

Easter 5 Year C

“A new commandment I give you that you love one another”

That brothers and sisters really is all there is to it. In the whole of religious thought worldwide, in every religious tradition, the chief tenet is that we love one another, that we as the Greek in John puts it, befriend each other...and as you know, friend is the ultimate most profound relationship in the Greco Roman world...so even though Jesus calls it a new commandment... there is nothing new about it...either the scribe is being rhetorical, or he's got his tongue in his cheek, or perhaps both. So what happened to the church that practiced love, and befriending... the church that honored the commandments of God and the church that disobeyed or at least critiqued the unjust laws of man. From his famous letter from the Birmingham Jail, which was written 50 years ago last Tuesday, Martin Luther King, Jr. writes as follows:

“Things are different in our day and age. So often the contemporary church is a weak, ineffectual voice with an uncertain sound. So often it is an arch defender of the status quo. Far from being disturbed by the presence of the church, the power structure of the average community is consoled by silent...and often even vocal... sanction of the way things are. But the judgment of God is upon the church now as never before. If today's church does not recapture the sacrificial spirit of the early church, it will lose its authenticity, forfeit the loyalty of millions, and be dismissed as an irrelevant social club with no meaning for the twentieth century.” I believe Dr. King's words have as much resonance today as they did fifty years ago.

Just this past week...Sunday evening into Tuesday morning, Mary and I attended the dioceses' annual clergy conference. Our speaker was Mirabai Starr who I had never heard of...but apparently she is beginning to hit the big time among religious scholars via her writings and her translations. Her primary interest and expertise has to do with comparative religion, specifically among the Abrahamic faiths: Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Her passionate point of view is that in truth the differences among these faiths are infinitesimally small compared to what we have in common. The media would have us think otherwise. These likenesses are even more poignant, the differences indistinguishable, within the mystic traditions of the three faiths.

Her new book is entitled *God of Love* and traces through the literature, iconography, art and music of these faiths the universal call to love...a call to love in all its richness and infinite means of expression...we talk about

those means here all the time, to forgive, to welcome the stranger, to do justice, to practice compassion and kindness. She finds these virtues as central to Hebrew scripture, The New Testament, and in the Koran. God is God and all people are God's people she says, and there is a preponderance of scriptural warrant in the religions of the world for her argument. Would that governments and the military industrial complexes buy in...the world would look much different. It makes me wonder what politicians are hearing and thinking when they piously attend their churches and synagogues and mosques. At our conference last week one priest, who is a former military chaplain, had a real problem with our speaker's drawing parallels to these faith traditions, especially Islam...in fact he had something of a meltdown when she read poetry by the Sufi Muslim poet Rumi, and then intoned a Muslim chant about the greatness of God; he left the room...he later said that the world is so fallen that our only hope for peace and joy and wellbeing lies in the next life...How terribly sad I thought. In the holy lore and literature of our world we are taught a far different reality. And we'll look at that reality today in our reading from John's gospel.

We are in the high season of Easter and are therefore reading from John's Gospel... You know, Matthew, Mark and Luke each have a designated year in the lectionary...John just drifts in and out, a ghostly sage, on special occasions, the season of Easter being one such occasion. Here in our passage today, on the eve of his arrest Jesus is giving his disciples their marching orders...but more than that he is yet again describing who he is to them...sharing with them the knowledge of his true nature...as a whole that is really what this Gospel is all about...who this Jesus is and what that means for those who would follow him. The writer(s) of this gospel use many metaphors to help us get at this knowledge: I am good shepherd he says (the words *I am* are the same words God uttered to Moses way back in the day) I am vine; I am bread; I am resurrection; I am way; I am light; I am truth; I am life...metaphors that point to the true nature of this Jesus....so for a minute lets fast rewind to the prologue of this gospel, because as you now Aristotelian scholars know, the prologue in an ancient piece of rhetoric ties together and gives meaning to the over-arching argument...From the prologue: "In the beginning was the word, and the word was with God, and the word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him. What has come into being with him was life and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it."

So as we are taught that this primordial Word, which was God of which Jesus is the archetype...we are also taught that this word is the same

as the light of humankind...that is stunning...Therefore if this Gospel is a treatise on the identity, the nature of Jesus...then it is also a treatise on our Human nature...what it means to be human made in the image of God.

To my priest friend I want to say that in spite of the darkness and violence in the world...Ours, and by ours I mean all people of faith...Ours is to build heaven in earth...Robert Frost, one of our beloved American poets, reminds us that “earth is the right place for love”...and so is Jesus reminding us, that love is at hand, not projected onto some imagined utopian future... He reminds us that we are sent into the world just as he is sent as transforming and healing nurture to the world’s sick and dispossessed and lost... We too are the gateway for a dignified life for the abased of our world... we too are vines and braches of God’s love that bear the fruits of the emerging commonweal of God, the new Jerusalem...we too are bread that will nurture our hungry...and we too are resurrection that will raise up the lowly into wellbeing...we are light and life and truth sent into a dark world...all of these metaphors are images of nurture, and empowerment and transformation of this world which God with all passion calls good, and that includes all people, there is no one alive or dead for that matter who is other!... those informing metaphors apply to us as they apply to Jesus...they are all metaphors of love that created and creates the universe.....May we by the Grace of God bear this magnificent mantle of love....and make this so-called new commandment...new indeed.