

“For I Was Hungry”
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Presbyterian Church in Leonia
October 3, 2021
World Communion Sunday

Psalm 8
Matthew 25:31-40

On this World Communion Sunday, our gospel passage reminds us that the kingdom of God begins with the sharing of food. It begins with the sharing of drink. “For I was hungry, and you gave me something to eat.” “For I was thirsty, and you gave me something to drink.”

To Jesus, this act of care and hospitality is his first reason for welcome into the kingdom of heaven and into the blessings of God.

“But when did we do this?” the people asked. We might ask ourselves, “When did we do this?”

A UCLA basketball coach, John Wooden, once said, “character is what you do when no one is looking.” The kind of behavior-- the kind of character-- Jesus describes in this gospel passage is not behavior one does to get into heaven. These are not actions people do to gain God’s blessing. The behavior Jesus describes here is a kind of orientation, a tendency to show compassion and care to others, not because they are in your flock, but because it’s in your nature. The later discovery that Jesus was there, in the body of the sick person who was cared for, or the hungry person who was fed-- well, that comes as an unexpected surprise which those who do such service only discover at the final judgement.

Sheep, after all, don’t know they are sheep, and goats don’t know they are goats. It’s the shepherd who makes those distinctions.

But the thing about the kinds of people Jesus describes, is that if they fit into the categories of the sheep on the right, who cared for the vulnerable and in doing so cared for Jesus himself, is that once they realize once they receive blessings from God, once they have at last made it to the kingdom of God, they are the kind of people who are going to look at who did not make it in, and they are going to want to turn back and help bring those people to join the feast, too. These aren’t the kinds of people who get upgraded to business class and then look back to see how crowded and miserable people are in coach, and then snicker in satisfaction as they feel even better that they made it into business class.

It’s true that the church probably has some sheep in it, and probably has some goats in it. But as we come together, we become the body of Christ, and together call ourselves to become more than what or who we are on our own.

Sometimes, it can even be people outside the church who call us to this nobler outlook and behavior. After all, Jesus says in the gospels, “all the nations will be gathered.”

I transferred colleges just before my junior year, and during our transfer student orientation, I made a new friend, Asiyah. Born in Afghanistan, she and her family fled the country while she was a preteen, because her parents knew that life under the Taliban is no way a girl should have to live and grow. They ended up in Stone Mountain, Georgia, where Asiyah went to school under the gaze of the Confederate soldiers etched onto that huge, granite rock. Asiyah seemed to have an instinct for justice, even when it wasn't for herself. She and I were both officers in our campus Amnesty International chapter. I remember Asiyah would do all the organizational work to prepare our group for civil actions and protests-- but then she would step back; since she was not yet a citizen, she knew she needed to be cautious; when she took her citizenship test, she didn't want anything to thwart that process. We always joked about what might be in my growing FBI file, but to Asiyah, it was no joke; I learned that my right to protest and raise my voice was a privilege not all in America could exercise. It was always clear to me that Asiyah loved America, this place that has protected her and her family, where she has been able to live into her God-given rights. And the justice work she did, even helping to organize protests, was based on her faith in what America can be; she was holding this country to its highest standards.

When we hosted an international feast day to educate about human rights situations around the world, Asiyah and I were tasked with getting food donations. Each time we climbed into Asiyah's car, she would kiss her hand and then reach across me to touch the Koran which was strapped to the sun visor in the passenger seat. Within a couple of days, with Asiyah's negotiation skills and amazing kindness, we had scored free trays of falafel, arroz con pollo, pad thai, bulgogi, jerk chicken, and california rolls to serve to hungry classmates desperate for a free meal that wasn't cafeteria food; as they ate, they signed petitions and volunteered for justice projects locally and globally. Even though this meal was not religious, it reminded me of the sacrament of communion; one of the layers of meaning in the table that Jesus set is that as we are fed, we look around to see who else is hungry? Who else is thirsty? Who is persecuted? We see them. We take note. And we honor the possibility that the hungry, suffering person before us is actually the dwelling place for God.

My friend Asiyah went on to become a lawyer, and a US citizen. But she took her incredible skills and passion for advocacy-- and her very young son-- back to Afghanistan in 2010, after the country had been made safe from the Taliban. That safety no longer exists. Here is what Asiyah recently shared with me:

The Taliban closed the Ministry of Women's Affairs and turned it into the Ministry of Vice and Virtue, notorious for abuse under the previous regime. The Ministry of Women's Affairs was a flawed organization but one that many women turned to for help. It employed over 1500 women and it was tasked with running some of the women's shelters. I worked closely with their Legal Affairs office from 2010 to 2012.

One day while I was there, an angry man and his son came to our office and started yelling at the Head of the Legal Affairs, a petite, soft-spoken woman lawyer. His daughter in law ran away from their home to one of these shelters and he wanted her back. He shouted and threatened her, towering over her. The head of the office quietly told him, "I am tasked with

protecting her rights under Islam. She has God-given rights too." This was just one woman who worked at MOWA.

The Ministry of Women's Affairs was under-resourced, but it was a bustling compound with a strong feminine presence, full of energetic women and a few men, trying to make things better. I would always joke that I liked their Ministry better than the Ministry of Finance because it was always tidy and well-kept. Everyday, I think that the heartbreak can't get any worse but it does. It does.

Thankfully, Asiyah returned to the US several years ago; she does immigration law in Atlanta now. She is safe now. But it is clear to me her heart is still there in Afghanistan, as are many of her family members and beloved friends. I know there are thousands, millions of amazing women and girls like Asiyah, there in Afghanistan, with a longing to make the world a better place. While it's pretty nearly impossible for the church to be there now, we can advocate from afar that the US not forget Afghanistan. We can also look more locally, to how we can help Afghan refugees resettle here. You'll hear about that more later.

We all wait, and wonder, when will God intervene in this flawed world to make everything right again?! But the good news is this: God is already here. God is in the lives of those on the margins. When we serve them, we serve God. But here's the other truth: God is in you. God is in me. We are the hands and body of Christ. The Spirit has given us a holy restlessness that is awakened in our compassion. Compassion hurts sometimes, but it is a sign that God is at work in us.