

Neutral No Longer

Coming home from the first day at the Priory this week, my daughter asked: "What religion are people who don't believe in God?"

Scrambling to have some time to think that one through, I asked what prompted the question.

Her classmate did, it seems.

She announced in religion class that she didn't believe in God.

She said: "I am a neutral!"

Which, if folks got really honest, "Neutral" would likely be the biggest religion in the world!

"Sure, we ought to tip our hats toward the big man, just in case he's really there; but on the important stuff, the day-to-day decisions on living a careful, prudent, common sense life; I'll decide which way to go!"

That's what's at the heart of today's gospel after all.

Peter, fresh from being promoted by Jesus to top dog in the new church, follows the time honored tradition of our first parents, Adam and Eve, a tradition we continue to follow in our own lives and in our own nations right up to the present moment.

As soon as Jesus tells Peter what God's plan involves, Peter blurts out, in so many words, that God is all wet.

It really is remarkable how we human beings have such a corner on wisdom.

Peter is of course saying to Jesus exactly what the devil says to Jesus in the desert.

There's an easier way.

You don't have to deal with suffering and pain and loss.

It was old Otto von Bismark himself, at the turn of the last century, who said, to near universal agreement, that countries cannot be governed based on the Sermon on the Mount.

He promised the German people iron and blood as the way to their salvation.

Two world wars later, we know how that worked out for the German people.

Until today, it is iron and blood, not the beatitudes, that run the world.

I sympathize with Peter.

You do too.

How can we follow a God who invites us into a life of suffering?

How can we follow a savior who insists we lose what is most important, our very self, if we hope to find what really matters.

After all, doesn't God want me to be happy?

Doesn't God want me to be a productive member of whatever society I happen to be living in?

Isn't God mainly concerned that we all eat our peas, play by the rules, be nice enough to get by and then die and go to heaven?

Isn't that, after all, the drill?

When we read today's gospel, the answer, sadly enough, is NO.

God apparently could care less about my happiness.

God cares less about me fitting in nicely to the existing social order, eating my peas, and all the rest.

And that's the startling message that the gospel has for you and for me and for the millions and millions who are neutrals.

Living a life grounded in faith has nothing to do with being pious or following rules or getting along or all the other stereotypes that faith has been saddled with (usually through the hard won efforts of religious people).

Nor does it have anything to do with the kind of submission that too many women have endured for too many years; somehow equating submission to the men in their lives with the sacrifice Jesus calls for.

A group of Bolivian women, who spent years in a base Christian community, finally came to see that the sacrifice Jesus calls for is not humiliation at the hands of a macho man.

Instead, it is something like this.

A life grounded in faith starts with a God who comes to an enslaved people, a bunch of nobodies, and announces to a murderer on the lam (that would be Moses – you recall he killed an Egyptian and left the country); he announces to this felon on the lam two words that forever change the course of human destiny: "I AM."

When Jesus rescues the apostles on the Sea of Galilee, as their boat is tossed by the storm, the literal translation as he approached them is not: "It is I."

No, the literal translation is: "I am."

And it is this "I am" that propels Jesus into the face of Peter, saying, in no uncertain terms, that what God wants for them, what God wants for the Bolivian women, what God wants for you, is neither safety nor compliance nor popularity, but freedom.

The freedom to risk security and safety by stepping out of line and following this itinerant preacher from the hills of Galilee, the freedom to lose ourselves in service to one another, the freedom to forgive rather than to hate, the freedom to embrace, rather than reject, the freedom to risk illness or poverty or even death, all because, no matter our doubts, no matter our fears, no matter our best thinking, our hope is in the one who says: "I am."

As one priest puts it: "The deep secret of Jesus' hard words to us in this passage is that our fear of suffering and death robs us of life, because fear of death always turns into fear of life, into a stingy, cautious way of living that is not really living at all. The deep secret of Jesus' hard words is that the way to have abundant life is not to save it but to spend it, to give it away, because life cannot be shut up and saved any more than a bird can be put in a shoebox and stored on the closet shelf." B.B. Taylor, *The Seeds of Heaven*, 79.

What Peter missed, what we often miss, is the last part of what Jesus says today. We hear quite well the suffering and dying part.

Those parts continue to ring in the ears.

But there is something else.

"In three days, rise again."

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God does not promise us eternal life.

God promises us life after death.

"Eternal life" suggests there is something immortal within us already.

Something that entitles us to life everlasting.

While the Greek philosophers thought this to be so, that is not the faith of Jews or Christians.

We believe that life is purely a gift from God.

Our breath is the breath of God.

And if we are to live after breathing our last, it will be purely by the overflowing free gift of a loving God.

"I am," God declares.

And since God is God, then the gift we hope to receive is a gift we can right now give away.

And so, beloved, "Let your love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor."

And you shall see that "all will be well, and all will be well, and all manner of things shall be well." Julian of Norwich.

