

Epiphany VI year C 2019

So a little reality check here.... Why do you come to church? What draws you here week after week? In a world that is increasingly secularized in which no faith affiliation is a growing "thing;" in a culture that now considers it okay to sleep in on Sunday mornings; a culture in which atheism is now cool... What are we doing here? The Enlightenment three centuries ago turned its precise lens on the church and its traditions; its inconsistencies; its abuses; its superstitions; its intractable dogma... and found it anachronistic and lacking. Science and rationality and progress became our preoccupation. With the help of new technology it seemed the human mind had no limits; the human imagination was in a renaissance and the church in its fearful institutional malaise could only resist.... Hegel called the Enlightenment the rise of the autonomous self... that the human mind was sufficient unto itself... that the possibilities for knowledge were endless... It was a coming of age for our species such that enlightened society could set its own course for progress... and not just progress but perfection. The God of heaven to many had lost relevance.

We now have the luxury of hindsight, and we know that the utopian ideals of the Enlightenment foundered. The twentieth century was the most violent in human history... over 100,000 million people were killed in the two world wars

alone. And now in our own age the middle class, where it exists, is shrinking... the world's capital is increasingly held by an elite few. On a planet rich with resources there is still scarcity of food and water. Modern Democracy is under siege... and the planet via our so-called progress is warming dangerously; and we now know through hyper active information systems that the powerful of our world are corrupt perhaps more than ever in our history. We thought we were outgrowing our xenophobic and racist tendencies, but we now know that they are still with us, institutionalized within the structures of our society. Philosophers call our world today 'post-modernity', a world characterized by isolation and fear, and a smoldering nihilism.... Everything is now up for question; all of our most cherished beliefs are open to critique... Pundits observe that the church is in sharp decline, seemingly irrelevant in a world collared by cynical skepticism.... So I ask you again, why are we here?

Throughout modernity the church made a living on the promise that while there is suffering in this life; while we journey in a fallen world... if one just believed rightly then one would be rewarded in the next life... and in the meantime, the church is merely here for reassurance and comfort... In the nineteen fifties just after World War two, there was a coinage that spoke of the church as a hospital for sinners; attending to the PTSD of the modern world. I

remember in my childhood my priest telling me that church was our private time with God. Perhaps the great tragedy of our time vis-à-vis the church is that we too bought in to the post Enlightenment obsession with the self; and we taught our people that salvation was an individual enterprise... that salvation was personal... that it was my responsibility to believe rightly and therefore receive everlasting life, whatever that is... But brothers and sisters, that church is dying if not already dead... and we are in crisis... and I don't mean that in a bad way.... The word crisis literally means reordering... we are in the midst, in institutional Christianity, of a radical reordering... the world has changed and is changing so very rapidly, and we will have to catch up... But apropos of the crisis, I am so very hopeful... because if there is death, then surely there is resurrection. I believe we are encountering a world of possibility in the church. In spite of our post-modern agnosticism, I believe there is a hunger for God.... However we might say that... a hunger for meaning, a hunger for agency, a hunger for honest community.... A Hunger for a way to live noble lives... a hunger for truth and beauty.... A hunger for mystery... Those are all aspects of God; a God with many names.... So I'm here because I want to know God; and to make God known... and please hear this... to know God is not a solitary enterprise... It is not an individual pursuit... spirituality is a community endeavor... There is no personal enlightenment unless it is borne

out of community. We can't find God alone, in short. It takes collaboration, and being in relationship. We are less if we are not committed to a faithful community... And salvation is not personal, but has everything to do with the restoration of community... that is another reason we are here: to engender what Martin Luther King Jr. called the beloved community.... So all that context brings us to our Gospel reading for today.

I say context because we are so influenced and biased by it when it comes to scripture in particular and the life of faith in general. Again, it is our acquired habit to look for comfortable words in the Bible and in our faith... to catch a word or phrase to give us a lift for the week... But today's reading is not one such passage. This is Luke at his subversive best. Luke's Gospel is considered the most literary of the four gospels... Matthew is the most dogmatic, steeped in Jewish theology and practice; John is the more intellectual and arcane... offering a high minded philosophy regarding the archetypal figure of Jesus; Mark is terse and bare in its rhetoric, offering a stark contrast between the vision of Jesus' teaching and practice, and the obstacles that would undermine them... Luke is the consummate story teller... This is the only gospel that has the story of the prodigal son; the only gospel containing the story of the Good Samaritan. This is the only gospel that gives the account of the encounter with Jesus on the road to

Emmaus.... This is the Gospel that we read every Christmas because Luke paints such a serene and poignant picture of the birth of Christ... pious shepherds, and singing angels, the baby wrapped in swaddling clothes, and the mother of Jesus trying to make sense of it all.

But Luke also is the most subversive Gospel. In between the lines of his majestic prose is the edgy reality of the wild God among us; and if we are not disturbed we aren't paying attention. For those of you who read Aristotle's poetics you know that the prologue of a piece of rhetoric predisposes the theme to follow. The prologue of Luke's Gospel is Mary's song, that we have named the Magnificat. It is the Song of the Jesus movement; and there's not much comfortable about it. This is my translation of Mary's song of the Greek: My soul proclaims the greatness of God; God has seen my humiliation... and the humiliation of generations from age to age; He has used the power of his arm on my behalf; he has routed the arrogant; He has pulled down princes from their thrones, and lifted up the downtrodden; he has fed the starving; and sent the rich away empty; He's kept his promise of the ages mindful of his great Love.

So Luke has Mary here calling for a radical reversal of the structures of her world. A reversal of the socio-economic system. This is the language of

revolution... And today's passage that we have named the beatitudes, the blessings, is a reprise of the same song, lest we missed it the first time... only told here in the teachings of Jesus in the context of his sermon on the plain (in Matthew it is on the mountain, here the plain) Jesus in short has quit preaching and gone to meddling. He's talking politics here... and you know we church people don't talk about politics; we are best seen and not heard... We have already seen in Luke the reaction of the Jewish synagogue hierarchy to his teaching... two weeks ago they were ready to throw him off a cliff; and to be sure it is this sort of teaching that got him crucified. But he is teaching the people, those who will listen, how to know God and how to make God known... and he's saying that to know God has everything to do with our common life... Here's the thing: to know God is to participate in God's project for humanity. To know God is to be about God's agenda; knowledge of God is a practice... and what is God's agenda? To invite hungry people to a meal; to take care of people who are poor; to comfort people who are mourning; to embrace the hated and rejected of our world; and to expect the world to reject you in your efforts, because God is all about change and transformation; and it is human nature to resist change and transformation; but God will not leave things alone.... Luke is saying that God is on the side of the disadvantaged; that God is biased towards the disenfranchised and the lost and

the victim....God is in short, counter-cultural; shaking to the core the status quo....Karl Barth, the great 20th century theologian said that the preacher should preach with the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other. So what does this great reversal of which Luke speaks mean in our own context, in our own world: We are advocates for prisoners; we are on the side of detained immigrants both documented and undocumented; we are against the American Oligarchy; we seek racial reconciliation; we are for progressive tax structures; we are for shared wealth; we are for healing and health.... I could go on... and you might say these are issues about which we have no business speaking. But I say that anything that affects the well-being and dignity of our brother and sister is our business. Jesus demands it; that is, if we want to know God. To live for the Good of our neighbor is to participate in God's life... But Jesus doesn't stop there: He calls out the things that are not of God. Cursed are you who believe your riches make you self-sufficient; cursed are you who are self-satisfied; and cursed are you who laugh in the face of those who weep..... cursed are you if you fail your neighbor.

This of course is a radical call to Love, to Love at all costs. This is an illustration as to the shape Love takes in the world. We are not self-sustainable. We are intimately contingent to each other. We are our brother's and our sister's keeper. Our spiritual lives are bereft unless the broken of our world are invited to

the common table. And Luke places this in the present time. Some scholars call this a foretelling of the coming kingdom; when things will be set right. But I think this is a description of how we live in the kingdom now. Maybe in God's sense of time and space we as God's people are manifestations of God's future in the present day. In other words, where there is Love, there God is, and the world in a moment is as it should be... We just have to be true to the moment; true to our calling; true to the one who calls us to Love.

I'm here brothers and sisters because I want to know God, and to give that knowledge away. I'm sixty three years old and I have witnessed my illusions crumble fail one after another. I want to know the truth of why we are here. I believe it is to Love, because Love at last is all there is. It is Love that holds the great mystery... and we have been given in Jesus Christ a way in to all that is true and beautiful about this short life we have been given. This is something that we have to do together.... And we're not playing at it here, I think... I think we are serious about it.... I'm sure y'all know others that belong in this fellowship on the corner of Ann and Government streets. Ask them to come... We need all the help in this enterprise of Love we can get. To be sure it will be an adventure; this journey into the mystery. I'm in. I want to know what's next in the mythy mind of God. How about you?