

Seventh Sunday of Ordinary Time (A)

Rev. Jeffrey M. Kemper

Scriptures: Lev 19: 1-2, 17-18 □ Ps 103: 1-4, 8, 10, 12-13 □ I Cor 3: 16-23 □ Mt 5: 38-48

It was a Sunday morning in 1865, in an Episcopalian church in Richmond Virginia, that the minister invited the people to come forward to receive Communion. The first to come forward and kneel for Communion was a newly freed slave. The white congregation, aghast that a Negro would presume to approach the altar before the white folk, sat in icy silence. Then a white man came forward and knelt beside the black man. He was the defeated general of the Confederate army, Robert E. Lee.

These two men, who seemed to have so little in common at first glance, manifested that day what St. Paul writes in the epistle passage worldly wisdom and God's wisdom.

I imagine, everyone – white or black – thought the audacity of the black man coming forward to the altar of the Lord was utter foolishness – the other black people thinking this guy is headed for a beating, and the white people thinking –
“Who does this guy think he is, going before us?”

Yet, in God's eyes, this man was no fool. He recognized his dignity as a human being made in God's image, as a son of God born of water and the Spirit, as a citizen of God's kingdom. Only in the eyes of fools was he seen as a former slave, a person of lesser worth, a person who should “remember his place” lest he incur the wrath of the crowd.

Robert E. Lee was probably thought to be crazy as well – at least by the white members of the congregation. The South had just lost a war, so his going forward to kneel with this former slave must have appeared as nothing less than the loss of conviction and the submission to a conquering nation which declared that there is no longer a two-tiered society of slave and free.

We do know this about Lee; he was a man of conviction. For him to come forward and kneel next to this former slave was to acknowledge that they were equal. This is not to say that Lee necessarily abandoned all prejudice, but it is to recognize that Lee was headed towards the wisdom of God that all human persons share a common dignity.

Besides the wisdom of God, what these two men have in common is the courage of the righteous. Both men were willing to do what they knew needed to be done so that the wisdom of God could shine forth. One was willing to risk his skin, even his life, at the hands of an angry mob to show his dignity as a child of God; the other was willing to risk his respect and credibility as a leader of his people.

It is easy to look back at white Richmond of 1865 and shake our heads at the folly of their bigotry and prejudice. But we might look at our own lives and ask where God might catch us in our own ruses and follies, as the Scriptures call them.

Where does bigotry and prejudice still remain in our own lives? We might not use derogatory language about people of other races, nationalities, religions, or ways of life, but do we harbor prejudice and bigotry in our minds and hearts?

Do we look at people and think that we would never want them to be our doctor or our lawyer or our neighbor or our son-in-law or daughter-in-law because of the color of skin or accent of their parents?

Do we participate in prejudicial humor at the expense of people because, while we might not really mean it, we also do not recognize that those who hear it may see it as our tacit endorsement of the defamation of others?

Do we have the courage to come forward and by our actions, proclaim our own dignity and the dignities of others in the face of ridicule and scorn from others?

In many ways, we are not that different from the people of Richmond in 1865, we may just be wearing different costumes. In God's eyes there are only neighbors, not enemies made up of different races and nationalities.

It is up to each of us to look at our attitudes, our convictions, and our actions and ask if they measure up to the foolishness of this world or to the wisdom of God which recognizes the dignity of every person because all are made in the image of God.

It is up to each of us to determine if we live with the courage given by the Holy Spirit to proclaim God's wisdom to the world.

Are we willing to step forward to proclaim our own dignity as a child of God; are we willing to stand next another to proclaim that equal dignity in our neighbor?