

Proper 21 Year B

Yesterday morning I attended a meeting of the peace and justice commission of the diocese at camp Beckwith. For the last several years this commission has been dormant.... You know.... Peace and justice... nothing to do... And, after all, what has the church to do with peace and justice... That's a rhetorical question; I'll let you answer it. Our new bishop has affirmed the work of our commission, and he has even said that he would like the diocese to embrace a peace and justice issue... so there was great anticipation for this meeting, and excitement in the room... maybe we're going to do something, at last ... We were charged as a commission to identify an issue facing our common life that would resonate with us... and that we offer it to the next diocesan convention.... After introducing ourselves to each other around the table, we were asked to raise an issue that we thought would be important, something we are passionate about. The issues ranged widely as one would expect... domestic violence; gun control; the care of refugees, and the disenfranchised of our world seeking asylum; prison reform; income inequality and poverty; marriage equality... climate change and how that affects first the poor; and last but not least pervasive and systemic disease of racism... We talked about the pilgrimage to Hayneville commemorating the martyrdom of Jonathan Daniels... and how moving the presiding bishop's sermon was there in the very same courtroom in which 50 years ago the deputy sheriff was acquitted of murder... We remembered that he talked about how Jesus didn't come to found a church, but that he came to found a movement... heads were nodding; the energy in the room was electric... palpable.

But then the institutional pall settled over the room.... "We need to be careful about how we speak about these things," said one clergyperson... "many of my people are just not where we are...." "We need to move slowly, another clergy person said, "tap dance our way into the issues."" because, you know, there are many Episcopalians who feel that we need not speak of such things because they are too political... that the church has no business meddling in politics.

And then the chair of our committee intervened... "Let's find an issue that won't step on any toes... something the whole diocese can get behind." And I thought, almost out loud, When does the truth not step on toes? Who said this enterprise called Christianity should be comfortable... and not have a prophetic edge? And I thought... The church is not here to protect us... not from illness, not

from pain... and certainly not from ideas and controversy...That church is dying. The church exists to sustain us and empower us.

My mind began to wander as the meeting began to feel like... well, a meeting. We can't know much historically about the person of Jesus, I mused.... The gospel stories of Jesus are not corroborated historically... in fact the gospel accounts of Jesus' life are meant to be theological, not historical. But scholars still have been in search for the historical Jesus for a long, long time; and what they have all concluded... from Josephus of the first century, to the Jesus seminar of the late twentieth century... they have concluded that there are two, just two historical facts concerning Jesus.... That he was a Wisdom preacher/teacher and healer who hung out in Galilee... and that he was killed by the Romans by crucifixion for the crime of sedition (treason)... So one thing we know about Jesus is that he was a political activist...that he stepped on toes... that he believed so strongly in the cause of God... The cause of God being the well-being and dignity of all people... that he gave his life for it.... And the cause of God is economic and social, and yes, political... because those are matters as to how we live together as humans made in the image of God.... In Luke's gospel Jesus preaches a radical change in the socio-economic system... the poor are raised up while the powerful rich are cast down... that's stepping on toes, right? In Matthew, Jesus makes the audacious claim that to serve the lost and the least, the outcasts of our world... we are in fact serving him... And here in Mark... Jesus is saying that it is to the powerless that we are sent (children the example)... that to set a stumbling block in the way of the powerless casts us out of God's presence. We just heard the over-the-top consequences of being stumbling blocks... And the great stumbling block for our age, perhaps for every age, is indifference. Who are we to challenge the status quo? We dare not step on anyone's toes... Peace and justice just takes time.

In 1964, Pope John 23 made the statement... that though God loves us all... God's preferential option in this world is for the poor... In other words, God will not sleep until the abundance of this planet we live on is shared equally among all of us... that's stepping on toes!... And now Pope Francis is at it again.... He's speaking out on climate change... He's speaking for a compassionate approach to immigration... He is calling out the corruption that wealth and power engender in our world.... And of course he's getting pushback... He's stepping on toes...I heard a Fox pundit (on You tube mind you!; I don't watch Fox) say that he goes to church to hear about *his* Bible.... Not politics. So that's a real question for the church these days... Do we dare speak and act in the political realm... the realm of public

discourse... the realm of our common life?... Politics of course is the name we give to the way we organize our living together... So to the question of: What does the church have to do with politics? I say, everything... everything.

Jesus is our example... He called out the powers that be... He offered scathing critique of the emperor as well as the civic and religious establishment of his day... He challenged orthodox ways of thinking... he taught and practiced inclusion... He broke bread, drank wine with Roman tax agents and prostitutes and n'eer do wells of his day... His disciples were called unclean... Wherever there was indignity he called for justice... wherever there was illness, he offered healing... he welcomed strangers, embraced with compassion and hospitality the immigrant (resident alien)... told stories that upended conventional wisdom... He was in short an activist for God... His edgy preaching was not comfortable but incisive... "I come not to bring peace but a sword," he says. We have made Jesus so very comfortable... we've made Jesus so very safe.... He's not safe.

I have a fantasy about what Jesus might have thought had he somehow appeared at the council of Nicea in the fourth century... a council in which the church fathers were hammering out a neat and clean doctrine about the person of Jesus and his part in the Trinity.... You know: Jesus is God from God, light from light... begotten not made... of one being with the father... Really!? I think he would say... I think he would say to the assembly gathered there.... Folks it ain't about me... It's about taking care of God's people who need taking care of... It's about standing against whatever is evil in the world... calling it out, and with grace offering creatively a way in which we can all live in Shalom... that is, at peace, with well-being and dignity, and without fear.

And Jesus goes further... He's not about an exclusive club, or an exclusive religion for that matter... He tells us whoever is doing good is of God... Get with the program of doing good, he says.... There is no time for tap dancing. The world is ready for the truth... Our identity is to be activists for the truth... activists for a world restored to the beauty God intends for it... and brothers and sisters, if that means stepping on toes... so be it.