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Emanuel's Ev. Lutheran Church, Pittsburgh (Bellevue), PA
June 27, 2010 • Pentecost 5C • Refugee Sunday

1 Kings 19:15-16, 19-21
Psalm 16
Galatians 5:1, 13-25
Luke 9:51-62

Our gospel lesson is one that is confusing and perplexing. We see a picture of discipleship that challenges some of our basic values in life. We have had a couple of deaths in our congregation recently – the mother of Carl Downie, and our own music director, David Archer. It is hard to imagine Jesus (of all people!) saying that we could not wait a day to bury our dead. There are scholars with different theories that try to explain the challenging statement away. From what I have read, they all boil down to the same idea.

We humans often lean toward valuing our close family ties above all others. Excepting perhaps those with very painful relationships with their family members, we tend to offer greater honor to the people with whom we have shared a home, or with whom we have special blood ties. Yet being a disciple of Jesus turns our limited understanding of family upside down. Time after time, Jesus challenges our inclination in the gospels.

As Christians, our relationships with others are defined by our baptismal relationship with God. God is our primary parent, the one whom we honor above all others. Through God's action in our lives, our definitions of family are redefined.

Family members become those with whom we are connected in Christ – regardless of age or race or culture. In the Christ’s Spirit, we are taken up into God’s will for all of creation with all peoples, and creatures, and places. We are called to recognize the real connections of relationship that God has formed between us and others. We are drawn to see the world with eyes transformed by Christ’s life and death and resurrection.

We may be naturally inclined to honor most the relationships that have formed us, or been most generous to us. But, with the eyes of Christ, we are invited to stand by our brothers and sisters who are in need: the poor, the meek, the merciful, those who mourn, those who hunger and thirst for justice, those who are forced to leave their homes to find safety.

God’s upside down ways affect how we are as individuals – how we think about our relationships to others and the world around us. It changes how we receive new people – especially people significantly different than us – into our lives. Do we reject them, like the Samaritan town rejected Jesus’ messengers? Do we receive their presence in our lives as a gift, and as a means of God’s blessing?

God’s upside down ways also guide our energy as a church. Our congregation describes Emanuel’s as a family in faith, which it is. The problem is that it’s so easy to center on ourselves – the church family members that are here, right now – and to forget about anyone else. Christ calls us out of that inclination – to go to where we

may meet people who are in the most need in our world. To reach out our hands in friendship, without thinking about receiving money to pay the bills in exchange.

In the last few years, Emanuel's answered this call in a very special ministry. Pastor Martin led y'all to cultivate a community space for Burmese refugees who were resettling in the Troy Hill neighborhood of Pittsburgh. This is how we became connected with San Xi, and other friends there. Several of our members, like Kathy, continue to offer their hearts and their time in friendship. We continue to support that ministry – Emanuel's gave a special offering gift to Grace Lutheran Church, our host, at Christmas time. We gather items that our friends there would find helpful for the new lives here in the United States. Yet it is far enough away from Bellevue, and from the places that we live, that it has been difficult to be as present there as we would like. Our leaders from Emanuel's have been working hard to network and build relationships in Troy Hill, and to gather more local support for the wonderful ministry that Emanuel's began.

So what does this mean for our congregation, as we seek to follow Christ together? Our friendship with San Xi, and our history of that refugee ministry effort, reminds us. We hear Christ's call to follow as disciples, asking us to leave our familiar spaces and relationships. Our guest, Lauren, and the members who spend time at Troy Hill, witness to the power of God's action in reaching out to those in need. At lunch today, we will hear more tales of how God has transformed

the lives of refugees through that ministry. Closely connected, we will hear tales of how God transforms those who reach out. We follow a topsy-turvy Jesus, who turns life upside down.

When we journey with the lost, we might get lost too – but then we will all be found by the presence of Christ. When we honor the persecuted and rejected, we may hurt with them – but then we will all be blessed. When we seek those who hunger for justice, we will be hungry with them – and God will feed us all with mercy and peace. It may be heart-breaking, and fill us with endless joy. It's risky, and absolutely wonderful. It's what God wants for us all.