

Proper 18 Year B

Over the years of my preaching and teaching, I hope I have made the point that theology, at its very best, is speculative. And that means that our sources for the theology of the church, Holy Scripture, like the gospels and the letters to the various early church communities, are speculative as well. They were written by passionate church people like me and you, complete with biases both personal and cultural. That doesn't mean, however, that there isn't truth in the literature of the Old and New Testaments. Nor does it mean that our sacred writings aren't imaginatively inspired by God. But to be sure our holy scriptures at the very least offer differing points of view; sometimes even contradictory points of view. Indeed, we now know that there were many more gospels written during the first and second centuries of the Common Era; that the so-called Good News of Jesus Christ had many competing voices early on. It is not until the third and fourth centuries, several hundred years after the life and ministry of Jesus of Nazareth, that theology became codified, dogmatized by the powers that be in the hierarchy of the church. Now I am persuaded that the polyphonic origins of Christianity are a good thing; that there is no "correct" interpretation of who Jesus is, or what Jesus means... what we have in scripture is a mosaic, if you will, of inspired speculation that offers a multi-faceted view of Jesus and the movement he engendered, that is open still to our questions and

interpretations... questions and interpretations sprung from our experience in our own context, or own day and time. I feel sure the writers of scripture would agree that what they wrote was not the last word... but first words to enable their audience and generations to come to enter into a world of mystery and discovery. Surely they recognize that God never reveals Godself once and for all; but that God is continually revealing Godself. Perhaps God too experiences the joy of discovery and the seductive beauty of mystery.

So I ask that you speculate with me today. This morning I want to look at our reading from Mark's gospel, its theological and ethical premise; contrasted with the theology of the Gospel of John from which we read for several weeks running... You remember, back in July and August, we read the entire 6th chapter of John wherein the writer offered his interpretation of Jesus' feeding of the five thousand. The gospels of Mark and John are two decidedly different points of view; two rather distinct views of the person of Jesus. And maybe in looking at these vastly different gospels we might have a broader understanding of this enigmatic figure named Jesus about whom there is very little historical corroboration.

You remember, the Gospel of John is overtly theological. John makes no bones about it. In his prologue he declares Jesus the divine Logos, the Word.... A

principal tenet of Greek theology, which means Pure truth, pure reasonableness, come directly from God... that he is of the same light, John's words, as the light of God. John continually claims that Jesus is one with the Father. For John Jesus is pure perfection. He is flesh and blood, but he is divine... the medieval church would come to call him sinless... and the Gospel of John is their authority to make such a claim.

The Gospel of Mark makes no such claims. Jesus is called God's son, but many notable patriarchs over Israel's history were called sons of God as well. Caesar also, was called the Son of God, rendering that reference politically charged and subversive. For Mark Jesus falls in line with the prophets from Israel's past, Moses and Elijah, critics, truth tellers. His ministry has push-back, is riddled by obstacles and incredulity. He has an on again off again relationship with his disciples. His teaching never quite takes hold; the crowds, even his disciples just don't get it; his family is what we would call dysfunctional. Jesus' own mother accuses him of being out of his mind. In the Gospel of John Jesus is most God-like... In Mark's gospel he is all too human.

This theological disparity between Jesus' godlikeness, and his humanity was a huge issue for the church in the first four centuries of Christianity. Indeed all Christological scholarship, the study of Jesus, fall on the continuum between Jesus

being divine and Jesus being human. Bishops in the early church were exiled even killed for leaning too far one way or the other. This controversy famously involved two bishops of the early fourth century, Arius and Athanasius. Arius argued that Jesus was very much like God; that he carried out God's purposes; but he wasn't God. I would say that the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, support to varying degrees that position. Athanasius, on the other hand supported the position that Jesus was God; that Jesus, though flesh and blood, was God come down to earth. This controversy carried on for over a hundred years, beginning in Nicea. We say in the Nicene Creed that Jesus is of God's being, but it is not until the Council of Chalcedon in 451 that it was decided as orthodox doctrine that Jesus was fully human and fully divine; a tension with which we still struggle.

That is to say that the controversy never really ended. I would argue that the church has never really embraced the humanity of Jesus. We have largely been Athanasians. Over the centuries we have looked at Jesus as other-worldly... different from us... aloof; all knowing; perfect; ascended to the right hand of God ensconced in the heavens. We, the church, have made Jesus, dare I say, an idol...

This is not the Jesus of Mark's Gospel. In our reading today Jesus has left the familiarity of Galilee and has crossed into Gentile country. The text says he entered a house but didn't want anyone to know he was there... That's because

Jews don't enter houses of Gentiles for fear of being made unclean. You remember last week Jesus was arguing with the scribes about what's clean and what's unclean.... Jesus enters the house of an untouchable, and is approached by one of them, a woman who begs him to heal her daughter... Now you should know by now that healing in the ancient world has as much to do with dignity as it does with being cured, so this is one more story about dignity... The woman we are told is Syro-Phoenician. She is a Palestinian who is a sworn enemy of Judea; not to mention a person of an impure race according to Jewish custom... and Jesus is offended by her begging... He even calls her and her daughter a dog... That's a racial slur... and then because the woman stands her ground, musters her dignity and calls Jesus out for his racism; ... He, not she, is converted. He changes his mind and heals the woman's daughter... This ain't the Jesus of John's Gospel. This Jesus is human, subject to, as all of us are, to the predispositions of the culture in which we live. This Jesus has to come to terms with his own cultural prejudices; his own blindness.... This Jesus I can relate to.

So here's the thing: When we make Jesus this ethereal idol... one who is impossible to approach, and with whom we scarcely may identify... we run the risk of not seeing Jesus as a model... A model, not an idol... The ancient religious practice was to find a sage, an enlightened mentor and teacher whom one would

imitate... This story is meant for our imitation. Because Jesus is fully human, he must grow and change just like the rest of us. I think this is a story about being mindful. If Jesus weren't attuned to his compassion and vulnerability he would have sent the woman away; he'd have never entered her house in the first place. This is Mark holding Jesus up as a model of transformation; that we are to have enough consciousness and humility that when we're wrong, then own up to it. Here Jesus is dead wrong; and it takes a so-called unclean woman to set him straight. That is what being mindful is all about... being open and vulnerable, and able to encounter the truth from the most unlikely places.

There is an irony here, as truth almost always emerges from irony, because it is a central, consistent teaching in Judaism to welcome the stranger; to treat the immigrant as one of your own family. Jesus would know that; and we know that, don't we? And yet he and we are blinded by the xenophobic tendencies that infect us all. We are all racists because the culture we live in has lived for four hundred years under the burdensome rubric of racism. What he is teaching us here is that changing our mind; rethinking what is hard-wired in our cultural predispositions; repentance in short, is possible if one is mindful; that is, awake and vulnerable, and present, and open to God's surprising possibilities. The fact that Jesus crossed into Gentile country in the first place is an act of courage... and

courage will open us up to the possibilities of God. Jesus is showing us the way to embrace our humanity.

But that is not all that's going on in this brief encounter. The Syro-Phoenician woman is also a model. She is in truth the protagonist in this tale. She is resilient, persistent in her passionate advocacy for her daughter. It is her resolve, her unshakeable love for her daughter that changes things, brings about healing. As women in the world come more into their own... look out... things will begin to be set right. More and more I believe the life of faith at its heart is advocacy. And let's not forget that the obstacle here is racism, lest we think that racism is a mere sideline for a "woke" church. Certainly in our culture, as in many, it is a principal source of dysfunction and violence. The teaching here is that advocacy is the solution. Advocacy equals loving our neighbor. It is passionate advocacy that will end the learned behavior of racism. Advocacy is empathy is action.

Remember Mark's Gospel is about the life of the Baptized... that's how this gospel begins... with the Baptism of Jesus... So Jesus is the model of Baptismal vocation... Our life as the baptized is a mysterious process of maturing, of making mistakes, like Jesus, and that our life's journey necessitates continual repentance, conversion, transformation... like Jesus... that life is about the willingness to turn

from our illusions and our biases and choose the Good, like Jesus... Brothers and sisters, Jesus is one of us, and like him we must be awake to the possibilities of God that are all around us, often in the most unlikely places, most often in the broken places. We just have to pay attention, and listen for the advocates among us, and become advocates ourselves. Maybe that's part of what church is about: a community in which we enable each other to pay closer attention... because I'm convinced that this life of faith; this life of the baptized is not a solitary enterprise. It takes community, and the accountability that exists in community. Faith is most effective in and through God's gathered people.... And maybe the lofty idea of the divine; maybe it's not so far from being human... maybe it's about Love... Love the bridge, Love the intersection point between human and divine... Love that welcomes the untouchable; Love that pines for justice; Love that heals and endures. It is Love that makes the human divine; and it is Love that makes the Divine human. That is the ideal for which Jesus stands. Not perfection; but Love... and Love knows no boundaries, because Love is courageous... and Love will never fail us; nor should we, our complicated humanity notwithstanding... nor should we ever fail to Love.