

Proper 13 Year B

My cousin William, who lives in Dothan is an avowed atheist, card carrying... I mean he's a member of the American Atheist Society... but he is one of the most "Christian" people I know. He is compassionate.... He cares about the least fortunate, the left out... He's willing to stand among his Facebook friends, and his large extended family, for that matter, and defend the cause of justice.... And equality... Some of his family won't speak to him... but he carries on... serving the good and the right... Some in our culture would call him a secular humanist.... But wasn't Jesus the consummate humanist? That is, didn't Jesus look to uphold the capacity of the human community to choose the good? He called the ones who make such an improbable choice, children of God.... Children of God... the ones who choose to stand for the right and the good.

Perhaps William has chosen to call himself an atheist for good reason... Perhaps he is done with what our post-modern western society calls Christianity.... Perhaps he is done with what I call a distorted theism that believes in a supernatural God aloof in the heavens.... A god who answers some prayers, and not others... a god who has a decided distaste for the human community, a community fallen from grace... a depraved community struggling for god's favor... hoping for a reward in the next life.... A god whose love is limited to a select few... a god who strikes fear in the hearts of the faithful.

The church of course has bought in to such an illusion... because for centuries such a theology has been good for crowd control... but in our age, people are done with the theology of fear.... Done with an institution that holds unworthiness over our heads... It shouldn't be any surprise that people have left the church in droves... I'm done with that theology as well...

So let's back up and take a look at what happened... how faith became a burden.... Let's look at the creation story: The man and the woman are in a beautiful garden... all their needs met... God tells them that they may partake of all the fruits of the garden except one.... They may not eat of the tree of knowledge... the knowledge of good and evil... they of course eat and, at least according to Augustine, and later Calvin, their disobedience brought on all manner of calamity, including death itself.... Original sin... Augustine called it.... Sin so profound that God chose to sacrifice his son to pay the unpayable debt.... That is called substitutionary theology... Jesus' life to stand between a judging God and

our incalculable sin. That theology over the centuries has passed for orthodoxy... the institutional church has largely embraced it... but as it has held sway over the tradition, it has always been questioned.... If you believe theology is always speculative, then we are duty bound to question it.... Theology is not in stone, as much as the church would like to say it is.. It is fallible, and therefore needs always to be imaginatively interpreted and reinterpreted.

So, let me offer an alternative interpretation to the Genesis account of our beginnings: At some point in the evolution of our species, we became conscious... conscious of the difference between good and evil.... The man and the woman were of course destined to partake of the fruit of knowledge.... Because we are told that if we did we would become godlike... having the discreet knowledge of good and evil.... It is as if we were set up in the garden.... Our so-called disobedience really just an act of differentiation, a necessary step in our becoming human.... The story of the man and woman in the garden I want to suggest is a story of our species coming of age.... Of our species receiving the gift of free will... a painful transformation to be sure... but a necessary one.... It is not until we get to the story of Cain and Abel in Genesis that violence enters our world... Cain's envy and subsequent murder of his brother Abel.... But the story of the so-called fall... is no fall at all, but a mythological account of our coming of age.... Our becoming sentient beings, with moral capability, able to make reasoned choices.

The gospel of John from which we just read is first and foremost a creation story as well.... In the beginning it begins.... In the beginning was the word, and the word was with God and the word was God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.... Now this is no account of a fall from grace... but a proclamation as to nobility of the human race.... The light of humankind being compared to the light of God.... For John, Jesus is the archetype of this light... Jesus is the mythological figure of the true human... the human come of age... full of light and truth he says.... The human capable of compassion.... Imaginative, creative, empathetic, kind... self-critical... reasonable. John's gospel is a call to live into our godlikeness. We are sent as the Christ is sent, the writer tells us.

So when John speaks of Jesus as come down from heaven... that he is the gate.... That he is the doorway... that he is the true vine.... That he is the good

shepherd.... He is speaking of us, all who follow in the way of Jesus... and today Jesus says that he is bread... nurture for the world.... That is us, brothers and sisters... we are the bread come down from heaven as nurture for our world. We are not fallen beings in need of rescue.... We are the chosen ones of God to bring love to our world.... We are the chosen ones to set right what has become wrong... we are the restorers of paradise... the bearers of God's bounty... the midwives of well-being and dignity for all.... And the guardians, the gardeners of this beautiful planet.

It is easy to be poor pitiful sinners.... A convenient means by which we may abdicate our responsibility... but it is quite another matter to be sons and daughters of God.... And that is our calling; that is our legacy to be holy bread blessed, broken, and given to the world... and what that means is that God asks everything of us.... Because we are the last stand for love... Love lies fallow until we say yes to our destiny.... That is what free will is, not a curse, not a fall, but a profound gift...free will is the chance, the possibility to love....Free will is the possibility to be truly who we are: a royal priesthood... a noble people.... Living bread, blessed, broken and given.