

Proper 23 Year B

Well Pope Francis has been all over the news these past few weeks. He's been riding the wave of his image as, "the people's pope." Even my mother likes him... She's never been much for the Roman Catholic Church, despite her spiritual conversion experience when she was in her late twenties... but she really likes this pope... she referred to Pope Francis' predecessors as those nasty old men... but she says of Pope Francis.... His humanity shines through... that he puts a human face on the institution of religion... and that with gracious humility he takes the activist bent of the gospels to heart. She even bought for me upon her last visit to Mobile the People Magazine edition on the pope's visit that one can find in the check-out line in the grocery store.... You know he only has one lung? She said, as if in on a secret.

Last week she was at choir rehearsal and commented to one of the sopranos on her row how much she liked the pope.... And her sister second soprano looked at her incredulously and said to her... "Well you know he's a communist." O my gosh, what did you say? I asked... "Oh, I just told her she didn't know what the hell she was talking about. And then I said, 'You must not like Jesus either.'"

But in truth there are a lot of folks who are uncomfortable with the pope's enthusiastic embrace with current so-called political issues... He's weighed in on climate change... He says it is perhaps the most important issue facing humanity... he is softening the Roman Church's stance on human sexuality and divorce... He's talking a lot more about forgiveness than punishment... and perhaps most controversial he is calling out the crisis of income inequality... as if that's a gospel issue, Right?... and in particular he is calling out the excesses of modern capitalism, which is causing the gap between rich and poor to grow at an alarming rate.... Fox news is going crazy, as is the tea party.... As is the comfortable church... He's rattling the cage of the status quo.... But isn't that just what Jesus did?

John's gospel is soaring theological and philosophical speculation as to who Jesus is in the cosmological scheme of things... It doesn't dwell so much on the radical nature of the subversive life and teachings of Jesus... John's gospel is a treatise on love... Jesus the embodiment thereof... that's probably why the gospel of John is most everyone's favorite. But Mark's gospel is not theological speculation... It is an incisive piece of rhetoric telling us in no uncertain terms how

we are to live... how we are to follow Jesus... Again, you remember, Mark's gospel is about the identity of the baptized.... Embedded in the narrative of Jesus' journey to the cross are our marching orders as well... Jesus in fact tells us to take up our cross and follow in the way of truth and justice and kindness and servanthood... because to do so we are living into our true humanity, what we are made for... and that leads to joy; that leads to true freedom.... Freedom the grand goal of the gospels.

So here's the heart of the matter, I think... found in our reading for today... This conversation in Mark about the rich man being told to give away his wealth is sandwiched between two conversations among the disciples about who is the greatest, and who will sit at Jesus' right hand when God's kingdom comes. The disciples are so much still of the world according to Mark.... This whole Jesus enterprise for them is about status and power... for Mark, they never quite get it.... But Jesus informs them that the way of and the way to the kingdom of God is not the way of the world.... The way of the world which is all about self-interest... about envy and greed and violence... and that to buck that system is like a camel passing through the eye of a needle.... You know, I've read something somewhere that goes into an elaborate exegesis about the possibility that the eye of the needle was one of the ancient gates to Jerusalem, and that a camel could in fact fit through it... you know, don't worry, wealthy people.

But Jesus here is making the point that it is possible by living the gospel vision to buck the system, to call it out, to name the structures of evil, to work for radical change... but to do that... to follow the way of Jesus... One must be about the painful but transformative process of renouncing self-interest... Jesus is not denouncing wealth... in fact according to Luke Jesus had a number of wealthy benefactors... What we are being called on as the baptized, is to renounce living for ourselves alone... to walk in God's ways... to live our lives for a just world wherein all share in the magnificent abundance of this beautiful planet; and folks that means that we have something to say about income redistribution, progressive taxation, adequate healthcare for all people, opportunity for an education, treating the imprisoned with dignity and giving them a bona fide second chance; welcoming the immigrant among us, and an end to the curse of xenophobia and racism.... To be self-interested is to keep God's love for ourselves... and God demands that Love is for all... So we are activists, activists for the good and the true... and that is a choice... My vision for the church is that we become a powerful force for the good.... A powerful political force for the good....

Political in that we have everything as people of faith to do with the common good... Like our brother Jesus.... Like our sister Julian, like our brother Martin, like our sister Harriet.... That we use our privileged wealth and power and formidable influence for the Good... that we live our lives to change the world as activists for God...that we live our lives to restore the dignity and wellbeing and freedom for which we were all made. Those are our marching orders, at least according to Mark.

And brothers and sisters to be sure this is the hard road... the road less travelled... this is not comfortable, this activism..... but the promise is eternal life.... Not in the hereafter, but in the age to come, the new age coming in the here and now when dignity and justice are brought to bear, becoming as we speak... the promise is what we all really want the most... and that is freedom from fear, and the peace of knowing that all manner of thing is well... That is the meaning of Shalom.... Dear people of God: Choose the hard road... impossible in the eyes of the world, but not with God... live your lives for the good of those not now at God's gracious table... be the restorers of the breach... Shalom.... Shalom.