Pentecost 4 – Proper 8 – Year A

Meaning is very rarely inherent. What I mean is that an event or a thing very rarely has a particular meaning in and of itself. Something has meaning because *we* ascribe meaning to it. Over time, through repetition, some things come to carry a meaning that everyone more or less agrees upon. The cross we wear is easily recognizable as a symbol of Christianity. In particular for us at Emmaus, it is a symbol of our membership in the community, because we have ascribed that meaning to this cross. That’s what it means because we have said so.

Many times we’re not even conscious of the ‘meaning’ we have attached to events or things. I heard an item on NPR recently describing some research on racism, particularly on unconscious bias. It took most white people longer to sort a stack of words on cards when they were told to sort positive words and African-American sounding names into the same stack, and negative words into the same stack with Anglo-Saxon sounding names than it did for them to sort Tremonisha and bad, or Johnny and good into the same piles. The subjects in the study were surprised to see that they had already attributed meaning to something as simple as given names…

There are words that have common meanings or connotations associated with them – we get positive or negative “vibes” from the word itself. We have one of those words in today’s Gospel. Jesus says, “Whoever welcomes a prophet in the name of a prophet will receive a prophet’s reward…” Welcoming the righteous will earn the reward of the righteous. Rewards are good, right? This sounds like a wonderfully uplifting Gospel message. But let’s think about it for a minute.

Most of the prophets were not rewarded positively in their day. Jeremiah’s reward for speaking the word of the Lord – which was that the people of Judah would be in exile for many years because of their disobedience to the covenant – was that he was banned from speaking in public! He is nevertheless confronting Hananiah in our first reading – essentially calling Hananiah a false prophet. Hananiah had said everything was going to be fine, the exile would last only two years, and everything would be restored. Jeremiah says he hopes that could be true, but then gives the test for distinguishing between true and false prophets. “As for the prophet who prophesies peace, when the word of *that* prophet comes *true*, *then* it will be known that the Lord has truly sent the prophet.”

And therein is part of the problem: how do we know how to ascribe meaning? How do we know what is true and false? What meaning do I give some event in my life? What meaning should I attach to someone’s words or actions?

So I return to the Gospel. Let *me* put the meaning into my actions. Let me offer a cup of water to every little person I encounter – with the meaning of offering it to Christ. Let me, as St. Benedict prescribes in his Rule, receive each guest as Christ. Let me consciously re-order the way I sort things and people. Let me take the time to ascribe to each person the meaning I say I believe they have: Child and Presence of God.

The rewards? I think Jesus is encouraging us not to focus on the rewards. There is not a point system where I can trade in 50 cups of water offered for a higher place in heaven. We should not expect universal love and acclaim when we speak prophetically or act righteously or offer hospitality to the marginalized in society. But what we can expect is a deepening of the *relationship* that Jesus is laying out for us: We are now Christ in the world. Whoever receives us, receives Christ.

And the side benefit is this: If I expect to greet a prophet, if I treat you as a righteous person, then perhaps I will in fact help call you to be just that.

There is a story that perhaps originated with M. Scott Peck, about a group of monks in a dying monastery. They were few in number, and disheartened. So the abbot decided to visit an old, mystic rabbi who lived in the woods nearby. The abbot asked the rabbi for any advice he might have, and the two sat in silence together for some time. Finally, the abbot got up to leave, and the rabbi said, “I have no advice. I can only tell you that the Messiah is among you.” When the abbot returned to the monastery and all the monks gathered, he relayed the rabbi’s prophetic words: “One of us is the Messiah.” – And so the monks looked from one to another, and even looked at themselves. They acted differently toward one another – and even treated themselves with more care. And those who came to visit the monastery noticed a particular presence in that place – and more people were drawn there, and the monastery flourished.

Yes, if I expect to greet a prophet, if I treat you as a righteous person, if I see in you the Messiah, then perhaps I will in fact help call you to be just that.

The Christ is among is. It is so.

[Jeremiah 28:5-9](http://www.lectionarypage.net/YearA_RCL/Pentecost/Aprop8_RCL.html#ot2)[Psalm 89:1-4,15-18](http://www.lectionarypage.net/YearA_RCL/Pentecost/Aprop8_RCL.html#ps2)[Romans 6:12-23](http://www.lectionarypage.net/YearA_RCL/Pentecost/Aprop8_RCL.html#nt1)[Matthew 10:40-42](http://www.lectionarypage.net/YearA_RCL/Pentecost/Aprop8_RCL.html#gsp1)