

Easter Year B 2024

We just returned from Austin having visited with our son James, and his family. His daughter, the older of his two children, Elliott, was in a school play; George the younger is a rising second grader, full of energy and mischief. Both are so smart. I've spent the last few days wondering where the years have gone. I'll be seventy next year. James will be forty three years old this December. I looked at him when he was not looking at me... a middle aged man, earning a living, rearing a family, contending with life's quandaries. Like our culture, he's stressed. He's had his ups and downs, of course. I wondered if he was still playing his guitar... so talented. He's excited about his new job... executive chef of a fancy new downtown Austin restaurant... It crossed my mind that statistics say that the majority of new restaurants fail. I can't worry about that. That's his worry. It is so hard to recognize that you can't protect the people you love from life's hard edges, risks, and suffering... I'm projecting of course. I see myself in my son. I want for him some peace, *shalom*, that great gift. I'd like to tell him that I've learned that the universe is astonishingly artful in the ways it sustains us. But that has to be discovered for himself. Perhaps the truth is drawn from the ancient memory of things seen along the way.

I've told this story from this pulpit before, and I want to tell it again: When James was about a year old Katharine and I would stroll him most every late afternoon up our dead-end street. He was one of those highly verbal children who

had something to say about everything. He could speak in sentences before he was two; and he was interested in everything; his attention insatiable... and he was always offering some commentary.

Around this same time my youngest brother Bob had come home from school, let us say, for an academic hiatus; and Bob had gone to work for a local construction company. Bob and James had a special bond....Bob, the ever earthy outdoorsman would tell James marvelous stories of the woods.... Stories of the magnificent, mysterious, and sometimes dangerous creatures that lived in them...James would listen, unblinking, awestruck....Bob told him about catching fish ... some with glorious painted sails on their backs.... Stories of fish that, he said, could fly....He spoke of sleeping all night in the woods, just to rise with the dawn and summon wild turkeys by speaking their own language... he spoke of riding horses bareback at midnight... all of this, rich nurture for an innocent and forming imagination.

One late afternoon Bob joined us on our stroll up the street....as we turned the corner at the top of the hill we looked toward the carport of the house next to the house on the corner and we saw a woman lying face down on the concrete, her huge German Shepherd lying next to her....without hesitation Bob ran as fast as he could to the woman in spite of the German Shepherd's hair raising suspicions.... He turned the woman over literally lying down beside her and

began trying to revive her...breathing into her, mouth to mouth....pressing on her chest....she was dead.....Bob broke the news to her husband just inside the screen door of the house, watching television at high volume, unaware of what had befallen. The old man wailed. Bob held him in his arms. James was watching, wide-eyed, speechless.

Over the years I have wondered what that child saw that day, what that child thought upon seeing his beloved uncle respond so courageously ...What I saw was a cardinal act of love, instinctive, courageous....I saw one laying down his life for the life of another....we all saw it...and seeing, at least for me, was believing.

“No one has greater love than this: to lay down one’s life for one’s friends,” Jesus tells his disciples. Indeed the principal theme in John’s Gospel is friendship. John considers friendship the very highest human ideal. It is the ideal that Jesus practiced in his life and ministry. At its core friendship is sacrifice... I’ve said it before, but it bears repeating: In this Gospel Jesus is the lens through whom we see God.... and perhaps more importantly, Jesus is the lens through whom God sees us. That premise, of course, flies in the face of Augustine’s doctrine of the Fall. Augustine proposes that humankind is wholly separate from God, living in a state of depravity; and for that matter, Jesus too. Jesus, God’s supernatural Son utterly set apart from humanity... and the church has wholeheartedly embraced

that doctrine over the centuries... and the result has been an insidious abdication of its responsibility to be the hands and feet and heart of God in the world. On the one hand the church proclaims that it is the body of Christ; and on the other it says we are languishing in sin and unworthiness. It is no wonder that the church's ministry and mission... and its numbers, have declined ever since the Enlightenment.

Perhaps the most audacious statement in this Gospel appears also in this brief passage: "I no longer call you slaves, because the slaves don't know what the master is doing; but I call you friends." These are not words one would use speaking to a fallen race. This is a statement of intimate solidarity; a statement that in fact strikes against the hierarchical structure of his society. Jesus is saying that we who follow in his ways of befriending are in effect equals with God. That means that we are the means of salvation for the world. To be the church, which is to be the body of Christ, is to lay down our lives for the good of our neighbor. That is salvation. That is what God does. God is forever emptying God's self for the good of the creation God Loves. God is not supernatural. God is love, and Love requires flesh and blood. One might say that God is radically natural.

George Gallup, the pollster, also an Episcopalian, ran a poll in the late 1990's asking which Gospel was the most recognized among the United States population. The resounding answer was that it was the Gospel of John. I find that

an irony, because I don't believe our culture believes that we are friends of God. I don't believe our culture believes that Jesus is the lens through whom God sees us. Our culture in its tendency for self-loathing has opted for the false narrative of depravity. That may explain the bitter cultural divide in which we now find ourselves. If you choose to believe you are depraved, then you will act with depravity. All of our social ills, all of the impairments of our common life are linked to this existential self-loathing... racism, climate change, the abuse of immigrants, the widening gap between rich and poor; Industrialized violence.

There is a lot being written these days about the possibility of an "emerging church." Perhaps we live in a time of deconstruction in which we are being presented with an opportunity to reinvent ourselves as God's people. My hope is that this emerging church will take John's Gospel seriously. My hope is that we live into our friendship with God; that we own our God-likeness. At the heart of any friendship is trust. We say we trust God, but do we really believe that God trusts us? Do we really believe that God sends us out to do the work of Jesus? Do we really believe that to be in Love is to be in God? that the love we give to the world is at its heart the love of God? I want to say that taking these things to heart is the only hope for a world burdened with self-loathing and shame and violence.

But don't take my words for it... just know what I saw on a golden Autumn afternoon. I saw the beauty of Love in the flesh. I saw its commitment; its empathy; its courage. There is no greater thing on this earth than to lay down one's life for one's friends. Good people, seeing is believing. I hope my son James will have taken to heart what he witnessed that day; that the memory of it will have returned to his consciousness; that he will have the good sense to call on this knowledge deep within his imagination; and that he will know his divine purpose... that he may feel the music of the spheres, and I hope he'll pass such wisdom on to his children, and they theirs. That after all is what our faith is all about; to bear witness to the truth; and give it to others. This world depends on that. It is lost without it. Know that the mystery of God is no further than the proximity to our neighbor. Bob has his flaws just like the rest of us; but in that shining moment he was perfect in Love; a friend of God; laying down his life. There is no greater thing. Look to your memories, good people, to the things you have seen that are true and good. And may we, friends of God, with courage and joy, go and do the same.