

Sermons at Saint Paul's

A Wellspring of spiritual; nourishment; A river of service in Jesus' Name

Pentecost 13

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The gospel story reminds me of numerous stories that I have heard over many years from parents about their children, who having been a part of the Church's life, no longer participate in the life of the Church. Parents, who share these sentiments, do so out of the deepest love for their children and the desire to see them do well. They believe, that their personal life stories and testimonies offer credible examples of the extent to which they have been blessed by faith. But within the depth of love for their children is also a hint of frustration over their inability to present an alternative narrative to convince these grown-up children to re-embrace their faith and to live into its promises. The fact that some of our children at least bring their children for baptism- is a comfort of sorts, because it signifies that they have not totally abandoned the faith; they recognize and celebrate some of its traditions.

Whether your grandchild is brought for baptism or not, there is a part of the story that acknowledges the inherent problem with faith. What it is about faith that I do not see but some way, somehow, my children have figured it out, and as a result, have been reticent about their involvement in an enriching and affirming community? To be honest, they have as much questions as those who worship here week-in and week-out. The problem, however, is we feel that by affirming their questions, we have in some way betrayed the tribe and the text. As a matter of fact, we feel often ill-equipped to even tolerate these legitimate questions; and our inability to affirm or tolerate either, distort our conversations, creates some awkwardness about certain topics and leaves all of us vulnerable and empty.

As Jesus indicated, we know how to interpret the appearance of earth and sky, and as parents and grandparents, we know that the world has been changing rapidly, and our concern for our children and grandchildren takes prominence over many things. And so out of the depth of our love, we are led to ask, would we let those we love chase after other gods or would we help them find the one true God? We know that what we often chase-the gods that we chase leads to a dead-end. But that which we seek, the community we seek, the love we seek to embody, the compassion that fills our lives and hearts, moving us to see ourselves, not apart from others, but to look past the otherness of others in order to look to the self we all share; and the joy of knowing that our words find their meaning and value in the light of the Word we call God-we know that is life-giving.

The divisions within households that Jesus talks about inaugurating with his presence are those that strike the very cord of what it means to be human- and that is to be pregnant with possibilities, to accept religion as a work of the imagination, a work of art that invites us into a relationship or covenant in a community that is unafraid of difference. Our human divisions only become profound, leading to conflicts, when we fail to recognize religion as a quest for meaning and for a community within which we find new life and energy that heals rather than wound, loves rather than hate and embraces difference rather than seeking to eradicate it.

The Letter to the Hebrews shares the likes of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David and Samuel, in order to recount their deeds of faithfulness in a community where some had abandoned the life-giving community to chase after other gods who offered nothing but a dead-end. By their life of faithfulness, they carved a way out of the dead-end and called the people of Israel back to faithfulness with Yahweh.

To many of these children who are now adults, understanding the life-giving aspect of faith doesn't square with some of the problems that have come to be associated with faith. And so part of their resistance to faith is based on this simple question, what relevance if any, does any of these

ancient ceremonies, language and rites have in the context of their world, and of today's world? More critically, how does the life-giving faith account for all the atrocities that have been committed in its name? In the absence of a credible alternative narrative, many have come to believe in the myth that the human nature is perfectible by its own efforts and that the quest for truth is over. It is therefore up to the people of faith to point out that no one person or point of view holds the whole truth. And that there is always more to see and learn about God.

See, religious stories are about the relationship or covenant with God and with one another. The Israelites were able to pass through the Red Sea because of their relationship with God. Rahab was able to save herself and her family because of the relationship she developed with the spies, all the hollering of the prophets that the Letter to the Hebrews point out was about honoring the relationship with God and with one another, and Jesus' presence was about a God who sought community and relationship. The idea of relationship and covenant are also essential to our own individual and communal stories. Martin Buber wrote "I have no teaching, but carry on a conversation.... In the beginning was the relation." Buber takes us back to the Garden of Eden, establishes Adam as nature's first priest, and points out that Adam existed only in relation to God. And so does you and me. We cannot exist without God and each other. The point then is, before we can talk about God, we need to be able to trust each other. We must be willing to create circles of mutual blessing in which people are capable of sacrifice and enchantment; for we know that humanism without the promise of grace and forgiveness is pure fantasy, and to be human in covenant with others is finding yourself in order to give yourself away.

For some families, in order to maintain some amount of civility, they agree to disagree on these and many other questions related to faith. For many, the point of family cohesion overrides any disagreement that comes with discussing faith. But as legitimate as these questions and sentiments

maybe, those of us who ask these questions or express these sentiments assume that any answers seem to delegitimize the human quest for longing.

Another cautionary tale is the concern echoed by the prophet Jeremiah who questioned those who chose to believe in the dreams of false prophets, and by so doing neglected Yahweh, thinking that they could hide away from Him. From the prophet's point of view, the false prophecies which the people have embraced was reminiscent of the attitude of their ancestors who abandoned Yahweh for Baal. Jeremiah's cries of how long, in a way reflects our own cry and silent tears over children who have not embraced faith as much as we would want them to, or tolerated the unknown for the sake of their belief in certainty.

I learned that humans are both tribal and scribal. We are tribal because we are married to our tribes. We feel comfortable among our tribesmen and women. We are also scribal because we are married to texts. We are comfortable among people who believe the texts just as much as we do. We do not easily accept people into our tribes nor do we like to deviate from our texts. And so if the Letter to the Hebrews suggest that Jesus, the same person who is bringing division and not peace, as the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, then maybe, just maybe, the division is about breaking up both our tribal and scribal allegiances.

The question this hot summer morning is, what stories are we telling about ourselves? Maybe, just maybe, the fire that Jesus brings is one that will rekindle us to look at faith anew, to reinvent faith. Pope Francis refers to this new way as an era of change-where we look at faith as a state of being grasped by an ultimate concern-God as the ultimate concern. By that, we can look at faith as both being existential, and also one that invites us into a community where being human means finding yourself in order to give yourself away. Amen.