

Proper 24 Year A

For those of you who read my blog this week this will be a little redundant, but I can't get this out of my mind. I recounted the story of Gordon Sturges who several years ago did handy-work around the church... carpentry, plumbing, masonry, painting...there really wasn't much he couldn't do...and he was a nice guy...and smart...he told me once how he had gone to college on a full scholarship, but during his first year the school in which he enrolled declared bankruptcy and closed its doors. He had to go to work to help out his family...He told me once that he never was much of a church go-er because he and his mother and siblings moved around a lot... but that he thought God had blessed him with the skills to get by in life....he asked me questions about my learning...what books he should read to properly educate himself...the books I gave him he read with relish....I got to know him pretty well and some of you did too....He worked around All Saints for about a year...He is the artisan who stripped and painted our enviable red doors.

But I noticed along the way, that Gordon was always out of money... and one day he told me that his former residence was undergoing renovation and his new apartment wouldn't be ready for a couple of days...he didn't know what to do...he said he'd never been homeless. I agreed, against my better judgment to let him sleep in the youth room for the couple of days before his apartment was ready...the couple of days turned into three, four... and on the sixth night at about nine o'clock, a L'Arche employee who had run by to check on something at the L'Arche office called me and said.... you'd better come and see about Gordon...he's out of control....so I drove to All Saints and sure enough he was acting like a madman...He had told me before that he had had a drug problem (crack and methamphetamine) but that those days were behind him....clearly they were not....I was afraid he might be armed....I told him he had to leave....he left hysterical out into the night and we never saw him again.....until Katharine opened the coastal local portion of the paper on Tuesday morning and gasped.... there was Gordon's mug shot plain as day, positive identification, and the news story detailing his attempted robbery of a convenience store in Mt. Vernon armed with a gun....tying up the clerks with zip ties and holding them hostage until finally the police after about an hour resolved the situation without anyone being hurt.

While Gordon worked here it was his dream that he talked about a lot about having a place out in the country....a place he could fix up and live a simple, peaceful life....I think he was mostly trying to get away from the

drug dealers of the city...I've wondered over the past four years if he were able to do that...Katharine and I have often wondered aloud what had become of him....and now after four years we know....he has joined the faceless, voiceless invisible ones of our world....his picture with his name Gordon David Sturges the last vestige of his identity, in the paper, now in nameless recycling bins, his name and image washed away for another name and another face in another time....He has joined the ranks of the world's unseen, the world's nameless, those without so-called positive I.D.... prisoners and captives....the ones lost in ill-equipped nursing homes....many of our veterans of war lost, their stories forgotten, who languish among the streets of our cities, or in obsolete rehabilitation facilities....the single mother with too many children to manage, at her wits' end, no chance for those kids who learn early on the means of the streets....the addicted lost in the relentless pursuit of their habit....the chronically poor, voiceless, unseen...all living just outside of our peripheral vision "I had not thought death had undone so many." Dante laments to Virgil at the gates of hell. Remember in the old Superman comics, the worst offenders of the law on the planet Krypton were sentenced to life in the phantom zone in which one lived forever unseen, nameless, lost....a parallel universe invisible to our own.

In our day, in our post "nine eleven" world, an I.D. means everything....It is the necessary documentation to get a job, to rent property, necessary for all manner of getting by....When people come out of prison, they are given a prison I.D. which actually hurts more than helps....that and a bus ticket....and it has become harder and harder to help these folks who are trying to reclaim their identity, more and more red tape just to get a Alabama picture I.D. and now with the insidious new immigration law in Alabama the I.D. now carries added weight....Identity, self-hood, self image and dignity is what our gospel reading today is about....The Pharisees and Jesus continue their Rabbinic banter...This is a familiar story: the Pharisees, the Jewish establishment are trying to force Jesus into saying that paying tax to the empire is blasphemous to the faith, proving he is a loyal Jew....but saying so would be contrary to Roman law, and would surely get him into trouble with the authorities, the question a catch 22 ...according to the NRSV translation Jesus asks whose head is on the coin with which the tax is paid....the answer of course is Caesar's....Jesus' answer is simple and practical.... "pay the tax"....it's the world we live in. It will keep you out of trouble...but much more than that give to God what is God's and that is everything including ourselves, our souls and bodies....the more accurate translation for "head" in this passage is *image*....whose image is on the

coin? He asks....that would evoke in the hearer of this passage the Imago Dei....the image of God and the reminder that we are made in God's image....in the beginning man and woman were created in the image of God according to the scribes of Genesis....all of us made in God's image...the good and the bad, as we heard from last week's gospel.

So this passage today is about identity, and our identities are found in what, as Paul Tillich puts it, in what it is with which we are ultimately concerned...deep down where is our allegiance, the ground of our being.... and of course the force of this teaching of Jesus here in Matthew is that yes we engage and live with allegiance in the way of the world, amid wealth and power, which is the way the world is ordered socio-economically and politically....but that allegiance is merely the size of a small coin compared to the profound allegiance to our God who owns it all, and who loves it all without conditions....Our identity is intimately and inextricably bound to the identity of our God who made us....and I mean to say that our identity is not found in an aloof God ruling mightily from the heavens towards whom we must aspire, a proverbial road to perfection...I mean to say that our God is with and among us in whom we must participate....and these New testament scribes give hints as to how...you already know:...to live justly, compassionately, mercifully, loving our neighbor and the stranger in the same way we love ourselves, never withholding hospitality, to live as healers, reconcilers, to live as restorers.....all identifying characteristics of God, a doing God, and therefore innate characteristics of the people of God, people of a doing faith....that is our identity.

But I want to offer another aspect of God's Identity(and therefore ours as well) God lives with the unseen, the lost, and the unnamed as well....they though invisible, bear his image no less than we the ones blessed with well being and dignity, what the gospel writers would call the saved,....the man passed out in our bushes at night an image of God....the prostitute downtown an image of God....the prisoner, even those on death row, an image of God, the dying one with no family...all images of God....I have no neat formula here...this has more to do with my questions than any answer to this mystery as to the nature of God.... Gordon's plight has made me wonder about the lost souls of our world....but I do believe that this is what Jesus on the cross means....that not only is he in solidarity with the ones who practice earnestly and artfully the faith....but he is in solidarity with those unseen...those without names...in solidarity with the brutalized and isolated of our world...Our God is a God who will not now nor ever forsake the collective brokenness of the world....that is what sin is: collective brokenness, and God will never abandon us to it....because he made us and

loves us all...and there is nothing...nothing any one of us can do to change that.... that's good news brothers and sisters....perhaps a way to put it is that our vocation as people who serve first God's kingdom is to be about positively identifying those without identification....positively identifying the lost....the ones in the phantom zone, identifying them as children of God...identifying them as a part of God's very body without whom God Godself is incomplete.....As the baptized we must embrace not only the light but also we must embrace the dark....We dear friends of God serve a creative, imaginative and powerful God, and we serve a God who is broken, and nameless and lost, and abused in the darkness of the world....the crucified God, like those who bear still that image, and God with them, of them....What wondrous love is this?...what manner of love would allow such a thing?....We must work, participate in such love to restore the image of wholeness for the sake of humanity and for God's sake, because the two are the same....We must give back the divine names to the nameless....I plan to be at the metro jail Tuesday morning, and I intend to say to Gordon David Sturges, I know your name...and I know who you are, and I know to whom you belong.