

Proper 23 Year C 2025

My favorite course in college was Modern British Poetry, taught by the master himself, Ted Stirling... brother of Doug Stirling, former rector of this parish. In his introduction to the course, he spent a lot of time on context; what was happening in the emerging Modern World of the West. The Industrial Revolution was in full swing creating vast amounts of wealth. Alas, the brilliant technology of the Industrial Revolution was also used for warfare, imposing the subsequent deaths of not thousands, but millions of young men and women during the First World War. Nationhood had matured institutionalizing wealth and power to the point of addiction. The emerging modern world would be born under traumatic stress never experienced before on such a scale. Dr. Stirling named two discoveries that shaped in no small way the consciousness of the Modern World. The first was Darwin's theory of Evolution in which Darwin proposed that all life evolved along a continuum of Natural Selection... that life as we know it was shaped over millennia by genetic change and adaptation; and influenced as well by geography and nature; that the ancient survival instincts, embedded in our DNA; and modified by experience, determined the arc of human development. Perhaps most importantly he argued that humankind evolved, and was evolving, from a common ancestor... that all humans bear the same ancient genetic code. It was as if humankind were one organism, becoming as the world was becoming.

The second was Freud's discovery of the unconscious mind, not only as a mark of human individuality, but, more importantly, that the unconscious mind among all

people, of all cultures, shared in a collective knowledge. Memory in our DNA. Carl Jung would later say that the collective consciousness described by Freud contained a common mythology across ethnicities and culture; that there are certain truths known in common by a species so very much more connected to each other than previously thought. The poet William Butler Yeats would call that collective consciousness the *Spiritus Mundi*, the world of the Spirit, which continues to shape the evolutionary trajectory of humanity. We evolve, but we know the truth.

The point is that humankind is not a loose confederation of individuals, but a collective organism fully contingent to, and knowledgeable of each other; a global community in which the whole is always affected by the experience of its individual parts. If one part of the community is broken, then the whole body suffers. Salvation I would propose is the tending to the healing of the one body. That makes salvation first and foremost about the care of our neighbor; that healing for our neighbor is healing for ourselves.

I have said before that humankind's predisposition to xenophobia, fear of the stranger, is at the heart of the undoing of a mutual society. Our disease; our sin. Perhaps along the way of our evolutionary development, the so-called "fear of the stranger" served some purpose for survival. At some point it may have been expeditious in our development to be wary of another tribe's intentions; to name others as "enemy." The great philosophical anthropologist Rene Girard argues that it was envy that turned us

against each other. We want what you have. Indeed the myth of Cain murdering his brother Abel in Genesis tells the story of the deadly proximity of envy to violence. We have a learned memory buried deep in our DNA that distrusts the stranger, our neighbor. Our instinct of “fight or flight” is our learned response.

The scribes of both Hebrew Scripture and New Testament literature recognize this problem as toxic to the sustainability of community, and thus our very species. The Hebrew bible is shot through with admonitions to welcome the stranger; in particular the immigrant; to welcome them as if they are one of our own family. Jesus in his teaching takes the admonition a step further; that we are to welcome the stranger as well as the outcast, the untouchable, the sick and the marginalized... and not just for the sake of them.... But for the sake of the community entire... dare I say for the sake of our humanity. Welcome becomes an act of healing: the healing of a broken community.

It is no accident that Jesus’s so-called miracles are acts of healing; and in each act of healing, the sick are no longer ostracized from their community. They are reintegrated, welcomed into the communion of their people. That is what salvation is... not a personal guarantee of heaven, but the restoration of the lost back into the nurture, dignity and well-being of community.

In our reading for today from Luke’s Gospel, the NRSV Translators have the leper colony by the side of the road calling out to Jesus to “Have mercy.” But the word for mercy in the Greek also means the loving kindness of salvation. Lord Jesus, “save us.

"The Lepers are crying out for salvation... and according to Luke, Jesus answers that call, and heals the ten lepers. And Luke with theological and literary license says one of the lepers was a Samaritan, thus connecting the act of healing and the welcome of stranger into one. This is a picture, a tableau, of salvation; and salvation is a collaborative enterprise. Jesus is travelling in the company of disciples. This is a group project. A community enterprise. All action in this Gospel points to community and its healing. And that sisters and brothers is our singular vocation.... And more than that. Jesus will go on to say that to Love one's neighbor is to Love God. Our welcoming of the stranger, the immigrant, the outcast, the untouchable, is to participate in the healing of God's broken world. And moreover, our embrace of the other is to experience God in the flesh. God won't be found in an arcane pursuit of some special esoteric knowledge. God is found in the lives of our neighbors, and for some reason, still a mystery to me, in the lives of the suffering. To cross the boundary between self and other is to evoke the recognition of God among us. The truth is, that what intimately binds us in the mysterious solidarity of being the human community, is God's very life. God lives in us, binding us together with one purpose... to bear God's healing Love to the world God loves.

The fruit of such a vocation is gratitude... and there is no healing balm in this world as powerful as gratitude. Luke alludes to it in this story. Gratitude and healing are artifacts of God's Love and presence. Fear is the *modus operandi* of our principal sin, our isolation from the other. And fear has no power over healing and gratitude. Perhaps our

greatest responsibility in these “end times,” is that we muster our praise of God in the face of, and despite of the world’s ruin... and its fear.

In post-modernity, our own time, our xenophobic curse has been institutionalized. It infects our education system; our prison system; healthcare... and not least of all our government. Racism is the outward and visible sign. The current regime is a model for the xenophobic disease that has so plagued our world over the centuries. Not only is it opposing the rudiments of our democracy; but it is opposing the central teachings of the Gospel. Corrupted power, and its means of fear, have always been the problem, and perhaps in our time it has never been as overt. That means that we have to be overt in our healing presence. We fight institutional hate with simple acts of Love as a community. Our banding together as community across this nation will subvert the evil we face. Healing and gratitude are our common anthem.

Friday night Katharine and I attended a retirement dinner for my brother Bob. Bob literally worked his way up the ladder of his profession from day laborer to president of a sizable paving company. There were a number of moving testimonials from fellow employees of his company, and finally Bob got up to speak. He spoke eloquently. He said that most of the time he really didn’t know what he was doing... many times he was afraid... but he said his colleagues always had time for him to talk things out; to find a way ahead amid complex problems. He said he learned that collaboration is what made the company a success. Community. Our collaboration; our speaking and listening; our

presence will save us, good people. because the truth is we are all... even our so-called enemies... all of us are one family, endowed with the best of bonds.... The prophets and scribes over the sweep of biblical history; even Jesus himself, only reminded us of what we already know: that we are one family gathered together in one Spirit, a Spirit that is invincible.