



Leaving the Shallow End

In her book, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, Annie Dillard writes this:

“Thomas Merton wrote, ‘There is always a temptation to diddle around in the contemplative life, making itsy-bitsy statues.’ There is always an enormous temptation in all of life to diddle around making itsy-bitsy friends and meals and journeys for itsy-bitsy years on end. It is so self-conscious, so apparently moral, simply to step aside from the gaps where the creeks and winds pour down, saying, I never merited this grace, quite rightly...I won’t have it. The world is wilder than that in all directions, more dangerous and bitter, more extravagant, and bright. We are making hay when we should be making whoopee; we are raising tomatoes when we should be raising Cain, or Lazarus.”

When I received my Ph.D. from Emory University, we had lunch with my mother and father. As I sat wearing my academic robes, my mother said to me, “Won’t it be wonderful that you have another diploma for your wall?” Looking back, I realize there was indeed part of me that was acquiring “itsy-bitsy statues.” Part of me was settling for the signs of wisdom instead of seeking to be wise.

However, at the age of 71, I don’t have time to stay in the shallow end. I am too old, and the world is too upside down to be happy with merely quoting interesting poems or making sure that our worship services are aesthetically pleasing. It’s not that I have illusions about changing the world by myself; it’s that I want to use the years I have left to live out the baptismal vow to “strive for justice and peace among all people and respect the dignity of every human being.”

My assumption is that I don’t need to join anything or go to a distant country. If we have learned anything from Epiphany, it’s that the light of Christ shines everywhere. That light not only shows us what to do, but, much to our surprise, it equips us for the work. As Jesus said, “The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few.” I am convinced there is plenty of pain and inequity and injustice right where I am. I just need to open my eyes and my heart to see it and to respond to it.

Dorothy Day, one of the founders of the Catholic Worker movement, said this is how that movement began: “We were just sitting there talking when lines of people began to form saying, ‘We need bread’.....If there were six small loaves and a few fishes, we had to divide them. There was always bread. We were just sitting there talking and people moved in on us. Let those who can take it, take it. Some moved out and that made room for more. And somehow the walls were expanded. We were just sitting there talking and someone said, ‘Let’s all go live on a farm. It was as casual as all that, I often think. It just came about. It just happened.”

It just happens when we align our hearts with God’s dream of a new world. Our lives are short and the need for justice, peace, and community is great. If we align our hearts, then I believe it will be clear how to move beyond raising tomatoes and discover God has equipped us to be agents for God’s raising Cain or Lazarus or this broken world.

