

Proper 19 Year C 2019

A little over three years ago at the Vatican in Rome, the seat of western Christianity, Teresa of Calcutta was canonized as a saint of the church... It took a while because of the protocol of the Roman Catholic Church hierarchy... You know, they have to identify a number of so-called miracles that she performed, so that her sainthood would be legitimate... as if a life lived for the poor and the lost is not profound miracle enough... So what's up with sainthood in the first place?... The Episcopal Church, as well, designates people whom we hold up as saints; they're listed in the Prayer book... There is a 'fill in the blank' in our Eucharistic prayers to name and remember the saints of the church... among the Episcopal saints, saints peculiar to our denomination, are Fredrick Douglas, Sojourner Truth, Julian of Norwich, Thurgood Marshall, Martin Luther King Jr., Jonathan Myrick Daniels, martyr of Alabama, to name a few.... Saints are not perfect people... as if there were such a thing. Saints are people whose lives reflect love in action, lives that reflect the very life of God... In naming saints we name the characteristics of God among us... God's love among us in the flesh... Saints are icons, windows, through whom we see a glimpse of God active in our world.

Of course those are saints that get institutional recognition, but we of course know saints among us... maybe in the pew right next to you... They are people who choose as best they can to serve the greater thing, people who practice self-awareness and empathy... people who are 'woke', to use contemporary parlance.... These are people you know who would take care of you if you needed them; people who have a passion for justice; people who love in short... we call them 'good' people.... Not perfect people... 'Good' people.... One such person, a modern day saint, is Bryan Stevenson... Many of you know who he is... We've read his book, *Just Mercy*, in Sunday school. Stevenson founded and heads up the Equal Justice Initiative in Montgomery Alabama... he grew up in Alabama; he's a Harvard graduate, a lawyer, who has dedicated his life to the cause of justice for men on death row, many of whom have been wrongly convicted... His work has led him to oppose as 'cruel and unusual' the death penalty (which, by the way, The Episcopal Church has opposed since 1962), and he has also become an advocate for prison reform recognizing the disproportionate prison populations between blacks and whites... He has named our prison system: the new 'Jim Crow'... a new manifestation of structural racism that continues to plague our world..... He will be our keynote speaker in December 2020, when our diocese celebrates the fiftieth anniversary of its

founding... His guiding principal is justice and dignity for all people, even murderers... Stevenson's work has resonated around the world... He is now sought after by talk shows and news magazines... His work is taking root... His work is an outward and visible sign of God's rule in earth.

And what he has in common with all the saints is that he has a passion for the Good... a passion for the way of Jesus... He has given his life to serving the lost of our world; and we would do well to learn from him... the same can be said of Teresa of Calcutta, who lived with the poor, the sick and dying in the slums of Calcutta; she gave her life for serving, literally, the untouchables of her world; the same may be said of Martin Luther King, Jr. who gave his life for the cause of equal justice, and the defeat of racism.... Fredrick Douglass who fought for the abolition of slavery... Jonathan Daniels who got shot and killed for merely registering black people to vote in Loundes County Alabama... All of these were people who gave their life and labor, their flesh and blood, for the lost among us.... And that:.... *servng the lost*...that is the Cause into which we are baptized.

Pope John the 23rd in the 1960's made famous the phrase that God's preferential option is for the poor... It was controversial, because the privileged among the flock, the modern day Pharisees, if you will, wondered: what about us?

It's the same thing with the Black Lives Matter movement... We say Black lives matter and the whites say, what about us?... But the point is this: God loves everyone, of course... that is a given... but what springs God into action, what gets God up in the morning... where God's passion is kindled is in giving God's life for the restoration of the lost, the weak, the voiceless, the untouchable... God acts first for the victims of poverty and its blood brother violence, victims of hunger and deprivation... the ostracized and the scapegoated... the disabled... the abased and powerless... those are who God pursues first... and as God is called preferentially to the least of these, so too are we, brothers and sisters; because none of us are whole until all of us are whole. It is as if God sees humanity as one organism.

That is the point Luke is making in our reading today... yet again. He is relentless in his admonition to serve the outcasts of the socio-economic order... he is relentless in his call for us to be countercultural, and break bread with the unloved, the non-persons that live so very near to us, but who live worlds apart; His point is that God has zero tolerance for the lost... the lost sheep, a metaphor... the lost coin... and a few verses later, the lost son... God searches out with obsessive compulsive passion the lost ones of our world... Because the world is just not right until all are found... the world is not right until dignity and well-being

is shared among us equally... justly... And such restoration we are told merits celebration.... We don't pray that the world may find peace, shalom... we pray that the peace of God will find the world... and folks we are that peace in flesh and blood... It is the love that we bear that will do the finding.

Love in the gospels takes on the form of passionate advocacy and radical hospitality... And Love is meant for the public domain... public domain, because that's where people live!...Our faith is a public, activist faith... a faith guided , not by right belief or intractable dogma, but by love that serves the cause of restoring the lost... Brothers and sisters, the kingdom of God is not a utopian hope. The world will always struggle with injustice and evil and suffering. The kingdom of God is this same broken world, but with Love in it; and we are that Love good people, saints of God. All Saints Church. Love does not make the world perfect. Love makes the world good. That is what redemption means.

Despite its flaws, and the corrupt spectacle that our political process has become, we live still in a democracy that teems with potential.... Some would say that smacks of American exceptionalism... I say that we as a national collective have exceptional opportunity, exceptional potential... We are a country founded on the principal of justice... justice which is the means of Love, according to

Reinhold Niebuhr... We possess the potential, we possess the very means of taking care of the least among us... How we do that is nuanced and complicated... the 'how' is what people of conscience must debate and figure out...Would that our politicians were people of conscience... but there is one thing that is not debatable when it comes to the teachings of Jesus... and that is that our first priority is to take care of our least... the poor, the addict, the mentally ill, the sick and the disenfranchised, the prisoner, the undocumented immigrant... the unloved. Our own well-being according to the teachings of Jesus, is found... with joy... in the well-being of the ones left out....that our joy is found in finding those who are lost..... That is the improbable alchemy of God's kingdom.

The lost are the ones for whom Jesus gave his life, after all... these are the ones after whom God seeks and pursues passionately... If we aspire to be post-modern saints... if we stop and weigh what is good and true and noble and lasting... if we believe that our baptismal call is worth everything, then we are to go and do likewise... to be like our brother Jesus, our sister Teresa, our brother Bryan, our brother Martin... We are to be advocates for justice and mercy...We are to be advocates for love, in short.... Christianity is not for the faint of heart. I'm not talking about what passes for Christianity these days. I'm talking about the Jesus movement that is revolutionary in its sacrifice for the least. Christianity,

alas, is not everyone's cup of tea... It requires commitment, singleness of heart, and all the courage we can muster... It is the commitment of our lives ... for life... But where else would we go?... to what else shall we give our life? Haven't we learned by now what is true, and what is good? This call... this Cause, at last, is all there is... and cause for celebration... Is it not?