

Proper 10 Year C 2019

We are now well into the season after the Pentecost.... Lectionary gurus call the time between Pentecost and Advent ordinary time... not that it's mundane or blaze, or riddled with tropical storms... but it is an 'ordered' account of the life and ministry of Jesus of Nazareth. Our readings from the gospel for the rest of this liturgical year, and we're in Year C... those readings will be principally from Luke... Our readings will focus on the parables and teachings of Jesus, as well as accounts of his deeds of power, the so-called miracles. The lectionary cycle also addresses the lessons from Hebrew scripture. We're given the option of track one or track two: track one includes readings from the prophets: Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel, the major prophets; Amos and Micah, and a few other so-called minor prophets. Track two which we are reading this year, focuses on the history of the Hebrew people from slavery into freedom; to settling into the land of Canaan; and continuing through the monarchy and its demise and fall resulting in the dissolution of the nation of Israel culminating in exile in Babylon. The chief end to the whole of scripture is to ponder, to take seriously the question: where is God in the momentous struggle to be a people. And, if God is a God of Love... how is it that God loves the world that God made.

Our Old Testament reading today is from Deuteronomy, believed to be the most ancient of Hebrew scripture... and the writer, dubbed by scholars as the Deuteronomistic historian, is using the voice of Moses to reflect over Israel's history in Egypt, and their new found freedom tried sorely for forty years in the desert of Sinai. In our passage today Moses makes the case for an incarnational theology, that is, God is not an abstract entity aloof in the heavens, or consigned to the mountaintops; or far across the sea, as he puts it... but that God inhabits our "mouths and our hearts", he writes. In other words God's Word, God's life is borne by our very lives. And the prophet Micah puts it succinctly: "What does the Lord require of us? To love kindness, and do justice, and walk humbly." That sounds a lot like the Jesus movement, doesn't it? In fact the Gospels are re-articulations of the Torah; new interpretations for a new time.... The Torah, the laws of God that teach us how to Love; that teach us the practice of the faith so that we can be a people of good will, who indeed love kindness and do justice, and walk humbly.

Luke's narrative about the Good Samaritan, a story most familiar to us, is classical Jewish theology. I mean to say, it is nothing new to practicing Jews. Luke is very intentional about connecting Jesus' life and ministry to the tradition. And Luke, not unlike the other Gospel writers is more

concerned, not with personal piety, but with the faith of a people... in short, the church. Many scholars argue that Luke and Acts, the same writer, one narrative, is at its heart a story of the blossoming forth of the church. This story, the 'good Samaritan,' only appears in Luke, but as is the rest of this gospel it is a vignette onto seeing what the kingdom of God is like; so very near to us, as the Deuteronomistic historian writes in ancient history. But it is easy to make short order of this passage, because on the surface the meaning is fairly clear, right?...Who was the neighbor? the priest, the Levite, or the Samaritan?...and of course we all know the answer...the Samaritan because he showed mercy. But I want to dig a little deeper here, add a little context, and perhaps shed some new light on an old story.

We've already talked about, a few Sunday's ago, the Jews hatred of the Samaritans, the 'half-breeds' to the north....so that's operative here for the audience....Just a few passages earlier we see Jesus headed to Jerusalem passing through the heart of Samaria, breaking a cultural boundary....so Luke is continuing his persistent theme of crossing over, boundary breaking; taking up again the malignant problem of xenophobia....This time, we have a Samaritan passing through Jewish territory, just a few miles from Jerusalem itself....this Samaritan, like Jesus, has crossed over, is outside the ethnic and cultural boundary.

Now some scholars make much ado about the priest and Levite passing by the half dead victim; that Jesus is condemning the Jewish hierarchy and establishment; its customs and its jaundiced insensitivity; but in truth in the first century near east it was taboo, ritually unclean to touch a sick or wounded person, because it was believed that the sick and the wounded are the way they are because of some evil possession, and that they too by touching them may contract such a condition or worse..... the audience would have had some sympathy for the priest and the Levite....So Luke here is painting a picture of true and radical compassion, compassion that is sacrificial.... And the risk of compassion...the Samaritan shares the same cultural taboos as the Jews and yet he risks, an outsider to say the least, to take care of this man....Of course the irony in this story is that the Samaritan is the Christ, the stranger we are unwilling to trust....I'm sure at this story's telling there was some squirming in the seats. But we get the point: The Samaritan is the Christ figure, sacrificing for the good of his neighbor, and we are to be like him.

But in all my years hearing this story, and hearing sermons about this story; I've never heard mention, the innkeeper. The innkeeper, who is nameless and seemingly, as Shakespeare would put it, a rude mechanical character in this story...but I think the innkeeper belongs at the heart of the

story's moral...first a brief excurses on innkeepers in the ancient world...they were at the bottom of the social pyramid...most were seen as scoundrels...known to evict guests from their rooms in the night after receiving a better rate from a late arrival...many inns were also brothels...they were known to confiscate property of their guests protected by the paid off soldiers of the empire.... They weren't listed in Trivago.

So the audience is doubly shocked...this Jesus allegory is tied to a Samaritan and an innkeeper, both marginal outcasts, untouchables, as it were....the Samaritan must leave and place the victim in the charge of the innkeeper....pays him what amounts to a deposit, and leaves....the innkeeper is the one, far beyond the call of duty, who must attend to the dressings of the wounds...wash the soiled sheets....monitor the bedpan...he's got the toughest job of all... and to boot he gives the Samaritan good credit terms...So he is a prominent figure in this story. This ministry to the wounded man by the side of the road is a collaborative one. It's not about being a good person. This story is about being *good people*. We're stronger together. In fact, I want to say that there is no such thing as being a Christian on one's own. Being a Christian means one practices the faith in community. Faith is collective believing and collaborative practice,

rendering absurd the notion that one can be a Christian and not be in a church....

So I think this text is about the church, after all that is one of Luke's chief concerns: being the church; that ministry is collaborative....that we can't do it alone. Ministry is partnership in the critical mass of community.... And also and importantly, ministry is about trust.... And we live in a 'trustless' society these days. Look at our story: the Samaritan entrusts the deposit to the innkeeper, knowing the reputation of innkeepers, and the innkeeper, a Judean, trusts the Samaritan, knowing the reputation among the Jews of Samaritans, that he will return and repay him for whatever expenses he incurred....The gospel lives and breathes along an axis of trust....and like love, trust is a courageous act of the will. If nothing else this story exhorts us to trust each other, our biases notwithstanding.

The prophet Amos speaks of a plumb line...the golden thread of compassion that points to the truth of who we are in relationship with God. I believe Luke here is pointing to the way of Christ as that very plumb line, just as it has always been....the way of compassion and mercy; of collaboration and trust, trust of our fellow sojourner, even if a stranger.... Maybe, especially the stranger. The Greek word for trust is the same word for faith. To be a people, and not just any people, but people of God.... We

have to have faith in the people we are given to serve, and faith in the people who accompany us in the work of salvation.... And faith in the neighbor who serves us..... and faith in humanity itself... that God is present in the risk of relationship.

The great question of every age, and certainly in the present age of dishonesty, corruption and hyper self-interest... The question is put into our mouths, and into our hearts.... Who shall we be as a people? And this question begs another question: who is our neighbor? And living in a democracy the question is all the more poignant and relevant. I don't believe we are called to live in isolation. I don't believe wealth and material success to be our reason for living. I don't believe we are subjects of manifest destiny: Exclusive, exceptional, entitled. I don't believe in might making right. In artful, courageous, and humble collaboration with other trusting souls we are to take care of our poor; we are to give respect to the shamed; we are to welcome the immigrant as if one of our own family; we are to heal the sick; we are to share the world's abundance; we are to heal the planet and be stewards of its sustainability; we are to bind up the broken-hearted. We are to risk our lives for the sake of Love.

The people we elected to manage and govern the nation in which we live are not doing that; far from it; and most of them call themselves

Christian. This very day our government is raiding the homes of immigrants all across the nation, to arrest and deport our brothers and sisters, our neighbors, who merely want to live a dignified and productive life. Where is the outrage among our elected officials? Alas, it seems our government is no better than any of the succession of empires come before. We, brothers and sisters are the resistance, because we follow Jesus, whose resistance to evil cost him his life. The word of God is in our mouths and in our hearts; For God's sake let us be that Word, and perhaps in God's time, perhaps sooner than later, Love will win the day.