

Is it just me, or does today's Gospel reading feel as cold as the temperature? The word *gospel* means *good news*, and there doesn't seem to be anything good with a Gospel reading where Jesus dismisses the grand extravagance of the temple as temporary. And then talked about stuff we don't like wars and rumors of wars and warning against leaders who care more about getting power and prestige than they care about people.

But maybe there are those who see something different in today's Gospel. Maybe it really is good news if you know how to look.

Writer, preacher, professor, and former bishop Will Willimon talked about a time when he and a group of fellow Methodists went on a mission trip to Honduras. At one point in their trip, he and some other church folks were sitting outside around a fire with some of the residents of the village where they were staying, and someone suggested everyone name their favorite Bible passage, just to start conversation. As people started naming their favorites, he noticed they all picked ones that give them some form of comfort and made them feel loved. One person said John 3:16: "God so loved the world...". Another person named Psalm 23, "the Lord is my shepherd". Then a woman who lived in the village spoke up and said, she had always found the Gospel passage we just read to be of comfort to her. Willimon wondered how she could find it comforting, until he learned all five of her children had died from malnutrition and poor medical care that were not the result of bad parenting, they were the result of a government and a system that doesn't help the poor. This reminded him of a pastor who worked for over two decades with the poor in an inner city who despite always having to work on a small budget in a place that pushed her around, kept working at her ministry. When he asked her how she kept at it, she replied by looking out at the city and said, "Because I know that someday, all this will end." For both women their suffering from injustice gave them a different perspective.

It can be easy for many of us to forget that our personal experiences aren't the same as what everyone else is experiencing. For example, when the pandemic hit, many people felt frightened that the security and familiarity of their routines and traditions were threatened. Others found liberation in the changes and adaptations that were made so that work could still get done and meetings could happen. You personally may not like zoom, but many physically disabled or immune compromised people I know felt included for the first time in their lives, and it was empowering for them. While some wailed the loss of familiarity, others

dared to hope the world would open its eyes and embrace new ways to include those who had been excluded. Sometimes we can forget the same systems and institutions that provide security and opportunity for some are often the same systems that force others out. Sometimes we can get frustrated with systems that can't help because they are set up to make a profit instead of provide care. And in those moments of frustration, maybe we can find a little empathy for the people who long and wait for the promise of Jesus to be fulfilled: that those systems of greed, inequality and extravagance will topple when Jesus returns to do what he did in the temple: overturn those systems like so many tables and open the way for God's dream for us and for this world to come true. A world where mothers do not grieve the loss of all their children because they could not feed them, where opioids are not sought after to ease the burdens that drag so many people down, where no one is denied opportunity based on lack of personal wealth, status, the color of their skin, or their gender or age. A world where we really do respect the dignity of all people and work together to support each other.

Perhaps a step in this direction, even now, is the practice of empathy. A few days ago, my husband and I were waiting in line to get into a doctor's office. There were several others in line, and they were frustrated because the office was closed for lunch. Some blamed the pandemic. Others complained they didn't get this luxury in their jobs. Then Michael and I shared we experienced this same thing in other places and wondered if it was because there are fewer employees right now. It was a question, not a statement and invited a different way to see the situation. And then we watched as attitudes changed and those who had been called selfish and wicked by the people we were in line with, were now seen as stuck in systems where they were told what to do and had to try and provide care around rules they don't control. The people in line now had empathy for the people who kept us waiting. By the time the doors of the office opened, there was no mad rush, there was a lot of politeness, holding doors for each other, making room for each other, a sense of sharing not scarcity. It was a small thing, but it still is an expression of God's Kingdom of love that overturned fear and frustration. All because we introduced empathy into the conversation and let it spread.

Perhaps empathy can do more. Perhaps empathy can help us recognize the good news in life situations and in scriptures we find cold or disturbing by reminding us there are so many people with so much loss, suffering, and struggles in their lives. We don't have to pity them, we can walk with each other and pray for God's Kingdom to come, into all our lives.