhood that housed brothels and was the place where many unhoused people slept on the street.
- Zion had made a commitment to make a difference in their neighborhood and established the Zion Development Corporation that worked to improve the appearance of the streets, purchase run-down buildings and brothels, and perform other works that would transform their community and its people.
 - Particularly, those purchased buildings would either be refurbished for new businesses or apartments, or torn down and the lots transformed into free parking where there was no free parking using the bricks from the buildings themselves as pavement.
- For a week we lived in that church and worked on various projects so that the youth could gain a greater vision for how the church can transform the lives of communities and people and further the Kingdom of GOD.

One morning, Meredith, Angie, Michael, and I had been assigned to clean out the trash from the tree wells along Seventh Street.

- After removing the trash from under the tree we would fill the wells with gravel to keep trash out in the future.

As we took a break and sat along the side of a building, a woman approached us.

- She was dressed in somewhat tattered clothes and had a dazed look in her eyes.
- She came up to us and asked if we had any money so that she could buy some food.
 - We had been instructed not to carry any money with us because of this very type of situation, so we told her that we had none.
- After she walked on, we talked about how we wished we could do something for her.
 - Mike remembered some sandwiches that were in the refrigerator back at Zion Church.
 - He took off running the three blocks back to the church to get the food.
 - Meredith got up and went after the woman who we could see a couple blocks up the street to bring her back.
 - I was very proud of these young people who sensed that this woman deserved more than just whatever crumbs she could find.

In this gospel text for today we hear of another woman who is seeking more than just crumbs.

- This woman, a Canaanite, had a daughter who was tormented by a demon.
 - Canaan was more commonly called Syrophenicia and was located north and west of Galilee in what is today Syria.
 - The people who lived there were looked down upon by the Jews as outsiders and not part of GOD'S chosen people.

- Yet she came to JESUS, a Jew and asked that HE heal her daughter.
 - JESUS, at first, seems to ignore the woman and then says, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel.”
- As she continues to beg, “LORD, help me,” JESUS in uncharacteristic harshness says, “It is not right to take the children’s bread and throw it to the dogs.”
 - The woman’s answer shows that she is willing to settle for even the least HE might offer her, “Yes...but even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from the master’s table.”
- JESUS was obviously pleased with her response, as HE says to her, “Woman, you have great faith! Your request is granted.”

This dialogue between JESUS and the woman is shocking to us.

- How could HE have been so nasty to her?
 - Never mind that she’s not one of the chosen.
 - She’s a mother seeking help for her daughter.
 - How could JESUS have been so mean?

Many of you know the problems that can come when we text or post information,

- and someone can only read your words, and thus misinterprets what you are saying.
- I had an aunt who only typed on Facebook with the caps lock on, though she wasn’t really yelling which is what that implies.
- I think that’s the case here as well—we’re misinterpreting.
 - We can’t see JESUS’ face and where HE’S looking when HE speaks.
 - We can’t hear the tone of HIS voice.
- Matthew includes some valuable information.
 - v. 23 says, *JESUS did not say a word. So, HIS disciples came to HIM and urged HIM, “Send her away.”*
 - It is then that JESUS replies.
 - I think HE waited to see how they would respond to this woman in need,
 - and when they try to dismiss her, JESUS turns on them and gives some sarcastic comments designed to name what they are thinking and to challenge them.
 - (Sarcastically) *“I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel?”*
 - “Is that what you’re thinking?”
 - (Sarcastically) *“It is not right to take the children’s bread and toss it to the dogs?”*
 - Is that you think about yourselves and this woman?

I think JESUS is challenging them to change their thinking and their view, and with them, challenging us, too.

- There are those today who, though they are also Americans, are “not like us” because of race, yet who seek equal treatment.
- There are those today who because of their gender are not valued as equal with others.
 - How do we as followers of JESUS respond to them?
 - What would JESUS say to us and how would HE say it?

If I asked six or eight of you to stand together in a circle, how would you form it?

- Most likely you would face each other, wouldn’t you?
 - That would be because you wanted to see each other, the faces of people you know.

Zion Lutheran in Rockford from time-to-time, turned themselves to look outward.

What they have seen in that outward-looking circle is a neighborhood, a community that needs what they have to offer.

- The youth that cleaned out the tree wells were given heavy gloves to wear to protect themselves because, not only were their cigarette butts and wrappers under those trees; there were used condoms and hypodermic needles.
- One night, I took our group out for a walk in that downtown area around Zion.
 - During that walk, we saw a woman dressed in leather—obviously a prostitute.
 - We watched through a window of liquor store as one man distracted the employee by buying a bottle of alcohol, while his partner snuck out the door with two unpaid-for cases of beer.

This is the neighborhood that Zion Lutheran saw as the looked outward.

- This is the neighborhood that our youth worked to help reclaim.
 - We chipped mortar off of bricks so that they could be used to pave parking lots where once had stood an adult book store.
 - We cleaned out buildings, painted walls, and even built walls for houses and apartments that would be rented at a cost of only 30% of the tenant's income.
 - By changing the appearance of that downtown area, other businesses worked to improve their property and to make this the kind of area where people were proud to work and live,
 - and where prostitutes and drug dealers would not be able to find customers.

I believe those youth also had their view changed.

- They learned how quickly a neighborhood can deteriorate if not valued and cared for.
- They learned how to take a bad situation and make it better through vision and hard work.
- And they learned that they could make a difference in the world for communities and for individuals.

Speaking of individuals, when Meredith caught up with that woman who asked for food, the woman said, "No."

- She didn't want the sandwiches the young people were offering her.

Sometimes that happens.

- Sometimes people want something different than what is offered.

Nevertheless, JESUS calls us, challenges us to do for others based solely on their need.

- It doesn't matter what they look like, or sound like, or smell like.
 - All that matters is that when they have needs that we can meet, JESUS calls us to serve.
- It isn't always easy.
- It isn't always comfortable or safe.
 - But it's what JESUS calls for.
- And how do we do it?
 - We need to turn around for a few moments and look outward, to see the needs and think how we might help.
 - It's what JESUS calls us to do and it all begins with changing our view.