

Wine and Roses

There is a version of American Christianity that says: "if you've got Jesus in your life, everything will be great!"

You can see that particular version of Christianity on any cable TV show and on many radio stations across the land.

Call it the Prosperity Gospel.

Call it Fundamentalism.

It's the promise that if you join the club, your life will be just peachy.

The only problem with this interpretation of Christianity is that it's not true.

We know that from our own life experiences.

Just about nobody escapes tragedy in life, in one form or another.

And when tragedy occurs, it doesn't mean God has abandoned us, as the "me and Jesus" folks often suggest.

When tragedy occurs, that's when God is most close to us; no matter the circumstances.

No matter the pain or injustice of it all.

Our scripture backs this belief up, always and everywhere.

Look at Paul and Silas!

Just last week, they're having a great old time!

Having "gone with the flow" they find the beginnings of the new church at Philippi.

They're welcomed with open arms!

Fed well.

Embraced.

And here we are today, just a week later.

They've been wandering around the King Street and Kapi'olani Boulevard's of downtown Philippi, announcing this new life of mercy, compassion and hope.

And, they are roundly ignored.

Everybody (except a noisy slave girl) is getting on with the business of the day, having no time for this kind of esoteric nonsense.

No time, that is, until Paul and Silas interfere with how people make money.

By "unemploying" the slave girl.

That gets everyone's attention!

And suddenly, the wine and roses that Paul and Silas were enjoying just last week are tossed into the trash heap; as they are stripped, beaten, and jailed.

Which is always what happens whenever the church finds the courage of its convictions and confronts the powers of this world.

A courage frequently lacking these days.

The gun lobby buys political and religious influence, while countless thousands die senselessly.

The recent massacres in Buffalo and Texas are simply the latest, totally avoidable, unnecessary, atrocities.

Gun makers, obsessed with power, wrap themselves in God, Mom and apple pie.

Authoritarians the world over enjoy the blessing of the church.

Whether it's archbishop Krill of the Orthodox Church in Russia, who is actively blessing the Ukraine war in exchange for money and property, or American clergy who cozy up to neofascism in our nation to promote their political aims.

They love the faith!

But who reminds them that God says "love one another? "

And, "don't kill?"

And oh yes, the treasures that last don't include an assault rifle or fat bank account!

Saint Oscar Romero of El Salvador was assassinated by members of an army gang, that our nation trained, as he celebrated the holy Eucharist.

His was a profound voice speaking up on behalf of the actual gospel of Jesus Christ.

He said:

“A church that doesn't provoke any crisis, a gospel that doesn't unsettle, a word of God that doesn't get under anyone's skin, a word of God that doesn't touch the real sin of the society in which it is being proclaimed -- what gospel is that?

Very nice, pious considerations that don't bother anyone, that's the way many would like preaching to be.

Those preachers who avoid every thorny matter so as not to be harassed, so as not to have conflicts and difficulties, they don't light up the world they live in.”

In these days of rising authoritarian tendencies, of corporate greed that so shamelessly causes the cost-of-living to rise for the vast majority of people, of faith in guns masquerading as faith in God, more than ever the clarion call of the gospel of Jesus Christ needs to be spoken fearlessly and frequently.

Jesus left us with a specific task: to change the world.

And over these many years, we have watered down that task to the saving of individual souls, eyeing a hoped for life in the next world.

The only problem with that is — Jesus has already saved the world!

Salvation and justification for all was bought and paid for, by him, for all.

Our task is to accept that fact.

Then, get on with the real work of faith.

Loving, even our enemies.

Feeding, clothing and visiting the least, the lost and the left behind.

Forgiving, in the same measure we ourselves wish to be forgiven.

Trusting, in the constant presence and faithfulness of God.

Avoiding the temptations that call out our need to control people, places and things.

And then acting, as if the greatest good is to create a world in which the very least among us might live a life of dignity and hope.

What happened?

The perversion of our faith happened when Christianity went from being an outlaw religion to the religion of the state.

As an outlaw religion, Christianity developed the first hospitals, orphanages, and opened houses of hospitality to all in need.

As an outlaw religion, Christianity was predominantly an organization of slaves, the poor and the marginalized.

Once Christianity became a state religion, it began to sanction war and political shenanigans.

It bought into the lust for economic power, while scorning the most vulnerable among us.

We need to return to our origins.

We need to confront the powers that be in this world, even at the risk of being stripped, beaten and jailed.

For only **that** life creates the openness of heart needed – in order to receive the waters of life.

Only faithful servanthood opens our eyes to the gentle humility of the God who beckons to everyone:

“Come.’

And let **everyone** who is thirsty come.

Let **anyone** who wishes, take the water of life, as a gift.” Rev. 22:16-17.

It’s so tempting to think that ritual and rules can replace the Way and Truth and Life that is Christ.

And yet, the promise of unity with one another, and with God, which is our destiny, will not be defeated.

No matter what we do.

No matter who we are.

At the end of the day, God wins.

And there is this.

I don't know whether you've ever seen that picture of a whole pack of friendly, furry, dogs.

Eyes wide open.

Tongues lolly-gagging out.

Tails wagging.

With the caption being: "this is what greets you when you get to heaven."

Or whether you happened to see the cartoon showing a long line of people lined up at St Peter's desk, explaining themselves, trying to get into heaven, while to Saint Peter's right, all of the dogs are marching inside beneath a sign that reads: "free pass."

I don't think it's a coincidence that in English, the word "dog" is "God" spelled backwards.

We can learn so much about the nature of God simply by spending time with our dogs.

The gentle, persistent, unconditional love.

The joy that leaps out of them when they see the face of their master.

The loyalty and forgiveness and compassion that seems to be part of their very essence.

But most of all, we know that our dogs are lifelong friends.

Asking for nothing more than that the love they give, be returned, in some small measure.

And even when it isn't, they continue to love.

We lost our beloved Irish Setter, Sammie, last week, to natural causes.

He was the most human four-legged creature that I have ever known.

And when I think about what it is that we are called to be in our faith, there is much to be said that we are called to be like, a dog.

Loving.

Faithful.

Courageous.

Forgiving.

Focused completely on the voice of our master, Jesus, whether the times are good or bad.

To go where he goes.

To do what he does.

For in that life — is grace.

In that life — is hope.

And in that life — is the peace that passes all understanding.

+amen.