

Proper 6 Year C, 2013

“Christ raises us in Spirit and turns everything to glory and joy without ending”

The summer I graduated from high school I went with Katharine to meet her mother’s family in Habersham Georgia, a tiny mill town in the hills of north Georgia. Her grandfather owned the textile mill. Their gracious and sprawling house sat at the top of the hill...and at the bottom was the mill sitting next to a pristine stream, the engine of the mill, and all the mill workers’ modest houses were dotted around the base of the hill...a benign feudal like existence it was...it truly was a beautiful Eden of a place, now all gone, sold off, and developed...and her family were as gracious as the land they occupied, brimming with life...they were full of stories, and around their bountiful dining room table (dinner was what we now call lunch) around the table and long after the end of the meal which included at least two meats and six or so vegetables...and no telling how many desserts...long after the end of the meal stories got told... And at night sitting outside under the North Georgia night sky, millions of stars come closer it seemed, bending their ear listening perhaps for some secret hidden in this family lore...stories of coon hunts...of horses and livestock.... Of characters who lived in the hills and coves of these Appalachian foothills... of World War two, one of Katharine’s uncles an honored veteran, of uncle S.Y.’s prowess as a collegiate baseball pitcher at Georgia Tech where he was named All American....Katharine’s mother, also named Katharine, was the only daughter and the youngest sibling as well...and soon I noticed she really didn’t have stories to tell as vivid and compelling as her dashing brothers. One snippet of her story is that she was offered a job modeling when she was of college age, but her parents refused to allow her to accept the job, because they felt it unseemly.

Most of her stories were about her brothers and her mother and father...she throughout her adult life suffered from depression, which until the invention of some of the better anti depressant drugs (which sadly was late in her life)...her story was mostly about her struggle with her disorder... As in Habersham, and still to a great degree our most told stories are about the patriarchs...*Man of Steel* just opened in the movies...an archetype thereof. We’ve heard in the news just lately that some 70% of women in the workplace who do the same jobs as men still make less money.

The same is even more true of scripture...all the protagonists in Hebrew scripture are male (with the possible exception of the judge

Deborah)...but the other female figures serve as secondary, supporting cast to the Patriarchs...we get glimpses of women...we even encounter briefly the figure of Wisdom herself in Proverbs...but these appearances are few and far between...You know that in the ancient world within which scripture was written, including most of the new Testament, women were considered quite literally a lower cast than men....basically property of men on whom their livelihood depended.

Luke is different however. In fact some scholars conjecture that this Gospel may have been written by a woman...or that it at least was influenced by a woman or women. The women in Luke are vital characters in the narrative action...you remember Mary's encounter with Elizabeth...and then Mary's Song of the coming kingdom in which society is utterly changed into a mutual, egalitarian commonweal...her song will dominate the entire narrative...and then we encounter the persistent widow, banging in the middle of the night on the judges' door...and here in this passage...a street woman referred to as a "sinner" washing Jesus' feet with her tears, anointing them with ointment and kissing them in gratitude for her sin forgiven and being included at table...she like Mary and the widow is the most wounded of society, the lowest, the most vulnerable...and here Jesus grants her dignity, gives her a story worth telling, which happens to be God's story....God's story being that to love lavishly, one joins the story of creation... The so-called sinful woman is the protagonist here...She was shown the love of God despite her non-personhood and was given a life story so that she is empowered to love lavishly as God loves lavishly...She is the model of God's love in this passage...Jesus merely the narrator.

In the Greco Roman world women of many religions would worship in temples...Isis, Dianna, Ashera and they would loose their hair as a symbol of total abandonment....abandoning everything for the sake of their God...at Baptisms in early Christianity, the same was true...women loosened their hair before entering the water...so Luke is holding up for us the model of how God loves as the way we are to love....lavishly and with abandon.

The twist in this parable vis a vis the powers that be and patriarchy which guard the status quo, is that we are to go to the ones who need such love first, break the boundaries of convention...gather the lost, the oppressed, the abased, the ones living in sin...sin being primarily the structures of our world which would degrade and keep one captured in an undignified life....a life bereft of the story, the story into which God calls us....And without including all in the story....God's story is incomplete,

unfulfilled. God's story is not wholly other, as Karl Barth argued...God's story is wholly present.

I remember a conversation I had with Jamie Praytor, of blessed memory, when she was helping found McKemmie Place, a shelter for homeless women. She told me about being there when the shelter first opened and meeting the guests staying there. She said, "Jim, these women all have stories." Stories lost along the way, but part of God's story nonetheless.

I watched an interesting video just this week that was posted on facebook. It was an interview with bishop Jack Spong. He was speaking of the modern puritanical notion of heaven(reward), and hell (punishment) and why anyone would worship such a deity if that were all there was to our faith...But the comment that caught my ear was that he said...we are not born into sin as Augustine would put it...we are not born into a world in which there is no hope except for the substitutionary atoning death of Christ...He says no...we are born into this world full of potential to grow into our full humanity...to become truly human, not less so...modern religion, particularly Christianity asks us to shun our humanity, as if there is something wrong with it...The Gospel writers are giving us example after example of what it means to be truly human...our flaws notwithstanding; the writer of John's gospel equates full humanity with God-likeness...we are to love lavishly and with abandon...beginning with those lost souls, the non-persons, who need such love the most, honoring their story...and then THE story, the one marvelous story moves towards its fulfillment, full of grace, brimming with life...and aches to be told over and again... even among the stars.