

A Life Laid Down

There's little doubt that we live in times far removed from the dream today's lessons ask us to dream.

The dream is for unity, no matter the skin deep or creed deep differences.

The basis for that unity is love, a love that lays itself down for the next gal or guy.

We needn't look far to see that we are living in times when line drawing and wall building are the latest objects of worship, with tribalism created by fear of the "other" rearing its ugly head.

Thinking about the merciless crack down on immigrants, many who've been here for decades, many with children and spouses who are US citizens, who find themselves handcuffed and deported back to lands they no longer know, well, what's a Christian to do about such things?

Perhaps you've heard of the story of Paul Gruninger, who grew up in a small Swiss town close to the Austrian border in the early 1900's.

He was an average student who served honorably in the Swiss army in World War I, and then taught elementary school kids.

He was a churchgoer and he eventually married another teacher.

Later, he took a better paying job as a police officer.

He was an ordinary, mid-level bureaucrat whose job mainly involved filling out reports.

At the age of 47, in 1939, going to work one morning, Mr. Gruninger's way is blocked by a younger police officer.

He's immediately suspended from his police duties, because, it seems, Mr. Gruninger was secretly altering documents for Jewish people so they might enter Switzerland and flee Nazi occupied Austria; entries the Swiss had forbidden a year earlier to Jews.

With a few strokes of the pen, Mr. Gruninger predated passports to get around a law designed to keep Jewish refugees out, and with that pen, he saved hundreds of lives.

Friendship with those who were once strangers, sometimes at great personal cost, that is the friendship our readings today are begging us to embrace.

Peter, once known as frightened Peter, denying Peter, Satanic Peter; is now Peter the amazed, Peter the awestruck, Peter the grateful.

The Holy Spirit is on the move this morning and Peter finds himself surrounded by the worst of all people, imagine, a Roman soldier and his family!

And Peter stands in jaw dropping wonderment as that same Spirit blows into the home of these infidels and invades their lives, their hearts, their minds.

And at long last Peter finally sees that God is erasing all of the lines that humanity has so carefully and painstakingly drawn.

God is knocking down all of the walls of separation that we have built up!

That God is showing in unmistakable ways that all human beings are sisters and brothers.

"Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?" Peter gushes.

By asking the question, Peter answers it.

Immediately, the whole motley crew is baptized in the name of Jesus Christ.

Peter is blown away.

And people he never would have thought in a million years to be his friends, are, today, this very morning, just that.

Shortly after he was suspended as a police officer, Paul Gruninger was fired from his job as a cop and then he was prosecuted.

The authorities spread rumors about him, claiming he had demanded sexual favors and money from the people he helped escape.

Later interviews with those he helped proved those rumors to be vicious lies; but nevertheless, the lies worked as intended and, dishonored and shamed, Mr. Gruninger sold umbrellas and animal feed for the rest of his life.

33 years later, he died, in poverty.

Jesus reminds us that the friendship he offers isn't cheap.

The friendship of Jesus brings with it a laying down of our lives.

Perhaps not literally, although one wonders what our own government would do if we Christians really began to live out our faith by refusing to participate in the economy and culture of violence; by honoring life from womb to the grave; or by insisting that the bounty of God's creation is intended not for those who can grab the most — but for those who need the most.

For us, the laying down of life usually means making the costly choice to forgive, and to accept forgiveness, to give, not just from our plenty, but from our scarcity too.

To reach out beyond those who look just like me to sisters and brothers across national, ethnic and creedal lines.

"This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you."

This is God's command to humanity; which in turn, always challenges, always stretches us beyond ourselves, beyond who we think we can become.

It's a love that's not for sissies; nor for the faint of heart; yet paradoxically, it is for the quiet, for the unassuming, for the humble.

While there was little to distinguish Paul Gruninger, (his own daughter struggles to explain her father's actions); he quietly saved the lives of hundreds of people at great personal risk; a risk that ripened into punishment; a punishment that caused the rest of his life to be lived as an outcast.

Why did he do it?

The thing is, you probably can't talk yourself into being that kind of a friend.

It really isn't a decision of the conscious will, but is more a consequence of who you are.

As one fellow says:

"Whether people serve themselves or serve others is not in their power to choose.

This is decided wholly in terms of the world in which they think they live....

In New Testament terms, they live or die according to the king that holds them and the kingdom to which they belong." Arthur McGill.

Today, on this sixth Sunday of Easter, the question Jesus asks each and every one of us is simple:

"To which kingdom do you belong?"

God's kingdom exists in stark opposition to the kingdom of consumers and celebrities and military power; the world that says "follow the rules," even if those rules kill, maim or hoard.

The kingdom of Madison Avenue, of fat wallets and looking out for number one, well, that's the world we are lured into each and every day.

Jesus offers a different way.

And it's an unsettling way, sometimes even a frightening way!

Because it leads to the shocking revelation that God loves everyone — and our efforts to categorize and stigmatize and ostracize are not only pointless, they are in direct opposition to God's kingdom.

Such is the costly friendship to which Jesus calls us.

Yet, we don't need to go back to Paul Gruninger's World War II to see the problem.

We see it today as immigrants flee the hell holes of Honduras and El Salvador; hell holes our own nation helped create when our giant fruit companies invaded the fertile lands of those places, removed the indigenous people, and installed repressive governments to ensure the displaced never complained, and if they did, to silence them.

It is by water and blood that we are saved; always there is blood.

Mr. Gruninger and his wife were buried together near their home town.

“Years later, a plaque is placed at the foot of Paul’s grave.

It reads: ‘Paul Gruninger saved hundreds of refugees in 1938/39.’

“At his funeral, a choir sang ... and a Rabbi said:

‘He who saves a single life, saves the whole world.’”

To be friends with Jesus, to be friends with each other and with the wider world, we need to enter a whole new world, a whole new way of encountering life; of encountering each other; and once we do, we too might become a friend like Paul Gruninger, like St. Peter, like those seeking justice for our immigrant friends, and yes, perhaps we might finally become a friend — like Jesus.

+amen

P. Gruninger story by T. Long, Christian Century, 5/2/12 at 47.