

Proper 15 Year A 2023

One day I'm going to get off of Facebook. It brings out the worst in me. I find I say things to people, sometimes perfect strangers that I would never say in person.

Whatever it is that is the cause of our cultural divisions, it is clear to me that Facebook, and social media for that matter, eggs it on, capitalizes on it. So I often find myself experiencing Facebook guilt for being condescending... sometimes demeaning. Maybe that's the draw.

I've joined several groups on Facebook: Alumni of Sewanee; Friends of the Seminary of the Southwest; Liturgical Theology. One would think groups such as those would be relatively benign, but sure enough, arguments abound. It seems these days everyone has a compulsion to have the last word, and I'm guilty.

One of the groups of which I am a member is called The Leftist Episcopalian Community. I thought, well that's me, so I joined; it's mostly Episcopal clergy, and some laity; and a few Episcopalian wanna-be's... and, over the past year or so, I have found that there is always someone lurking there in the ether to argue a theological point. Just last week a theologian who teaches at an Episcopal seminary was lamenting what he thought was a post-modern trend in the theology of the church; that we, the post-modern church, have a hard time believing that Jesus was fully human and fully divine. He argued that we have little trouble with the human part, but that we don't embrace the divinity part. If anything, I thought, the opposite is true. He said what we have lost is the "uniqueness" of Jesus. I responded tersely, "There is nothing unique about Jesus."

“Moreover,” I said, “We human beings, not just Jesus, are both human and divine.” That we share in the imaginative and creative mind of God, knowing the difference between good and evil; that Jesus is the mythological figure who represents the dual nature of us all. After accusing me of heresy... he quoted the Chalcedonian definition, written by the church fathers in the mid fifth century (it’s in the back of the Prayerbook): That Jesus was complete in Godhead, that he was fully God... and in every way like us, fully human, apart from sin. I replied that I respectfully disagree with the church fathers. How could Jesus be fully human and be apart from sin? As I posted my reply, I could feel a tremor in the internet cloud. As of today he has not replied.

The problem, among many, with historical, institutional Christianity is that we have ironically held Jesus up as the “perfect man,” whatever that means. We have set him apart as a deity, who because of his divinity, has very little in common with us. I don’t know about you, but if Jesus didn’t feel shame or regret; if Jesus never told a lie; if Jesus never questioned the existence of God, then I can’t relate to that Jesus. Jesus, like the whole of humanity, had to contend with life in all its ambiguity and temptations just the way we do. And just like us, he bore the life of God, participated in God’s imaginative vision for the world. Was he perfect? I think not, for to be human is to grow and mature, and to evolve... to make mistakes, and learn from them. The process theologians of the early twentieth century argued that God Godself is changing and evolving. In New Testament literature Jesus is us, beings created by God with two natures, both human and divine in creative tension. Jesus represents our true nature,

and therefore we have vital purpose; suffice it to say, a profound responsibility. If Jesus is the savior of the world, then so too are we, brothers and sisters.... Despite our sin; maybe even because of it.

But you don't have to believe my imaginings. Matthew in the Gospel this morning is making the same case. Jesus is arguing (not on Facebook) with the crowds, which would have included his followers, as well as some scribes and Pharisees. If there is one thing consistent with biblical history it is that believing Jews are always ready for a theological argument. The Pharisees argue that learning Torah, learning and understanding the Law is the way to live a righteous life. Jesus is making the argument that it is not so much what we learn or believe, but what we do. We don't follow the Law for the Law's sake, nor for our own, but we live for the other, we live for our neighbor. It is what comes out of us that will either bless or defile; that our actions are artifacts, as it were, of the heart. Our words and actions speak the truth of who we are. It is not enough to be learned in the Law... we have to imaginatively practice it.

And then abruptly, Jesus leaves the place... in fact he leaves the country. We are told that he goes up the coast into the district of Tyre and Sidon, gentile country. There he encounters a Canaanite woman. The Canaanites are, of course, for centuries, the sworn enemies of Israel, considered unclean by Jewish Law. The woman in desperation asks Jesus to heal her daughter. Audacious in and of itself. Women didn't speak to men in public, in those days. Jesus ignores her at first, but the woman persists. And then Jesus, the man, both God and human, utters a racial slur. He calls her a dog. You see the

irony? Jesus has just finished teaching that our words and actions define who we are, and here he demeans a poor woman only because of her gender and her race. He has committed a sin, in short.

But because of her persistence and her despairing advocacy for her daughter, Jesus repents, he is converted to a state of empathy, and the daughter is healed. So many preachers have made this story about Jesus finding his mission, not only to the people of Israel, but also to the gentiles; but more than that this is a story about being human and being Godlike. Jesus, like all of us, is subject to the culture in which he lives, its moral code, its prejudices, its dysfunction. And here the presenting sin is the sin of racism. We call racism in America our original sin, but I would say it is the original sin of humanity. Our xenophobic tendencies have for millennia been our undoing. They have engendered violence on a catastrophic scale over our history. To be fully human is to grapple with our prejudices, our fears, our self-absorption, whether cultural or otherwise. And to be Godlike is to submit to the truth in Love. In this story Love is stronger, and Love wins. None of us are born knowing the truth, but we are all given the ability to discover it; and we know it when we see it. Life is a process of transformation... a never ending saga of conversions; letting go of our distractions and preconceptions, and embracing the truth. If Jesus were not a participant in that very process, then he has nothing to teach us. He is hardly perfect. He is human, shaped by his world, but he is open to the will of God and the love that flows from it. It is an heroic choice. And we are presented with that choice.

So, how do we know the will of God in the face of a complicated cultural system in which we live? The Republicans argue for one way, and the Democrats another. Do we ascribe to the economics of John Maynard Keynes, or to the doctrines of Adam Smith? What does Love require? I believe this story from the pen of Matthew tells us. Jesus is converted, torn from his prejudices, by the passionate pleas of the widow. The voice of God, good people, comes from the poor and the marginalized. Why did Jesus hang out with the poor, and prostitutes, and tax collectors? Because he was listening for the voice of God. The Canaanite woman in our story, she too, both human and divine, speaks with the authority of God Godself. It is from the underside that God speaks. God speaks from the broken places of our world. The poor are our prophets. The incarcerated, our oracles. The LGBTQ community, who have suffered derision and rejection, heralds of Good News; Our Black brothers and sisters who have endured three hundred years of abuse and violence in this country... they are our conscience.

We talk a lot in our post-modern malaise about finding God. We pray hard. We seek to know. But, Good people, the voice of God calls out from the broken hearted. We are of two natures... we are human and we are divine. To answer the call of God is to live both with integrity and humility. To answer the call is to become truly ourselves. I follow Jesus because he was one who answered the call; risked and lost his life for simply finding and serving the truth. May our conversions give us the courage to risk for the truth. Be like Jesus, good people. Live into the gift that is your full humanity... and Love, because love is divine.