

Proper VIII Year C 2019

I am not a literalist. I have been accused of many things, but never have I been accused of being a literalist... metaphor works better for me in my trying to understand the world... but I'm talking about literalism as it pertains to scripture... and of course, I'm not alone... We Episcopalians in keeping with our tradition, have never opted for a so-called literal interpretation of scripture... We recognize that the bible is a collection of all sorts of genres of literature, written by people like you and me:... poetry; moral teaching; interpretive history; genealogies; rhetoric; parables; political discourse; legend.... Mythology... and we recognize that this literature is full of contradictions and theological disagreement; that's the nature of the human experience... As early as Genesis there is an ongoing argument as to the central core of the Covenant itself... God tells Abraham that if he and his descendants worship only the one true God then they will be God's chosen people... some ancient scribes argue that this means the salvation of Israel exclusively... others argue that Israel is chosen not for their own fortune, but for all people... "you will be a light to the nations," the writer of Genesis puts it. There is, as another example, an intense argument in Biblical history as to whether a Temple should be built, or not... some scribes felt that the relationship with God

in the desert of Sinai, that is, God carried among the people in the ark, suited them just fine... but others felt that God belonged in the precincts of a holy edifice, exemplifying God's power and greatness....Great nations have great temples... At the dedication of the second temple after the return from Babylonian exile, Nehemiah, a prophet and priest, describes the people looking on the restored temple with tears.... Tears of joy, and tears of frustration and pain.... An apt metaphor for how we get along in the human community. And these issues are left unresolved... they are left open, as so much of scripture is an open question.... In the book of Job, Job the protagonist, there is challenge as to the very theology of the Torah, the heart and soul of Jewish religious life... Challenge of the ancient promise and premise that if the people of Israel loved God alone, then they would be blessed and protected... Job, in a rant to God, is one such faithful, and he has all manner of suffering thrust upon him.....He's questioning whether the premise holds true; and God's answer to Job leaves many more questions than answers.

And then there is the matter of context... social, political and historical context... the world then was not what it is now... Some things were considered perfectly fitting in society then, that we would consider anathema now.... Like slavery, and the subservience of women... I am always amused when folks these

days start extolling the virtues of a so-called biblical marriage, when polygamy was perfectly acceptable in the ancient world.... All this to say...

That the life of faith has far more to do with questions than answers... the life of faith is so much more about discovery than it is about dogma... The life of faith requires that we think critically and imaginatively... that we are open minded and honest... the life of faith takes a commitment to do the work using our minds and imaginations and trusting our gut, informed by experience, taking into account things we have learned over our lifespans and over the centuries... The longer I live the more I believe that truth is not found in certainty... but in nuance and ambiguity.... In Irony even... and dare I say in contradiction..... Of the many familiar, fantastic stories of the bible, the scribes would never have thought that their readers would take them literally... their art relies on symbol and metaphor, the language of the imagination... language that points our imaginings, our perceptions toward the true and the beautiful... To take the whole of scripture literally ironically limits and even distorts the truth of what is being told.

Fundamentalism, a modern phenomenon, I think, thwarts the creative process in the life of faith. It narrows our line of vision to where we can't see the truth borne by our inspired speculations... Life is uncertain, and ambiguous, and changing, and nuanced... and scripture rightly reflects that complexity. In our being a people of

the word of God, we are on a road of discovery led by the imagination.... The imagination, a manifestation of the Spirit ... we are on a road living the great questions... open to possibility.... Possibility, an apt metaphor for God.

So... having said **all** that... there are some things in scripture that are meant for us to take literally... There are some hard and fast rules of the road, if you will... From the prophet Micah... “What does the Lord require of us?... to love kindness, to do justice, and to travel this road humbly with our God.” Paul says in our reading today, “For the whole Law is summed up in a single commandment, You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” And the writers of Hebrew scripture and the New Testament tell us how we do this... It is the golden thread that belies contradiction, the golden thread that unites the whole. It is practice that holds the speculations of scripture together.... And that is to love our neighbor, and not just our neighbor in our neighborhood, but we are told to love the orphan and the widow; and the hungry; we are told to love the resident alien, the immigrant, the stranger, the outcast and untouchable... we are to even love our enemies... This is the literal means of living up to what God requires of us. When it comes to practice, scripture gets literal.

In our gospel reading for today, Luke is sticking to the fear of stranger theme, the same theme we encountered last week with Jesus healing the demon possessed gentile; the same theme persistent throughout the whole of scripture... Jesus crossing the social comfort zone... restoring the life of a stranger, reclaiming an outcast for well-being and dignity.... In today's reading Luke raises the stakes... still pressing his agenda of naming the pathology of xenophobia, the fear of stranger.... We are given dire warning throughout the whole of scripture that our xenophobic tendencies are our undoing. Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem from Galilee... normally Jewish travelers would take the eastern route along the Jordan River... or they would take the western route south through the Jezreel valley... Both routes would bypass the region of Samaria, hated enemies of the Judean people....old conflicts, old wounds... these are foreigners, strangers... they speak differently...they're not like us... But Jesus leads his followers straight into Samaria, and the inhabitants are rightly wary of them so much so that they offer no hospitality... The disciples are enraged and want to torch their city... but Jesus stops them... repudiating their inclination to fear and violence... even for their enemies... and just a few lines later in Luke's narrative the story culminates as Jesus tells the parable of the Good Samaritan... The hated enemy, the one who rescues the victim of an assault along the road... a victim whom a Levite and a

priest, pillars of Jewish society, the insiders, passed by... the Samaritan, of all people, is the one who Jesus holds up as human... as the one who loves... as the one who is of God.

This teaching of course is timely for us is it not?... given the political climate right now... The issue of immigration is now front and center. On our behalf, children are being separated from their families, and detained in inhumane conditions. The specter of racism has reared its ugly head, now perhaps more virulent than ever; white nationalists have come out from under their rocks... Our own politicians rail against the people who come to this country for a better life; people fleeing poverty and violence for a scintilla of well-being and dignity. They cite our immigration laws; they say we are a country of laws... while they flaunt others..... It is our age old problem of xenophobia rearing its head yet again... Politicians know that fear is a means of control; that fear is seductive.

Just yesterday sixteen of us All Saints folks went on a pilgrimage along with parishioners from the Episcopal Church of the Good Shepherd, and others from our area. We went to the Equal Justice Initiative lynching memorial, and then to the Civil Rights legacy museum in Montgomery. Needless to say the experience was overwhelming and powerful.... Some four thousand African Americans were

lynched, murdered by white gangs and mobs during the first hundred years after the Civil War... and that number is just the ones we know about for sure. There are many others that lack the dignity of documentation, recognition. There are three impressions that I shared with my brother and sister pilgrims during the Eucharist yesterday in Montgomery, and I want to share them with you: The first is that there was a sign posted in the museum as we entered. It was a quote from Harriet Tubman. She said, "slavery is the next thing to hell." But I thought, that is not true. Hell is not real, but slavery is; hell is a dark concocted fantasy; but injustice and indignity and shame and violence are real. The second experience was seeing a famous photograph blown up larger than life of a group of well-dressed white men with their fifties haircuts..... and over their heads is hanging a man who has been lynched. All you can see in the photograph are his lifeless legs... and just in the foreground is a young white boy, maybe seven or eight years old, standing with these men who have publically committed murder.... And I wondered what kind of ghastly memory was engendered in this child... what scarring he must have taken on. What was he taught by his so-called elders? What is that boy like now, all grown up and hardened by such evil that his young soul witnessed years ago? And I mused that hate is learned behavior.... But then I thought, so is love... It's hard to trust that these days; but trust the power of Love

we must...and then lastly, I encountered a group of college age black men. They were full of life and energy, and they were arguing passionately as college kids do... philosophizing as to the nature of privilege and its relationship to violence. I heard one of them mention Kierkegaard. I heard the word scapegoat. I heard the words fear and projection... When they saw me listening in, a white priest, they got quiet, as if they might have overstepped the bounds of their right to speak, their right to give voice to their hopes and dreams. And I thought that there was so much possibility among them; that the future for them, if Love would have her way, would be redemptive and whole and just.... And that they would be a gift to us, to the world.

The issues of Racism and the violence and abuse of immigrants are of course intimately connected. They are the results of our fear of the other, our ancient xenophobic tendencies, scars on our DNA, as it were. Scripture teaches us that acting on this fear is perhaps our most grievous offense against God. If we don't face these issues under the aegis of love, then we as the human community are in great peril. It is a choice between condemnation and salvation; always a choice.... And we brothers and sisters are in the business of salvation, and that requires that we give ourselves over to Love, and that we harbor no tolerance for the willful ignorance that has enabled such crimes against God and humanity. The

bottom line is that we welcome the stranger, and the lost and the outcast, and the shamed as if they were one of our own family... because they are our family and they are wounded, ... in some cases wounded beyond belief. And our God is a God of healing.

We are to set our face against injustice, and be the people that God calls us to be. People who care about their neighbor as if caring for ourselves. Jesus tells us that we are people of the future, the future in which all God's people stand with dignity... there is no looking back.... God's future is urgent.... We are people of possibility... Some would say why this sermon in church; it's political... Let's just talk about the love of Jesus... Well, that is what we're talking about, the Love of Jesus, and don't doubt that that Love is political. It has everything to do with how we live together justly....Some would say to the church that this is none of our business; we're better seen than heard... but it is our business. Love is our business....Stand up good people... protest, speak up..... literally invite the stranger to your dinner tables.... be passionate advocates.... Call your legislators when things aren't right.... Be persistent about it.. Because If not our voices then whose? And we do this for a good reason, among many good reasons...We do this because holy scripture says so... It literally says so....

