

Proper 13 Year B

My cousin William, who lives in Dothan, is an avowed atheist... card carrying... I mean he's a member of the American Atheist Society... but he is one of the most "Christian" people I know. He is compassionate.... He cares about the least fortunate, the left out... He's willing to stand, ninja-like, among his South Alabama Facebook friends, and his large extended family, for that matter, and defend the causes of justice and truth.... And equality... Some of his family won't speak to him... but he carries on... serving the good and the right; persevering against evil, as we church folks might say... Some in our culture would call him a secular humanist.... But wasn't Jesus the consummate humanist? That is, didn't Jesus look to uphold the capacity of the human community to choose the good? He called the ones who make such a noble choice, children of God.... Children of God... the ones who choose to stand for the right and the good. William would make a good All Saints parishioner.

I am fascinated by the early evolution of the Christian faith. Before it became a thing. It emerged in the first century as a movement within Judaism, a reinterpretation of Torah in the context of Imperial occupation. Jesus of Nazareth was considered by his following as one in the line of the ancient prophets, prophets whose vocation was to speak wisdom to power. The prophetic legacy of Israel was to call to account the powers that be so that they would govern with mercy and justice God's people chosen to be a light to the world. Prophets were the proverbial thorn in

the side of the ruling class. The Synoptic writers, Matthew, Mark, and Luke present Jesus in that light. They bestow upon him the honorific, "Son of God," a title used for kings and prophets over Israel's storied history. But none of these writers would have dared to propose that Jesus was the same as God. For them he was a prophet and teacher reminding the people of how to live in the ways of God. Bart Ehrmann, New Testament scholar, argues that the hook for this movement was their deference to the poor and marginalized; their commitment to welcome and hospitality, and their belief that all are equals. That was as counter-cultural then as it is now. Resurrection for these writers was the metaphor that such a life had irrepressible vitality and sustainability even in the face of oppression, violence, and death.

And then something strange happened just after the end of the First century. The knowledge of this movement entered the world of Academia (that is to say the academic world of the Mediterranean basin)... into the philosophical discourse of the day. The scribes of the Gospel of John, one of many examples, took the synoptic narratives concerning the life and ministry of Jesus, and rearticulated them using Platonic categories, Egyptian mysticism, Zoroastrian lore. Jesus, for these scribes, becomes the mythological figure for humanity. A universal proclamation. Humanity, for Plato, was the God-consciousness of creation. Samuel Taylor Coleridge, some eighteen centuries later would call that consciousness, imagination. All things of earth, are reflections, symbols, of the reality of God; and not merely means of

reflection, but the means of participation in the life of God. The created order is an unfolding story, a poem, perhaps, in and of itself, sprung from the imagination of God. And we are characters, protagonists in this mythic saga, participating in the very disclosure of God Godself. It is a story of discovery, rife with possibility; and as God discovers the beauty of God's art, we discover the beauty that is God's life....

The Jesus movement was an isolated and seemingly insignificant sect, with its commitment to the dignity and well-being of a community of equals that had been taken up into the philosophical air of its time and place, connecting its ethos to the ancient discourse as to the reality of God... and it changed the world.

By the early second century, the Jesus movement was burning with a mystic fire. It had spread beyond Palestine into Alexandria, Antioch, even Rome. By the early fourth century it had become the religion of the empire. The egalitarian, counter-cultural church had become an imperially sanctioned institution, taking its organizational structure from the imperial system itself. There are two things institutions cherish above all else: certainty and control. To this day, I believe, the church suffers from its institutionalism, its patriarchal theology, its obsession with itself. Its vision has been modified, tragically, to fit the needs of the institution.

Perhaps my cousin William has chosen to call himself an atheist for good reason... Like so many, perhaps he is done with what has become of Christianity.... Perhaps he is done with what I call a distorted theism that believes in a supernatural

God aloof in the heavens.... A male god who answers some prayers, but not others... a god who has a decided distaste for the human community, a community fallen from grace... a depraved species struggling for god's favor... hoping for a reward in the next life.... A god whose love is limited to a select few... a god who strikes fear in the hearts of the faithful.

The western church over its history has bought in to such delusion... because for centuries such a theology has been good for crowd control... but in our age, many people, at least people who think, are done with the theology of fear.... Done with an institution that holds unworthiness over our heads; done with a church that cherry-picks scripture out of context, and uses it for its own self-interested agenda.... It shouldn't be any surprise that good people have left the church in droves... I'd have left as well if it weren't for the Episcopal Church... a church that honors our speculations and questions... a church that approaches theology critically; a church in which one may think; a church that, with thoughtful intention, has sought to return to the Gospel imperative of inclusion and justice.

So, a brief Old Testament bible study here... how faith became a burden.... Let's look at the creation story in Genesis: The man and the woman are in a beautiful garden... all their needs met... God tells them that they may partake of all the fruits of the garden except one.... They may not eat of the tree of knowledge... the knowledge of good and evil... they of course eat and, at least according to Augustine,

and later Calvin, their disobedience brought on all manner of calamity, including death itself.... Original sin, Augustine called it.... Sin so profound that God chose to sacrifice his son to pay the unpayable debt.... That is called substitutionary atonement... Jesus' life sacrificed for an exacting and judging God to make palatable our incalculable wretchedness. That theology is pathological, and over the centuries it has passed for orthodoxy... and the institutional church has largely embraced it... but as it has held sway over the tradition, it has always been questioned by seekers of the faith.... If you believe theology is always speculative, then you are duty bound to question it.... Theology is not in stone, as much as the church would like to say it is... It is fallible, and therefore needs always to be imaginatively interpreted and reinterpreted. We should always be on the lookout for new knowledge, new revelation. God is not finished.

So, let me offer an alternative interpretation to the Genesis account of our beginnings: At some point in the evolution of our species, in our cognitive development we became conscious... conscious of the difference between good and evil.... The man and the woman were of course destined to partake of the fruit of knowledge.... Because they were told that if they did they would become godlike... having the discreet knowledge of good and evil.... Who could resist that? It is as if we were set up in the garden.... Our so-called disobedience was really an act of differentiation, as modern psychology would call it, a necessary step in our becoming

human.... The story of the man and woman in the garden I want to suggest is a story of our species coming of age.... Of our species receiving the gift of free will... a painful transformation to be sure... but a necessary one.... It is not until we get to the story of Cain and Abel in Genesis that violence enters our world.... But the story of the so-called fall... is no fall at all, but a mythological account of our coming of age.... Our becoming sentient beings, with moral capability, able to make reasoned choices.

The gospel of John from which we just read is first and foremost a creation story as well.... "In the beginning," it begins.... "In the beginning was the word, and the word was with God and the word was God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it" Now this is no account of a fall from grace... but a proclamation as to the nobility of the human race.... The light of humankind being compared to the light of God.... For John, Jesus is the archetype of this light... Jesus is the mythological figure of the true human... the human come of age... full of light and truth he says.... This Gospel is a hymn to the human made in God's image; capable of compassion.... Imaginative, creative, empathetic, kind... self-critical... reasonable. John's gospel is a call to live into our legacy chosen in the garden. How else can we make sense of Jesus' radical statement that "we are sent as he is sent?"

Last week after reading the account of the feeding of the five thousand, I told you that we are the boy with the loaves and the fish offering them for the nurture of the whole, in particular, the ones in need.... But we are more than that; we are bread... at least according to John's mystic theology.... The disciples ask Jesus, "Sir give us this bread always." And Jesus tells him that he is the bread... which is to say that we are the bread... sent from heaven as Jesus is sent from heaven. In other words, the bread is not only, exclusively for us the people of faith. We are bread for others. Salvation is not about us, but about the ones in need of the living bread. It is our presence among the hungry and the lost of our world that is required. We have the privilege as the gathered faithful to be nurtured week after week at this altar... but our coming here is meaningless unless we go into our world as bread and wine, as body and blood for the world's sake. Sadly, that profound call just won't appeal to many; because it requires profound responsibility... the responsibility to be our brother's and sister's keeper in short... and that is a hard choice in a world that avoids hard choices.... But, brothers and sisters, such a choice is not a burden. It is the means of joy... such a choice is the way, the truth, and the life, to quote Jesus of Nazareth. This is a choice for Love; Love which is not a feeling but a choice. This is a manner of life that is lost to many in our culture. Where and when in this country of ours did we lose the Gospel vision for the world? Perhaps it was our four hundred year old practice of abusing our Black brothers and sisters that has led us from the

true path of empathy. We have been hardened by our apostasy. We as a culture have some learning and unlearning to do.

It would be easy for us to be poor pitiful sinners, and that I suspect would suit the institution.... And, that's a convenient means by which we may abdicate our responsibility... but it is quite another matter to be sons and daughters of God.... And that is our calling; that is our legacy... to be holy bread blessed, broken, and given to the world... and what that means is that God asks everything of us.... Because we are the last stand for the movement, the last stand for love.... Love lies fallow until we say yes to our destiny.... That is what free will is, not a curse, not a fall, but a profound gift... free will is the means to the infinite possibilities of love, the infinite possibilities of the story.... Free will is the possibility to be truly who we are: a royal priesthood... a noble people.... Living bread, no less, come down from heaven, blessed, broken and given.