

**SURPRISING ENCOUNTERS; LUKE 7:1-10; MAY 29, 2016/MEMORIAL DAY WEEKEND; THOMAS H. YORTY; WESMINSTER PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH**

I've been enjoying the paintings of Andrew Wyeth from the catalogue of a Wyeth exhibit back in the 1970s. When American painters in the 40s and 50s like Jackson Pollack, William De Kooning and Mark Rothko were getting more abstract, Wyeth marched in the opposite direction and embraced realism.

His subject matter comes from a very small circumference of rural scenes in Chadds Ford, PA and Cushing, Maine along the coast.

While the paintings appear nearly photographic, there is a grainy, luminous quality about them that photographs do not possess, an ethereal quality. For artists who came of age during the Great Depression like Wyeth, Edward Hopper, Charles Burchfield, Walker Evans and William Carlos Williams to name a few a haunting bleakness and simplicity often characterizes their work.

What intrigues me is how these painters, poets and photographers embraced and extolled the everyday, the ordinary as their subject matter.

A weathered door, a coat hanging on a hook, a laundry basket propped against a white stucco wall convey surprising richness and beauty – as do the people, the forgotten faces, who reveal a dignity and depth one would not expect to find in such drab surroundings and out of the way places.

The poet William Carlos Williams said through such attention to the ordinary and mundane we see *ourselves* lifted from our parochial settings...and made worthy *in our anonymity*.

Luke's Gospel paints precisely the same thing: ordinary, everyday, outsider men and women – a widow, a leper, a blind man – who wait for justice or healing or the miraculous waters of a pool believed to have healing properties to do their work.

Like Andrew Wyeth and his generation of American artists, Luke opens our eyes to the ordinary as the repository of beauty and great faith, people who exhibit implicit trust in Jesus but have no official standing *or any standing* in the social and religious order.

Sometimes we are blind to the people we pass by who exemplify the very openness and trust Jesus talked about and encouraged his followers to embrace. This can be an occupational hazard for clergy or even faithful church-goers. It's just less complicated to close our minds to the spontaneous and new and confine ourselves to the formulaic and predictable. It is why many churches fall into a survival mentality and when the methods of the previous generation are no longer effective, rather than explore new imaginative ways of doing ministry and outreach, they end up dumb and blind to the opportunities around them – the need right under their nose. This tyranny of the status quo goes beyond religion. Bernie Sanders and Donald Trump have confounded the pundits by hearing and responding the cry of the disenfranchised millions whom the experts did not see or hear.

Sometimes we have to be shocked out of our comfortable doldrums. Like the church that decided it needed to grow; so they worked with denominational consultants on a program that equipped church members to knock on doors.

The big day came, two retired school teachers decided at the last minute to venture into a neighborhood that was not approved for the calling program.

The entered the housing projects and knocked on a lot of doors. No one was much interested until they got to Verleen's apartment. Verleen lived with her two children in a three room flat. And even though she'd never been to church she was interested in attending this one.

The next Sunday Verleen shows up for the 11am service with what the pastor described as her two feral-looking children. She liked the service so much she said she'd be coming to the women's Thursday bible study the pastor announced.

At the Thursday meeting, clutching a bible the retired school teachers gave her, she got in on the pastor's discussion of Luke 4 – the story of Jesus' temptation in the wilderness.

The pastor asked the group, "have any of you ever been faced with temptation and with Jesus' help resisted or refused because of your Christian commitment?" One woman told about the time she checked out of the grocery store and realized she had not paid for a loaf of bread. She was standing in the supermarket parking lot debating what to do. "Why should I pay for it?" she asked herself, "they seem to be doing just fine and the cost of food these days is ridiculous." But then another voice within her said, "No, you're a Christian." So she went back into the store and paid for the bread.

The pastor made an approving comment and nod of the head. Then Verleen spoke. "A couple of years ago," she said, "I was into cocaine really big. You know what that stuff's like! Makes you crazy. Well, anyway, my boyfriend, not the one I have now, the one who was the daddy of my first child, that one, well, we knocked over a gas station one night – got two hundred dollars from it."

"It was as simple as taking candy from a baby. Well, my boyfriend, says to me, 'let's knock off that 7-Eleven down on the corner.' And something in me, it says, 'No, I've held up that gas station with you, but I ain't going to hold up no convenience store.' Then my boyfriend, he beats the hell out of me, but I still said no. It felt great to say no, 'cause that's the only time in my life I ever said no to anything. Made me feel like I was somebody."

The bible circle sat in stunned silence. The pastor muttered something like, "Well, er, uh, that's resisting temptation. That's sort of what this text's about. Now it's time for a closing prayer." Out in the church parking lot, the pastor was helping one of the retired school teachers who invited Verleen to church into her car. "Can't wait to get home, get on the phone and invite people to come to bible study next week! Your bible studies used to be dull," she said. "I think we can get a crowd for this!" And somewhere deep in the fathomless depths of heaven God laughed with delight.

Caught by surprise. Just when you think you're the one doing the reaching out, God is reaching out to you through the one you think you're helping. God is saying, "listen up people, here is child-like trust and faith. Go and do likewise."

Something similar happened that day Jesus was approached by a delegation representing a Roman centurion; they came to ask if Jesus would heal his slave who was ill and close to death; the centurion was a person of authority, held in honor by the local community because he'd done much work with the local leaders, even built their synagogue. But he was also a Roman officer, the last person anyone would expect Jesus to point to as an example of faith.

So when Jesus approaches the centurion's house and he sends a second delegation to tell Jesus not to come to his house because he, the centurion, is not worthy to have Jesus in his home but to simply say the word and his servant will be healed, Jesus is shocked and with a smile on his face, says, "Such faith I have not seen even in Israel."

This is vintage Luke – the perfect insider/outsider story. In the story we are the disciples, the insiders. We are the ones who follow Jesus but often miss the point of his teaching, or jockey for position and prestige, we're the ones who put more stock in ourselves and our brilliant programming or impressive building or reputation in the community than we do in Jesus and the Holy Spirit to usher in new life.

I don't know what the disciples said to Jesus or under their breath when he praised the Roman; but I'll bet at least half of them still missed the point.

It's fun to think what Andrew Wyeth might have done with that scene – capturing the austere moment; Jesus' face turned toward the disciples, his arm pointing in the other direction to the centurion's house – an unpretentious, weathered stucco dwelling – the disciples' squinted eyes, pursed lips. Who knows?

There are times when Jesus gives us the grace to see faith in the lives and words of outsiders that is faith we can learn from and greater than that of us on the inside.

The outsider, in the hands of Jesus, becomes our teacher. Luke's message today is this: we grow in our faith not by sitting around and talking to those on the inside, but we are led to faith by those on the outside.

Like the church in conflict that called a new pastor and was transformed. Asked what caused the change one leader said, "We were so focused on our own issues we needed to get out and find people in greater pain than us. We needed more to do than sit around and worry about our church." Or the seminarian who worked in Ferguson after the killing of Michael Brown and said, "God is doing good work with people who are not Christians. Many of them shame those of us who think we are following Jesus." Or the newly trained pastor visiting prisoners started talking about the weather to which the prisoner said, "Look, we don't have a lot of time. Would you mind if I asked you a question? Do you believe it's true that God became a man, a real man, without ceasing to be God?" Finding theology in a prison of all places; most of us are not desperate enough to need much theology.

Sometimes we never know when we think we are taking the Good News to some needy persons or situation and the needy persons or situation ends up delivering the Good News to us.

The Holy Spirit refuses to stay tied down and confined to the usual suspects. It breaks through our stereotypes and biases to bring fresh, invigorating change and life.

I suspect a big part of the reason for our blindness is our busyness; we're simply too driven, too scheduled to have time to notice or listen very deeply. But it's also a function of our disbelieving age – the shrunken, minimalized, tepid thing we call faith that is less faith in God, Jesus and the Holy Spirit than it is vague hope in an amorphous thing called science or in the possibility of good luck or in reaping the rewards of some system of brownie points; none of which is remotely able to speak to our deepest hopes and greatest needs.

What is so striking about today's story, what jumps out at you is the simplicity and beauty – like a Wyeth painting – of a busy, burdened Roman centurion worried for a slave and his simple, unequivocal faith that Jesus can heal the man even close as he is to death. That's it, that's all we have – not some Hallmark ending with the centurion on his knees, confessing allegiance to Yahweh. Just his powerful expectation and trust that Jesus could do what he said he could do.

It's a good weekend to slow down; take a few things off the list; tune in to the world around us – the gift of this nation for starters and then sharpen our focus and hearing.

There's no telling what surprising encounter of life-giving faith we might have this week if we are open to it. Amen.