

LAITY SUNDAY
October 23, 2011, at 9:45 a.m.
(Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost)
by Jennifer Dewhirst



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Texts: Deuteronomy 34:1-12; Psalm 90:1-6, 13-17; 1 Thessalonians 2:1-8; and Matthew 22:34-46

Matthew 22:34-46

³⁴When the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together, ³⁵and one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. ³⁶“Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?”

³⁷He said to him, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.” ³⁸This is the greatest and first commandment. ³⁹And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ ⁴⁰On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.”

⁴¹Now while the Pharisees were gathered together, Jesus asked them this question: ⁴²“What do you think of the Messiah? Whose son is he?”

They said to him, “The son of David.”

⁴³He said to them, “How is it then that David by the Spirit calls him Lord, saying, ⁴⁴‘The Lord said to my Lord, “Sit at my right hand, until I put your enemies under your feet”’ If David thus calls him Lord, how can he be his son?”

⁴⁶No one was able to give him an answer, nor from that day did anyone dare to ask him any more questions.

Good morning. My name is Jennifer Dewhirst, and I’m both honored and very nervous to be standing here this morning. At first, I thought, “Oh, I don’t have anything worth sharing....” You can see how that turned out, because here I am.

I am a stereotypical “Navy brat” – I moved nine times before my junior year of high school, and I’m also one of those people who proudly exclaims, “I wasn’t born in Texas, but I got here as fast as I could.” I went to college in Virginia, and I’m grateful to Teach for America for bringing me to the great state of Texas to teach soon after my college graduation. I’ve now lived in Houston for a little more than 17 years, and I don’t plan on leaving any time soon. I currently teach 7th and 8th

graders with the KIPP schools, and I can personally attest that teaching middle school kids is an adventure every day.

One of the downsides of moving around so much as a kid was having to say good-bye so often and having to make new friends every few years. During one point in high school, I actually stopped talking to my dad for several months out of my selfish frustration at having to move yet again. Now, my dad was a Navy man for 30 years, and in his career he worked with thousands of sailors and other very strong people. Yet, I don't think he was quite prepared for the conviction I displayed in my teenage angst. I'm definitely not proud of that behavior and have worked since college to repair my relationship with him, which is why, when my dad started talking about a mission trip to Honduras, I started to consider going with him.

As you may know, Honduras was hit by Hurricane Mitch in late October of 1998. The hurricane was a category five when it struck, but the real problems arose when it stalled over the country for several days. Thousands of people died, entire villages vanished under tremendous landslides, and the country's economic infrastructure pretty much collapsed. Needless to say, Honduras needed lots and lots of help to start to recover from this incredible disaster. A group of churches in Aiken, South Carolina, (where my parents were living at the time) joined together to form The Honduras Agape Foundation in 1999. My dad's first trip to Honduras was in 2000. Mine was in 2002.

My initial motivation in going to Honduras was, admittedly, pretty selfish. One goal was to spend some time with my dad, to continue to heal our relationship. I also was interested in seeing if my Spanish would improve after spending ten days in a Latin American country. Upon arrival, I experienced the usual culture shock moments - I actually clamped my mouth closed and plugged my nose while bathing out of the irrational fear I had of ingesting even a tiny bit of water.

Despite my "country mouse" perspective, I soon began to notice a few rather miraculous things. Many people in the United States have a lot. We have access to limitless resources; most of us have adequate medical care; we have a lot of "stuff." We also tend to complain a lot about all that we don't have, or things that aren't convenient.

Most, if not all, of the people I've met in Honduras have a fraction of what we have in the U.S.; yet, I rarely heard a single complaint or saw any emotion short of appreciation and gratitude for the little that they do have. I also noticed a tremendous sense of spiritual joy. I decided I needed to take note of this approach. If I could have a small taste of what my new Honduran friends had, I figured it definitely couldn't hurt. So I decided to come back to church more regularly, seeking the sense of spiritual contentment and peace I noticed in Honduras.

Today's reading from the Gospel of Matthew is the perfect passage to highlight mission work. Helping our neighbors, whether they are down the street or a plane flight away, shows our love for God.

Fast forward to 2008. I had traveled to Honduras every summer since 2002 with my dad, and my spiritual life was in a better place. I was attending church more or less regularly, and I thought life was good. Of course, there had to be a test sent my way to shake things up.

At KIPP we frequently say we are a team and a family, and with many of the families I've worked with over the years, this has been true – I'm frequently invited to celebrate birthdays and weddings and all of the other milestones that are celebrated along the way.

I met Fernando Mendez when he was in 9th grade. He called and asked for my help writing a paper, which led to me working with him throughout high school and through the loss of his mother to cancer. He frequently referred to me as his second mom, and I would jokingly call him my son. In May of 2008, I was on a school trip to Chicago and found out that Fernando had been murdered. At the time, I experienced many of the typical reactions to such traumatic news – denial, anger, intense sadness. One thing that kept me from the deepest despair was the fact that Fernando, a life-long but lapsed Catholic, had celebrated his Confirmation during Easter Vigil Mass just a month earlier.

Looking back on it now, I view this moment of my life as a crossroads, a turning point. I felt that I had two options:

I could turn away from God and church and the peace and freedom I'd found. I could blame God and become bitter and angry. I have known many people who have responded in this way.

Or I could instead turn towards the church.

I'm grateful on a daily basis that I chose well.