

Scandal

Just last week, a doctor in Michigan who happens to be a lesbian and is married to her spouse, was publicly denied holy communion by a clergyman from another denomination.

The reason given for the denial was that her mere presence in the church, because of her sexual orientation, was a cause of scandal.

And so she was held up to scorn and ridicule for simply being the person God made her to be, by a purported servant of this same God, no less.

That shameful rejection of one of God's children was especially ironic given last week's gospel lesson, which ends with Jesus telling everyone "blessed are those who are not offended by me."

Which, in the original Greek, actually reads "blessed are those who are not scandalized by me."

Because Jesus, as you know, is full of scandal.

He eats with prostitutes and loan sharks.

He heals folks on the sabbath, which gives the rabbis conniptions.

He hangs from the bloody cross while the good folks shout out the famous Bible verse about God cursing all who are nailed to a tree.

And what we learn from today's gospel lesson is that scandal is nothing new for Jesus, he's actually conceived in it!

An unwed teenager who is promised to a man in marriage finds herself pregnant in a time and place where such women could be lawfully stoned to death.

Not only is she hapai, but her fiancé finds out as well!

And he's struggling with what to do with this terrible news.

What will the neighbors think?

The local rabbi?

His parents?

When we pay attention to the gospels, what we discover is that God is constantly acting through and within scandals.

And the question we need to ask is: why?!

What do scandals force us to do?

These are the questions put to us as we come to the end of this season of preparation, this season of Advent.

Last week I talked about the bags we each of us drag behind us, bags filled with our anxieties and angers and unfulfilled joys.

The bags represent what Freud calls our unconscious mind, what Jung calls our shadow side, that vast part of ourselves that we usually ignore, the part of ourselves that often remains hidden, even from ourselves.

But always to our peril.

Perhaps the point of scandal is to shake us hard enough, to clap loud enough, to bang the drum forcefully enough, to wake us up, to pay attention to that which we too often keep hidden away, because they are parts of us that we are too frightened or ashamed to face.

The whole point of this season of preparation is to get ready for Jesus.

The whole point of Jesus is to help us become complete human beings!

And we can only become complete human beings when we come to grips with all that we are, especially the things we have buried, covered over, ignored.

Fr. Tom Keating, a wonderful contemplative priest, offers his considerable wisdom and insight into the kind of prayer needed to crack open the door to our shadow side, to our secret places:

“The only prayer you need to say is, ‘Help!’

It’s right to the point.

It describes what we need.

Because, when the cry for help comes from a heart that knows its own failures, the divine nature itself is moved with tenderness and compassion, and God always responds.

It’s not about forgiveness!

Forgiveness comes the instant we want to change.

But the cry of 'help!' frees us from the straitjacket of shame and fear that we too often put on ourselves; it frees us from the crazy, useless, pathological need to control other people, places and things.

While the purpose of ordinary therapy is to help a person adjust to society, the purpose of divine therapy is to heal us -- down to our very roots; to transform the whole of our human nature into the mind and heart of Christ.

To exchange our eyes for the eyes of God.

Which then allows us to get a peek at the magnificent joy and peace and acceptance that is the life of God." T. Keating, as quoted by R. Rohr, Meditations, 12/17/19, paraphrased.

Scandal allows this necessary cracking open to occur, because scandal reveals my own small mindedness, my own intolerance of those who are different, my own fear of that which is "not like me."

And while we often use the Bible to condemn others, to judge and exclude others, we should remember something Jesus says to us when we do that:

"The difference between you and me is that you use scripture to understand what love means, while I use love to understand what scripture means." David Hayward.

Scandal breaks us out of our blinders by coming to experience that in God, all things are, in their essence, good.

"When we can on some level love even our sins and imperfections, only then do we become fully conscious and fully liberated.

God, who is Universal Consciousness itself, knows all things, absorbs all things, and forgives all things — for being what and who they are.” R. Rohr, Meditations, paraphrased.

You see, “scandal is not the same as real offense.

Scandal is the irruption of God’s love, a love that our feeble minds have not yet understood.

Jesus embraces scandal as a way to teach us that the law works for love, not the other way around.

If you think of love as the sun, then the law is its weakest ray of light.

If you hold onto love, you will see how the law can reflect it.

But if you lose love, the law cannot replace it.

Law then simply becomes a tool of self-promotion, a weapon with which to punish others.

When you love a person through the law, you shape the law so that it reflects the larger reality of God, a reality that is always far more than we can ever know.

And this gives life a chance to breathe.

It gives a person room to change.

And funny thing, the deepest change will not be in the other person, but in you yourself.

Because love worries about the log in my own eye, not about the splinter others may have in theirs." Shea, *On Earth As It Is In Heaven*, 47, paraphrased.

When we learn these things, we will at long last see that scandal is nothing more than our own blindness; and that once we are able to see, scandal disappears — into the embrace of the One who is All in All.

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