November 17, 2019 All Saints Church

Proper 28 Year C

Malachi 4:1-2a 2 Thessalonians 3:6-13

Psalm 98 Luke 21:5-19

Gary was in my fourth-grade class. He was a slacker, a trouble-maker, and unwilling to participate in class, unless to be unruly. I didn’t like him. Rumor had it that he had failed fourth grade the year before and was repeating the year. He was big for his age.

I stayed away from him. I cared about my class subjects; I loved my teacher; I had a lot of good friends. Gary was “living in idleness… like a mere busybody, not doing any work.” The writer of Thessalonians would have cast him into utter darkness. I wanted nothing to do with him. And it was easy. He wasn’t in my friend group. Did he even have a friend group? I ignored him. Kept my distance. Easy.

Until, Mrs. Blue, one of my all-time favorite teachers, announced to the class, unbeknownst to me, that “Jamie’s new seat assignment will be right next to Gary.”

“What!!! Are you kidding me?” (I said this to myself; never to reveal what I was really thinking). I was to be his side-by-side desk-mate!! Even then, I knew that Mrs. Blue was moving me next to Gary to be a “good influence.” I couldn’t put words to it then, but I was afraid of Gary. He was so different than I was, and I did not want to be his partner. I didn’t want to be anywhere near him.

I still remember taking all my books out of my desk (you know the ones made with wood, that were hinged on the front side so you could lift up the wooden top which was carved up with past students’ signatures)….. Of course, I never carved my name into the desk. I slowly moved across the other side of the classroom. All eyes were on me. I’m sure I sighed as I sat down. I felt like I was being punished, even though I knew I wasn’t.

Gary leaned in and whispered, “Sorry.” I must have looked surprised at his insight. He smiled and almost winked.

And within a few days, a whole new world opened up to me. He was so much fun. Gary loved Mrs. Blue as much as I did, ***and*** he knew her a lot better. He understood the depth of her love for us, what made her tick, and all of her “tells.”

“When she crunches up her shoulders like that, it means she’s worried.” “Oh, oh, she’s pacing; she’s waiting to hear about her son.” (Who was in the Vietnam War). “See that almost smile; she’s being really sympathetic.” I was so clueless; I didn’t even think teachers had kids or worried or were amused at our antics. Sympathetic was a word I did not use. Who was this kid?

Gary was also very attentive to all our classmates who were really poor…. The ones who didn’t have snack, maybe even lunch, whose coats were worn thin, who didn’t wear socks. He defended them.

Sometimes his defense was pushing other kids. He had a difficult time controlling his anger. I had thought he was a bully. No, not at all! He was a crusader. He would break rules in order to do the right and moral thing, all the while, swearing and using bad words which always got him into more trouble.

And then I realized about two weeks in, that Mrs. Blue ***loved*** Gary, just as he was. He was the trouble-maker, for sure, ***and*** she loved him. She knew that the school system had strangled him; that school had become an incubator for his malaise, his resentment, and his impatience. He had given up, and she wasn’t going to let that ugly grasp have the last word.

Gary knew. Mrs. Blue knew. And now, I knew. I was a part of their plan. I was being invited into complexity. Nothing was as it appeared; life was unfair; and my neat way of controlling everything by being good meant squat. I became Gary’s defender and he loved me for it.

One day, when we were reading a very boring book in class, I put it down. Something I never did. I always did what teachers told me. Ever-vigilant Gary leaned in. “You don’t have to read this; you should daydream.”

“That’s not going to happen. I’m just taking a break.”

“You should try dreaming- let your imagination run. Better than this book that’s so boring. I’m reading a really good book at home- *To Kill A Mockingbird*. I’ll lend it to you when I’m done.”

“I’m not going to read a book about killing a bird. Forget it- too bloody.”

“Oh no, it’s the best book ever. It’s violent, yeah, in parts, but not in the way you think. Trust me on this.”

I did trust Gary and read the book and it changed my life. One of those turning points.

In this morning’s gospel, Jesus is challenging our institutions. Institutions that allow us to thrive. Institutions that support our schools, our government, our hospitals, our courts, our prisons, our welfare system, our highways, our international relations, our military, our religious identity, and the list goes on.

Jesus is not critiquing for critique’s sake, but rather to point out the obvious.

Jesus, as he reminds us, did not come to abolish the law, but rather to fulfill it.

And to fulfill the law, we must embrace love, grace, forgiveness, and mercy, and the undying belief that we all matter- everyone is included. Everyone has a right to equal protection under the law, adequate shelter, food, safety, access to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.

Jesus was crucified because he stood up to the powers to be. If he had just stayed out in the desert preaching love and forgiveness, he would have lived to a ripe old age. This gospel manifesto we just read this morning is so radical!!

Jesus is saying that if we make our institutions into the final authority, adorned with beautiful stones and gifts, and we hold them up no matter their weakness or corruption or absolute authority, then we have turned them into idols. And when we do that, we are at risk of losing the power of God’s will in our lives and the beauty of seeing each other as a child of God.

That’s what I learned in that year of 4th grade. I loved school; I knew instinctively that an education was my way out of poverty, and I was going to do my best to be the best. Thank God for public schools and later in my life government aid that paid my way through college. Yet, no matter how much the system was helping me, it was also broken, not flexible enough to accept the child who just didn’t fit.

This week in Peterborough, we are challenging the reality that there is too much hunger and homelessness in “Our Town.” Enough. The system is broken. The gap between those who have and those who do not have is too large. Do you know that

* we have 25 children identified as homeless in the Conval School district.
* the Peterborough Food Pantry serves over 300 households (6300 meals) per month.
* End 68 Hours of Hunger sends home 140-180 bags of food with children so they can eat over the weekend
* we have three community suppers on our block each week
* MATS (Monadnock Area Transitional Shelter) hosted 7 families this year and received 275 calls looking for shelter assistance.

Thanks to you, All Saints is involved. We’ve taken a page out of Mrs. Blue’s book, and we’ve moved our desks next to the ones that may make us uncomfortable. We can do both- love our traditions and our successes and our institutions, while at the same time critique what’s not working. Really, should any child go hunger or worry about where their bed is for the night?

Just as I was finishing up my sermon yesterday, as I was typing AMEN into my text, I received a call from Sargent Mike Chapdelini asking if I could help house a 72-year-old woman and her special needs 42-year-old daughter. They had been evicted.

“Of course; where is she now?” I learned that her next-door neighbor (Mary) had taken on the responsibility of helping this elderly woman (Mary) and her daughter. It wasn’t lost on me that we were trying to find room in an inn for Mary. These things always take longer than you expect, but after many calls, we secured 2 nights of housing at the Days Inn in Keene. In one of my last calls to Mary, the neighbor, I shared with her about the gospel passage for Sunday and that the reading closed with this last statement from Jesus:

“By your endurance, you will gain your soul.” Indeed, thank you for your soul work!!

Mary burst into tears. Thank you. Thank you. You’re one of the few “real voices” I have connected with while I have been trying to break into the shelters in our area to help. Thank you. I don’t feel so alone.

“By our endurance, we will gain our souls.” AMEN