

Proper 16-A
August 27, 2017
St. John's Cathedral
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I want to tell you about my friend, Clare. Clare was a member of St. Paul's, my parish in Kennewick – a longtime member. She was perhaps the tidiest, best-organized person I have ever known. It is not surprising that she worked as an executive secretary and was the president of the parish Altar Guild. She was using her God-given gifts in very good ways.

One Saturday morning in about 1980 Clare and her husband were at the church, tending to the things that altar guilds do on Saturday morning. They were sacristy chores that were well-organized and tidy. The parish phone rang, they answered it, and on the other end was a refugee family from Southeast Asia whose car had broken down near Benton City. (Remember, there was a great influx of Southeast Asian refugees at that time, some of whom were known as 'boat people.')

The people stranded in Benton City were being re-settled in Kennewick and were at a pay phone randomly calling churches for help.

Clare and Larry immediately got in their car and headed for Benton City. They helped get the family to Kennewick and into the hands of the agency that was helping them. But it didn't stop there. Clare and Larry stayed in touch. They invited them to church. They visited the family, met their friends, helped them navigate a place that was very different than where they had come from.

Before long, we welcomed refugee families from Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos as part of our congregation. Someone who had been a Peace Corps volunteer who knew a couple of

Asian languages offered a class for those who wanted to be baptized. Our potlucks became an amazing international array.

But the best part of all, I thought, was how Clare threw herself into helping our new friends find work. Her effort took her out of her previous comfort zone for sure. Before long a yard care service was formed, made up of workers who were new to western culture and who did not have cars. You could, for an hourly charge, have a crew of people who would mow or thatch or trim or whatever needed to be done. They did good work and they had a willing driver. One day Clare drove up to my house in her once-immaculate Lincoln with a careful of men in the passenger seats and power equipment hanging out of the trunk. It was well-organized, but not that tidy.

That was the beginning of a long ministry of welcoming refugees that St. Paul's has undertaken over the years. Today they have Sudanese members and a Spanish-speaking group among them.

I thought of Clare and others who were part of the opening chapter of that story that started nearly 40 years ago as I read through Romans this past week. Paul urges us to present ourselves—bodies and all, to God. He urges us to be transformed – not to be limited by convention and business as usual. He urges us to live with humility. And most of all, I think, to live as a diverse community of people, each of whom has some unique gifts to offer to the service of God. And many times, as in Clare's case, there are some wonderful surprises when people answer that call.

Over the years I've been blown away by the variety of gifts that people bring to bear as we serve God together. We see that in one context when we look around at what people do in

parish life – offering prayer, music, financial skill, the wisdom of elders, gardening, serving meals, visiting the sick and the lonely. This list could go on forever and there are many here who share those gifts every day.

But this offering of gifts goes much further and into our lives beyond the work of the parish. It goes into our city, our neighborhoods, our schools and workplaces. It goes wherever we go. I often think of Carole Dennison, once a member of this cathedral parish, who was a nurse and Peace Corps volunteer in Honduras. She saw a great need there among the poor and became a medical missionary, sponsored by our diocese. She went to medical school and became a physician. She opened a clinic and offered medical care in La Ceiba, an area that desperately needed it, for 20 years. She offered her gift. Generously. Faithfully. And with the enthusiastic support of our diocesan community.

There is an important question in today's gospel that underlies much of what we glean from Paul in the Romans reading. Jesus asks the disciples, "Who do you say that the Son of Man is?" (referring to himself) This is sort of a pop quiz and they offer their best answers – Some say John the Baptist, others guessed by naming Elijah or Jeremiah or another prophet. Finally Peter says, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God." The right answer.

This gospel reading is offering a clarity about the person of Jesus – the Messiah. The son of God.

Maybe our question is who Jesus is for us? Who do we say and know that Jesus is? How do we honor him with our lives? How do we serve him with those gifts that we offer?

You may have heard our presiding bishop, Michael Curry, talking about Episcopalians being something he calls the "Episcopal branch of the Jesus Movement." Maybe you've even

seen a bumper sticker that reiterates this: “The Episcopal branch of the Jesus movement.” That is a fresh kind of language for the Episcopal Church, I think. It doesn’t sound like Rite I. this movement is based on how we hear – and then live into – the gospel readings that we hear proclaimed each week at the Eucharist by our deacons. Bishop Curry calls that not just hearing, but ‘*revering* the gospel.’

What does revering the gospel like? When we listen and learn from the gospels, he says, we begin to know Jesus better. We are opened to change and newness. We begin to live lives that are ‘transformed.’

When we live in the way of Jesus, he says, we seek well-being and good for all. We are grounded in compassion and goodness. We seek what is loving, liberating and life-giving. And we take this orientation into the world with us as we live our lives of faith.

I was cleaning out a drawer in the kitchen earlier this summer and found a yellow plastic bracelet from the 1990s with the letters WWJD on it. Those would be familiar initials for some of you. For others, not so much. They stand for ‘What would Jesus do?’ Wearing the bracelet was intended to be a constant reminder to seek the wisdom of Jesus as we encountered important decisions, challenges and turning points in our lives. I really don’t know what Jesus would do if faced with some of the things I encounter in my life, but I do spend time asking for his help. I do embrace deeply the call to do those things that are loving, liberating and life-giving. I do try to seek well-being and good for all. But this is not always easy or even clear. It is a journey.

I think my friend Clare was without doubt a part of the Episcopal branch of the Jesus Movement, even though that expression was coined years after she began her loving, liberating

and life-giving relationships with the refugees who settled in our town. In many ways she was our teacher and their cheerleader.

Clare gave me permission to share her story many years ago and each time I did I would write her a note. Clare died a few years ago, well into her 90s. Her last note to me, written after she had celebrated her 90th birthday, let me know that she hadn't given up her ministry. She was mentoring and sponsoring a woman from Sudan.