

Easter VI Year B 2018

Some of y'all have heard this story before... a story from our family lore... It is a story that I still think about from time to time. It still has resonance for me; part of our family mythology, if you will... So, I'm going to tell it again... When our oldest child James was not much older than a year old, Katharine and I most afternoons would stroll him up our street... James was unusually precocious... maybe it was because we read to him every day and night that he was so very aware of things around him. He noticed everything. He could speak in sentences at an early age, and he would offer extended commentary on just about everything going on around him. On a particular afternoon my youngest brother Bob joined us on our walk. Bob had come home from Auburn University after five years, still a first semester freshman... His major had been SAE from which, to the detriment of his studies, he graduated summa cum laude... Bob just wasn't interested in the rigors of academia. He was and is a consummate outdoorsman... and a consummate uncle to young James. He would tell him stories, to his delight and wonderment, about shark fishing; about early morning hours in the deep woods, and about the magnificent wild beasts that lived there. He would tell him about contending with storms in the gulf, and flying fish; about the rarity of midnight lightning. They had a special bond, James and his uncle Bob.

So on a Spring afternoon we were strolling up our street, and as we approached a house some four or five doors up from our house we noticed the elderly woman who lived there, who some said was crazy... she was lying face down on the floor of her carport. She was motionless and alone except for her very large German Shepherd sitting next to her. Without hesitation Bob ran across her front yard to her, and despite the raised hackles of her dog... he rolled her over and lay down beside her, and breathed into her mouth, and pressed on her chest... over and over again... but she was dead. Bob knocked on the door. Her husband was inside the house watching television, unaware of what had befallen his wife. We heard him wail at the grim news. Bob brought him outside. He had his arm around him steadying him against the unfolding brazen reality. The dog watched solemnly. The paramedics arrived and sure enough she couldn't be revived. Bob was visibly shaken. We were all shaken... and to this day I wonder what James saw; what he thought in his new and impressionable imagination. I doubt he remembers this day. He was so young... but I wonder if somewhere in his soul he knows what courage looks like, and commitment, and sacrifice... Love in short. Seeing such valor would have to shape one so impressionable.

In the first letter to John, written by the same editor, or editors who wrote the Gospel of John... there is a phrase in speaking of the raised Christ that gets

repeated several times, almost a mantra... “ We have heard...We have seen with our own eyes, and touched with our own hands, the Word of Life.” And they go on to say that they are witnesses to this Word so that we too may believe. This letter and the Gospel were written two generations removed from the time of Jesus... so what is it that these people had heard and seen and touched? They are claiming to be eye-witnesses to something that they name as resurrection in their own day and age; and they are connecting what they are experiencing to the crucified and raised Jesus; to his life and ministry. First hand, though generations removed.

“No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends,” Jesus tells his disciples. This is the distilled essence of this Gospel. Amid its exquisite theological poetry; amid its soaring metaphorical prose is the word of life; that as followers of Jesus we are to lay down our life for our friends... That is the Word of Life. That is what we are searching for. We have looked for God, lo, since time immemorial, among the heavens, amid so-called super-nature; and God has been among us all along in our capacity to Love. There is no greater love than to lay down one’s life for one’s friends; plain and simple. And that of course begs the question: just who are our friends? Well, you know; scripture tells us: The orphan and the widow; the poor and the dispossessed; prisoners and the sick;

the immigrant; those of our world who live as if they were dead; those who experience daily the sharp edge of shame; those face down in need of the resuscitating power of Love... Resurrection life is for us to hear and see and touch. It is not a grandiose idea, or a fantasy, or magic. It is a practice and a choice. These writers are attesting to their experience of Love in the practice of laying down one's life. And they call that the Word of Life. The Logos; the deepest mystery we can know.... So it all comes down to this: God doesn't just ask for our attention; our polite affirmations. God wants our lives. God wants our bodies and blood. God wants everything.... So that we become our true selves... that we become the word of life.... And I would imagine that God has a stake in our becoming... perhaps there is a radical contingency between our becoming, and God's becoming. Love requires flesh and blood.

Jesus said, "I do not call you slaves, but I call you friends... the translation is really befrienders. "I call you befrienders." As Followers of Jesus we are to be about the art of befriending; laying down our lives for the good of the whole. Friendship in the Greek philosophical schools is the highest virtue, and friendship is about sacrifice; loving first the other. One poignant image of friendship in this Gospel is the washing of feet... that our sole purpose in our short lifespans is to live for the other in service and empathy and advocacy... and people will see that

Love is alive and real, and that resurrection is a present reality that raises up the beat down and the dead of our world... and that there is no power greater. To Love is to draw the world into Love; heard, seen, and touched.

I want to believe that James saw such love in his uncle Bob on that spring day. I want to believe that he took such seeing to heart, and that he too will be a befriender; that he might excel in the high art of Love; that he might take it upon himself to breathe life into one who languishes in death. It is my hope for all of us, brothers and sisters that we take courage in our befriending; that we come to know resurrection life as the gift that is ours to give. Our God, good people, is not invisible, not aloof in the heavens... Our God is heard and seen and touched in every act of Love... bearing such love is our labor, our purpose, our vocation. One day we shall rest, but for now we work. For now we lay down our lives for the Good of our world. There is nothing greater; nothing more commendable, nothing more impressionable... and seeing is believing.... Seeing the Word of life in the flesh; being the Word of Life, is believing.