

October 3, 2021
Lectionary 27, Year B
The Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost
Mark 10:2-16
Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Norwood, MA
Pastor Amanda L. Warner

With Nothing

I finished reading a book this week. It was a good book, but it was not a book that I'm sure I'd recommend without a warning.

It was a book by historical fiction novelist, Kristen Hannah, and it was called The Four Winds. It was about about the Dust Bowl and the Great Depression and, as I told Britton and Cyrus, most of the book was pretty depressing. Cyrus thought it was pretty funny that I was upset that a book about the Great Depression was depressing. He wondered why I hadn't seen that one coming.

I guess I should have, but it's one thing to know intellectually that the events of a period of time happened and it's quite another to get attached to characters, even fictional characters, and then walk with them through a crisis, to feel their feelings, to suffer with them, to draw parallels between their time and ours, and to imagine what it would be like to live through the kind of suffering that they experienced.

To wonder if I would be like the strong characters in the book, who persevered in spite of intense suffering or if I would be like the ones who gave up, the ones who couldn't make it, the ones who disappeared from the narrative with a whimper, and not with a shout.

Of course, it's tempting always to imagine oneself as one of the strong ones, one of the ones who suffered, yet triumphed, one of the ones who did what had to be done, no matter the cost.

But honesty compels me to admit, that I'm not sure what I would have done, if I had been faced with the kinds of disasters that the characters in the book faced.

The main characters in the book were part of an immigrant wheat farming family in the Texas panhandle. It wasn't the stock market crash in 1929 that caused the most trouble for the people in the book *The Four Winds*.

Instead, it was an environmental crisis that caused their lives to fall apart.

Of course, they were struggling because of The Great Depression, which caused wheat prices to fall greatly effecting their livelihood. But they still had the produce of their farm to feed themselves and to bring in some money that helped them to keep themselves afloat.

But then, in 1931 a drought began, which lasted until 1939. Eight years with no rain brought the region and the family in the book to their knees.

Also, the way in which the farmers had farmed the land, plowing up all of the native prairie grasses to plant their crops, caused the dry land to erode. The topsoil was picked up in the winds and blew away in great dust storms that sometimes lasted for days and sometimes reached as far east as New York City.

Again, it's one thing to know that a thing happened intellectually, and another thing to be transported there by someone's writing, by hearing someone's story, which, was based on the memoirs of people, especially women, who lived on the Great Plains during this slow-motion natural disaster, as their crops and gardens failed, as their wells ran dry, as their livestock died, as their children wasted away before their eyes, as their family members sickened and some died from dust pneumonia, and as their family and friends and neighbors set out for what they had been told was the promised land, set out for California, which was advertised to them as a land flowing with milk and honey. A place where there was water, a place where the soil was still rich and fertile, a place where there was food, a place where there was work, for these people wanted to work, to support themselves and their families. So, millions of them got in their cars and trucks or hopped on trains to go to California, where the residents, the big growers needed people to pick their thriving crops.

However, when the migrant workers arrived in California, they found that while their labor was wanted and needed, they, themselves, as human beings were very much not wanted.

They were scorned for their poverty and their desperation. They were called freeloaders, they were called criminals, they were accused of bringing disease. They were often forced to live in shantytowns along irrigation ditches and sometimes they became enslaved by growers, who set up camps where the migrant workers were forced to go into debt in the non-picking season to gain housing or to buy overpriced food in the company store, on credit, that, because of high interest rates, and low wages, they could never make enough to pay off.

Like I said, it was an excellent book, and it was, at times, an inspiring book, but it was also a heartrending picture of a horrible period in our country's history.

The thing that struck me the most was the attitude that the people in California had toward the migrants, the refugees from environmental crisis, who they disparagingly called "Okies" no matter where they came from.

With very few exceptions, they were cruel, they had no sympathy for what the migrants had suffered, they denied them their rights as fellow Americans. They denied them any compassion as fellow human beings.

They created a scenario in their heads that the suffering people who arrived in their state had brought their plight on themselves, by being lazy. They ignored the fact that the very people that they called lazy were, spending 12 hours a day picking their crops, men, women, and children, for pitiful wages, that would never raise them out of poverty.

The people who lived in the towns that depended on agriculture and the labor of the migrant workers imagined that they achieved their success and their comparative well-being because of their own virtues, rather than because of the people who sickened and starved, who suffered and died, in the camps and fields

that they did their best to keep out of their towns, out of their schools, out of the hospitals, out of their churches, out of their communities.

So, by now you might be wondering if this is a sermon or a book review and a history lesson. After all, I haven't mentioned Jesus yet!

Today's gospel reading is unquestionably a challenging one. Jesus has a debate with the Pharisees about divorce, in which he says things that are truly challenging to our modern sensibilities, when we either are people, or know people who truly struggled and suffered in their marriages and who, after those marriages were dissolved, found love, peace, happiness, and healing in second marriages, which appear to be condemned here.

Of course, in Jesus' time, divorce was very different than it is now. In an extremely patriarchal society, women were usually trapped in marriages, no matter what they were like and if a divorce happened, it was almost always initiated by a man, who could divorce his wife for any reason and, if he chose, leave her and her children completely penniless and without any support.

In a society where women rarely worked outside of the home, where they contributed to the family's economy by child rearing, gardening and animal tending, food preparation and storage, and making and cleaning clothes and other household goods, it was extremely difficult for a woman who had been cast off by her husband, to support herself or any children that she might have, if her husband would not support the children.

She might have a male relative who would take her in and give her a place in his home, but her male relatives might also decide that she should be punished and was not worthy of a place because she had been rejected by her husband.

People tend to do that. From the Californians' reactions to the dust bowl migrants to the reactions of fathers, brothers, uncles to the plight of women who had been thrown out of their husbands' homes, people so often assume that people who are struggling, people who have fallen on hard times, people who are in

distress or need, are struggling because of something that they have done wrong, rather than because of situations that are beyond their control.

People tend to assume that their own comfort, or well-being, or success, is a result of their own hard work or their virtue, that they earned the good things that happened in their life, rather than that they experienced good circumstances, that were equally beyond their control.

But that's not what Jesus says. In Jesus' time, children were not necessarily the treasured part of the community that they are or at least are talked about being today.

In Jesus' time children had no status or standing. They were mouths to feed, who could not work or at least could not yet work as much as an adult. They had no power, they had no rights, they had no publicly celebrated accomplishments and no recognized status or standing. Some children had the love of the parents to sustain them, but not all children had even that.

And so, these children were coming to Jesus with nothing but themselves, no merits, no claim on him, no credentials to wave in his face to declare themselves worthy.

The disciples knew this and they tried to send the children away. The children had no right to approach the teacher. But Jesus said,

“Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it.” And he took them up in his arms, laid his hands on them, and blessed them” (Mark 10:14-16).

In his welcome of children, Jesus was making it clear that is not because of our successes or our accomplishments, it is not because of our social status; it is not because of any of the things that we tell ourselves we have created for ourselves,

ignoring the people who have toiled in the fields before us and sometimes for us, ignoring the fact that for us the rains fell when for others the ground was parched, ignoring the fact that some of us experience love that is safe, faithful, and true, in our relationships and that some of us experience betrayal and violence, and hurt.

It is because of none of that that we receive a place with Jesus. Our virtues are not what gain us access to Jesus and to the Kingdom of God.

In fact, clinging to those things that we believe make us exceptional, make us better than other people; clinging to our successes and our triumphs, the things that give us value in our society, might cause us to be more like the Pharisees than the children. Like Pharisees who questioned the teacher, who test and challenge Jesus, instead of seeking and receiving his blessing.

The childlike faith that Jesus commends is faith that comes with nothing, not claiming a place in the kingdom as a right, as a reward, as a prize that we have won, or something that we have earned.

It is faith that receives, as a gift, and only gift, the blessing of life with Jesus, in whose arms we experience, welcome, healing, blessing, and love. Thanks be to God. Amen.