

Christ the Lord Episcopal Church

Pinole, CA

The Ninth Sunday after Pentecost

August 2, 2020

“The Ask”

Rev. Dr. Lois Williams

The phone rang, “Hello, are you Rev. Williams?”

“Yes.”

“Are you the only priest? Are you in charge of things?”

“Yes, but I do have a vestry to answer to.”

“Can you do pastoral care?”

“Yes, what can I do for you?”

“Well, my name is Roy

The man proceeded to tell me he was from good Mayflower stock and proud to be American. He had graduated at the top of his class from a well-known college. He had never met the perfect woman and maybe he would never get married. He had been raised Catholic. And for about 30 minutes I calmly listened to this gentleman on the phone who had shared a very good part of his life with me.

“What is it I can help you with?”

“Can you meet with me? Maybe tomorrow?”

“Yes I can. You need to wear a mask and we can sit outside on the porch of the church. Ok?”

“Ok.”

As I sit on the porch a casually dressed middle-aged man approaches the porch.

“Hi, I’m Rev. Lois, have a seat.”

“Thank you so much Rev. As you know, I am Roy.....”

Again, this time for an hour the man, in seemingly increasing distress repeated the story to me that I had listened to on the phone. But it didn’t end the same, he would now continue the story. I still had no idea of what he wanted.

“I am a computer programmer and really good at my job. Why did God let this happen to me?”

He then described his tech company’s sell out and how he has been struggling for about a year and a half without work. His life had slowly dwindled from the lavish

tech world living down to living out of a rental car. The whole time, I could see a blush of shame on his face, as he tried to show me he didn't need any help.

"This is not who I am. I am white, I am educated, from a good family, my parents remained married until they died. I am a little older though, I have come to realize, as the new millennials enter the tech industry. But I have done everything right in my life. I have made good decisions, I stuck to my job, I didn't cause waves, I am outstanding. Of course I don't have an ego. I am a good person."

I smiled behind my mask as he again told me how he didn't need any help.

"A preacher told me I hadn't reached bottom yet, so I didn't understand and then he asked me to an altar call. I was very uncomfortable. But I did it because I need a job. And well, I think God heard me."

"Well. Roy, your story is not unusual. The whole economy is at a loss and since the Corona virus no one else is working either. What can I do for you?" I ask again.

"I just described my bleak state. See, I have a job starting next week. I just have to get through two weeks of working and I can get back on my feet. I have been to all the social service places I can think of (thank God I still have my cell phone) and they said I was not poor enough. Can you believe that, not poor enough. But then I looked around and saw a couple with three young children and realized why the clerk had told me that."

"But I have done nothing wrong. I pray this job will work out, but how do I get to next week?"

"Roy, are you asking for money?"

"Well, I'm a good person you know. I don't have an ego. And if all you can offer is a prayer I will take it."

"Roy, have you asked for an advance at your new job? It is COVID time, they might understand."

“I can’t let them know I am living out of a car. I don’t have an ego, but I can’t tell them that.”

“Have you tried looking into couch surfing, staying with a friend for a few days like the younger people do?”

“No, I can’t do that. I don’t have an ego, you know, I’m not like that, I’m a good person. They won’t understand.”

“Roy, what is it you need me to do?” Again, the direct ask.

“Can you spare some money to get me through to Monday?” He hung his head. Ok I think, I knew this was coming, poor guy, this is so hard and shameful for him.

“Well, Roy, this is a very small church in the scheme of things, and my congregation is also struggling, but you know what, they have a very big heart. I’ll give you a check.”

“But really, I am a good person. I don’t have an ego, but what happened to me is wrong.”

“Let me tell you something about Jesus, Roy, as I realize you shared your Catholic background earlier. Jesus never judged, even dared someone without sin to throw the first stone. Can I share something with you Roy? All you had to do was ask.”

The ask. Please reflect on the ask. Why was it so hard for Roy to ask? How many other times had he been turned down? Think about that. From the time you are a child and begin asking questions night and day – how many times did you hear “no”? Or maybe you were reprimanded for asking for something in the first place. Even the disciples approached Jesus with a non-asking suggestion – send them away. Send them away rather than asking Jesus for what they need.

We are called to be in relationship with Jesus. Friendship, relationship with Jesus. We don’t have to prove we are worthy. We know we are not. But yet, God loves us, and as scripture tells us, “Which of you, if your son asks for bread, will give him a stone?”

When we approach our lives with the idea that we have to earn our survival or work towards God's love – we are mistaken. When we ask, always when we ask Jesus -the reply is yes, however Jesus said to them, “They need not go away; you give them something to eat.”

Yes, you heard that right. **You** give them something to eat. He didn't say God will give them something to eat. No manna raining from the sky, although I believe there is some divine magic in this story. But nevertheless, he looked at his disciples, not the crowd, but his very own disciples and said, **you** feed them. And of course the disciples came up with excuses: they didn't have enough.

It's about the ask. We ask Jesus, **and he asks us**. We ask the Divine, and we are asked to take the gifts given us however meager and solve that problem that has been prayed upon.

There is even more to this story. Taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds.

Now, here is where there may be some theological difficulties with this story, but I will present two very important thoughts. One, once Jesus received the loaves and fish, through the blessing given to God the Creator, they multiplied to fill everyone, and we have Divine intervention.

For those who don't do miracles, when Jesus took the loaves and fishes and held them up and blessed them, he modeled sharing to the crowd, and then they (the crowd) took out whatever they had in their own travel bags or pockets and shared until there was an abundance. I consider this Divine community modeling and inspiration.

So too is the giving end of what we do as a disciple of Christ. We can go to Jesus in prayer and ask, and Jesus sends us a personal gift to move that intention forward. An example:

“Lord, why do we have so many people struggling?” Then suddenly your schedule is cleared and a neighbor asks you to help with a program delivering food to the needy. A little like the Divine intervention when your precious time is multiplied to help others.

The other giving end, or what I consider Divine community inspiration, is “Lord, why do we have so many people struggling?” Then you feel moved to donate to your church, your favorite non-profit, and your little bit, along with others and their little bits, provide programs or whatever is needed. Divinely inspired within community.

I want to thank everyone who has kept up their pledges, has donated to our First Sundays which today I believe goes to the food bank, an opportunity for you to multiply the loaves and fishes. For those who donate to the discretionary fund, today’s little reflection on Roy’s visit happens on a regular basis as we serve a wider community than our church base, as people struggle through these times. I want to thank everyone who is beautifying the church building and grounds and know there is great appreciation to those spending time considering and planning our future through the COVID crisis.

If you are in need, please don’t let your ego keep you from asking. There is no judgment. If your loaves and fishes are many, please share and know your gifts of time, talent, and finances are being used to serve Christ in the world in the best way possible. We at Christ the Lord will continue to welcome the stranger and provide hospitality to all with open hearts and open minds. We have abundance if we look. There is Divine intervention and Community inspiration. There is also no need to prove anything. If you are in need remember Jesus had compassion for them all. **Amen.**