Fifth Sunday after Epiphany All Saints’ Church

February 4, 2018 Year B

Isaiah 49:21-31 1 Corinthians 9:16-23

Psalm 147:1-12, 21c Mark 1:29-39

Sometimes I see Jesus as the Good Cop and the Bad Cop.

The Bad Cop Jesus: You are lost. You cannot live with any kind of meaning if you think life’s all about your glory, your accomplishments, your privilege, or your acquisitions. That stance is delusional and demonic. The Bad Cop Jesus: “I am here to disrupt you, to make you uncomfortable in your self-designed security.”

The Good Cop Jesus: I’m here to find you. To bring you home to God’s dignity for you, for all.

Jesus has come into our lives, not only to find us, but to cast out our demons of doubt, to heal where we are broken, to bind up our wounds, to dash our fears, to renew our strength…. so that we can mount with wings like eagles, run and not be weary, walk and not faint. We can get up from our sick-bed, like Peter’s mother-in-law, and serve the world. All of us, victim and perpetrator alike- are worthy to live the dream God has designed for each one of us.

This healing touch of Jesus, which by its very nature names the reality of our pain and the nightmare of our world, also soothes, no matter how bad it is. This invitation to be baptized into dignity and significance reminds me of a student- one who came into my life almost 20 years ago, which means by now she is in her mid-30’s maybe married, maybe with children, a career, friends, indeed a full-fledged adult. I’ve lost contact with her; I hope she is thriving.

She came as one of my advisees. A ninth grader who walked into my living room as if she owned it. She was tall, blond haired, beautiful, funny, articulate, smart….. giving you one of those first impressions of having her life all together.

And yet, in less than a week, I discovered that she was a mess- one of the most socially inept, immature, needy kids I had ever met. Everything she touched turned to disaster with her teachers, her peers, even her advisor (moi) who usually was pretty patient.

“Give her time,” I thought. “She’ll grow up.” A year went by, and things still were not going well. Not great grades and no loyal friends. I could tell she was isolating herself, setting herself up for rejection, becoming depressed, so when I learned that she was a tennis player, I invited her to play tennis with me at my local tennis club…. Pay her some attention. Get her away on a Sunday morning, escape from the life and pressures of school.

One morning, as we were driving to the club, I turned to her and said, “You look particularly sad today; what’s up?”

“I don’t have any teachers who pay any attention to me. I’m a nobody to all of them, not worthy of their attention. I hate being here; no one cares about me.”

I kept my mouth shut… not pointing out the obvious, but it was difficult. (What am I? Chop liver?) My feelings were hurt, and I tried not to take it personally, but the tennis that morning was not fun.

I called her mom that afternoon. “There is something I don’t know about your daughter; something in her past; she’s hurting in a way that has nothing to do with where she is right now. Can you help me to understand?”

There was a long silence. I waited. It wasn’t easy; it was uncomfortable. I waited.

“My daughter was riddled with acne, starting in about 6th grade, literally covered from head to toe with mountain ranges of cysts, especially on her back and on her face- they were everywhere, puss-filled, painful sores, with no relief. She became a pariah, an outcast, as if she had leprosy, no one hung out with her, and we suspected there was bullying. As a response, she hid her head into her books; she concentrated on her academics which is how she got into Exeter. She’s smart- it was her saving grace.

“In eighth grade, with her doctors’ support, we put her on Accutane, despite the risks, and within 9 months everything cleared up and she became beautiful overnight. When she arrived in Exeter, it was the first time she was acne free, and she had no experience whatsoever of how to deal with her dorm mates, her popularity, the boys who fell in love with her- nothing in her life had prepared her for her peers and the social dynamics of being a teenager.”

I think the mother kept talking, but I didn’t hear much more… so moved by her young daughter’s story, and convicted of my own impatience, frustration, anger, dismissal, and irritation with her. I had done all the right things as her advisor, except one. I had not seen her. I had categorized her by an inherited muscle memory that I think many of us might have- which dictates that pretty rich white girls are self-absorbed, entitled and shallow. I had labeled her, unconsciously. And I couldn’t hear her cries: “I am a nobody; nobody cares about me. I am not worthy of being loved.”

I could feel a sympathy for her that I hadn’t felt before, a natural rising up of love for her- real love, even tears. Sure, she had been healed, but only on the surface. She was hurting, ashamed, feeling unloved, because she “knew” she was only loveable when she was acne free. Even her parents were ashamed and kept her acne as some dark and ugly secret.

I changed everything in the way I was her “advisor.” I went to bat for her, defending her, no matter what, asking for patience, second chances, and help. I consistently pointed out, her beauty that went beyond “skin deep.” And I listened. A lot.

I think this is why Jesus interchanges physical healing, casting out demons and forgiving sins as all interchangeable. It’s all about worthiness, dignity, a fresh start, and meaning.

Slowly, she began to trust me and to talk…. The bullying had been horrific… Lots of tears as she shared with me about being a “legitimate target.” And yet what was worse was her own guilt….. she had become a bully herself once she had become “beautiful.” In her stories, I became a witness to her life, her sins and to her possibilities for a newday

I got, as Bryan Stevenson suggests in his book *Just Mercy*, “proximate” with her. Yesterday, parishioners and friends of All Saints’ gathered at St. James to listen to poets, activists, and theologians speak about “Values in Action.” We had a break-out session, and a friend of All Saints’, Charlie Gibson, talked about being “proximate” with a man who has just been released from prison.

He has to wear an ankle brace and pay the state $42.00 a week for the privilege of being released with an ankle brace. It takes an hour and a half to charge the ankle bracelet. He can’t wear winter boots because of it. He needs to travel weekly, responding to a random call, for drug testing, which requires a car. He can’t find work. He is living in a half-way house, and though he is clean he is afraid some of his house-mates who are still using will sabotage his life by spiking his food with drugs. He’s afraid that he won’t find his way back to the living. And who in the world thinks he is worth saving?

You are worth saving! All of our speakers yesterday talked about getting proximate as a way to be with each other. That our values need to be wrapped with each other’s stories, history, context, pain, fear. We need to be witness to each other’s lives and feel tears of sympathy for each other as Presiding Bishop Michael Curry reminds us: “treat each girl you meet like your sister and each boy you meet like your brother; it’s that simple because we’re all family, saying to all, “You are worth saving.” We are the Episcopal branch of the Jesus movement that lifts up the dignity of all of us as God’s children.

I’m thinking of volunteering more hours at the Cheshire County Jail, to get proximate with those who need to be reminded of their worth. I’ll let you know how that goes.

I’d like to close with words from my student. As a senior, she took a philosophy class from me and we were debating whether or not we live in the best of all possible worlds, a dispute that Voltaire and Leibnitz had in the 18th century. And so I gave the students the opportunity to answer the question. Do we live in the best of all possible worlds? They had to say Yes or No. No middle ground. 250 words or less.

Here’s her answer (I saved it):

“The world we live in is perfect. Perfection has been attained. We all struggle through each day and then most of us finish each day and then we sleep. Sleep revitalizes- little pieces of redemption reside in our dreams, during our rest. We wake the following morning, still full of sin, but with a new day. Whether we have been saved during the night is irrelevant. Night can choke, accentuate our error- our great deviation from the Word of God and Jesus’ perfection, but there is forgiveness, either from ourselves or God himself.

“And where there is great sin, great frustration, great rebellion, and great misery, there is great love. We feel the breeze and smile for reasons we can’t explain, and tears can spill with joy.

“We sit around and discuss how nice/horrible it is to have free will. How can we possibly debate whether or not God’s most wonderful gift makes sense? With no free will, there would be no life. We would be living for God, for the decisions he would be making for us, so not living at all. We would be puppets in the great production of “The World,” a play written and performed by the Creator Himself.

“I appreciate my misery because the next day could be the best of my life. This makes life perfect.”

Jesus gets proximate with us so that we can get proximate with each other, and through own healing touch, and our freedom, we can defend and advocate for Dignity, a dignity we are all given by God’s grace. And then we get up and serve the world. AMEN