

## Proper 21 Year C

I discovered Homer's epic tale, *The Odyssey*, when I was in Mrs. Baxter's third grade class at Girard Elementary School. One day a week for about thirty minutes we could go to the tiny library of our school and check out a maximum of two books. Upon one such visit amid my favorite tales of the old west: Kit Carson, Daniel Boone, Dan Morgan, rifleman, Pocahontas, Lewis and Clark, Jim Thorpe (that's not a western...instead a football story, whatever) amid all this lore, was the *Odyssey*, a children's edition, maybe 150 to two hundred pages. I don't remember if I had ever heard of it before, but for some strange reason, perhaps the allure of its name, or the ink drawings of the fine Greek sailing vessels, I checked it out. I looked up what odyssey meant: "An extended adventure, or a spiritual quest," according to Webster, the dictionary that lived on the librarian's desk.

Once I started reading it, I couldn't put it down. I remember the images: The clear salty cobalt blue of the Aegean Sea....the wind-driven battle ships of the ancient Greeks...Odysseus' ambiguous relationship with the gods.....the steamy... steamy, at least to a third-grader, encounter with the beautiful temptress Circe...The sacred forbidden cattle...the sirens singing and beckoning from the shore...The encounter with the Cyclops who demands to know Odysseus' name as Odysseus leaves the Cyclops,

who he has blinded, and leaves him blinded and alone on his remote island.... What is your name?! the Cyclops bellows....I am *no man* Odysseus proudly proclaims....and thus begins the odyssey: Odysseus' quest for his own identity.....a quest from no man to a name....a crossing of a vast sea towards home....towards his true destiny: husband, father, king....Literary critics say that this tale is not so much about a singular soul finding its way...but about a people, a collective expression of a people finding a way of life.....a tribal people in the midst of transformation.... A people who will found what we now call a democratic society...a quest for identity of the people who would be called Greek....a people whose lore and mythology shaped the world in which it occupied, its philosophy and thought, and shaped much of what Christianity is today: The concept of monotheism is not Jewish theology; It is much more a Greek concept than a Jewish one.

Perhaps what attracted me most to this tale was the pathos of alienation in it. Odysseus is thwarted time and again from returning home to his wife and child, his homeland and his kingship. It seems there is a vastness across which he cannot travel....as if the colluding forces of the universe will not have it...and homesickness becomes the pathos of this epic tale. I was one of those children who couldn't spend the night away from

home, so I pined for home along with Odysseus the protagonist in this story....this story of the lonely hero trying to find his way....up and against the fixed impossibility of it all...It will take a miracle for him to make it I thought....and then Mrs. Baxter's ruler popped on the surface of my desk...."put that book down, Jim, we're having math class now!" I cried into my shirt-sleeve when Odysseus finally saw the cedar bestrewn cliffs of Ithaca on the horizon...borne by his crew, their hands at the oars...come home at last.

Our story this morning in the 16<sup>th</sup> chapter of Luke is a story about returning home. And it is a story about identity. The story Jesus tells in Luke of the rich six brothers was in fact a popular fable told among a number of cultures in the first century world of the Mediterranean Basin...similar tales are chronicled in Egypt and Syria, and there is even a scene in Homer's *Odyssey* that borrows from the Syrian version: Odysseus is sent to the underworld as a test. He is sent to the underworld and encounters his mother, but he can't embrace her because of this great chasm fixed between life and death...he can only see her shimmering image across a vast breach, and can only hear her in whispers....an unearthly voice....and he knows deep down in his soul it is to home and to life to which he must return, the vast chasm between the two notwithstanding.

Luke takes this well known, classic tale and makes it his own. Here again we see the motif that we have been seeing since the beginning of this Gospel: the reversal of fortune, as it were...of which Mary prophesied....The poor are lifted up and the rich are sent away empty... the socio-economic world reversed, turned upside down...By now you know that this is Luke's chief end. He won't let it go.....but if we connect this story with the lore of the times....I think we might find some new meaning here. The initial, obvious message is that we are to share our wealth, our resources, with the poor, which is after all, a cardinal principal of Torah, the Jewish law, often called Moses and the prophets, as Jesus calls it in our reading.....I think we all agree about that, whether we do it well or not, but it goes deeper. This story is secondarily about choices, and principally about how we live together as community and society, communal choices...just as *the Odyssey* is at its heart about a societal quest for a just order and identity....our story then is a quest for identity, and that quest becomes a choice....this odyssey, this quest, culminates in a choice....a choice for home, identity, and life.... or a choice for alienation, disillusion and death. This is rhetoric remember....a literary genre that is meant to move and persuade its audience. This isn't about rich people going to hell and poor people going to heaven. This is a story about recognizing the injustice in our

world, and choosing the greater good of setting it right....choosing the greater good no matter how vastly impossible it seems that choice is to make. Because, to be sure, there are colluding forces in our world that make the choice incredibly difficult, and our age is certainly no exception...the theology of scarcity is pounded into our collective psyche by the culture...the conspiracy theories of fear; the intractability of the status quo... all prevent us...The point of course is that there is a chasm fixed between the honored of our world and the shamed... between the powerful and the weak.

But brothers and sisters our life as the baptized is an Odyssey, a quest, a spiritual journey, an extended adventure towards our true identity...to claim our name....to renounce namelessness, to claim our identity and name as people of the Way..... to claim our identity as people of justice, people of kindness and compassion.....to claim for ourselves the name above all names... the name of Christ....and such a life can only be lived out within and among the community. It is impossible alone.... the term: *self-sufficiency* might be the ultimate oxymoron; an illusion to be sure... Our identity, our true nature, is a life of making the stranger our brother, our sister..... Our true life is to raise up the broken of our world, to dispel the illusion of shame, and to proclaim that all are worthy and Loved by God our

maker...just as Lazarus was claimed by the bosom of Abraham in the end...the bosom of Abraham being the communion of Saints, both living and dead. Lazarus, the stranger, our brother, rejected by the vast injustice of the world and claimed by the community of faith.

“If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced if someone rises from the dead.”

And here is Luke’s twist...Here Luke is describing resurrection...Luke is describing resurrection life not as a miraculous event, if miracle there be, that happened years ago, a magic event that causes generations to believe, but he is describing resurrection life borne by the people of God by their practice of the faith. And it is in seeing this resurrection life, this acting for the good, that people believe...this is resurrection life that changes things; and it is real, and it is alive...literally in the flesh.

Our spiritual life brothers and sisters is not so much about what we believe....it is much more about how we live. Our living is our believing. Luke is saying to us that there is no resurrection without the people of faith living the faith...living each day by choosing the way of God...living the faith is what changes the world and it engenders in our very doing the identity to which we are called...They will know our names by how we

live...and we are stronger together. Our lives of faith are a collaborative practice, rendering the idea that faith is personal absurd... and the community of the faithful will bear us up in our work ....as aboard Odysseus' ship, many hands at the oars, the ship a symbol of community...the ship spying home on the horizon....By giving ourselves to the sacred lore of the community come down through the generations...by giving ourselves to this identifying way of life....we then dear people of God will choose home....and that is to choose life....home where all are welcome...where none are cast out....wherein a life of love begets the sumptuous feast, an abundant feast not reserved for a scant few, but for all....the miracle of resurrection is in the doing.... And it is high time to get on our way....It is time to live into our name....

Last week Katharine and I attended the national conference of the American Civil Liberties Union in Boston. The sole purpose of the ACLU is to defend the constitutional rights of the people of this land, including people who are not documented as citizens. I was so very inspired by this gathering. Erudite speakers and scholars passionate for the cause of justice. These are people who, dare I say, are living the Gospel: taking care of the least, the oppressed, the voiceless... they believe that the way Love becomes a public good is through the cause of justice. Reinhold Niebuhr, the great 20<sup>th</sup> century

theologian said it best: “God’s dream for the world is Love, and the means of Love is justice.” I left there more hopeful for our democracy than ever before.... Because there is no power greater than Love; and it is Love that shapes our lives. It is Love that is our identity as people who follow Jesus. I hesitate to say Christian these days, because of what Christianity has popularly become. Let’s say we are people of the Way... that was how the church of the first and second centuries referred to themselves... People of the Way... That is our identity.

Our Odyssey, dear sisters and brothers is to repair the great, fixed chasm of injustice, the great vastness between the honored and the shamed, the rich and the poor, the despairing and the joyful; the imprisoned and the free.... And know that the powers that be in our world will conspire against us. Identity is not given once and for all. We have to remind ourselves of who we are. We have to continually rediscover our true selves... I think that’s what is happening in our nation right now. We are in the midst of an identity crisis. The impeachment of the president has much more to do with who we are as a democracy than it has to do with Donald Trump. Will we be a society governed by greed and self-interest; or will we be the egalitarian and just democracy dreamed by our founders? Pray for our nation, good people when you say your prayers, and lend your voice to its restoration; and

know that Love will stand in the end.... Love after all is what the quest is all about. Love is who we are. Love is what we do. Love is our Odyssey across the vast sea of injustice. May we sail with all due courage until at last we are home.