

The Annoying Jesus

When the Pharisees ask Jesus “How long will you keep us in suspense” the sense of it actually means, in Greek, “how long will you continue to annoy us?”

For us, at first glance, it’s hard to figure why the religious leaders of the day found Jesus annoying. How could they not recognize the Son of God in their midst? How could they not see that what he said summed up everything taught by Moses and the prophets?

Except, when you get down to it, the reality of God, shared with us in Jesus, rubs pretty much everyone the wrong way. Even today.

It seems built into our human DNA that we insist on “cause and effect.” For example, “If I am good, good things will happen to me.” “If I sin, bad things will happen to me.” “God helps those who help themselves” is old Ben Franklin’s summary of our cause and effect thinking.

Even when we work really hard at setting aside “cause and effect”, it’s there in our guts, in our instinct, in our first response. “Cause and effect” justifies my harsh judgment of that dope over there who (and we can all fill in the blank)

- won’t get a job

- dropped out of school

- has a big mouth, etc. etc. etc.

Cause and effect allows me to say: “Hey! You get what you deserve!”

And here comes Jesus, patiently explaining to us that while cause and effect may be our favorite toy, God doesn’t have much use for it.

It’s easy to see how the Pharisees could ask him: “How long will you continue to annoy us?” They were big believers in cause and effect too. Eat the right foods. Wash the right way. Keep away from this guy and that gal. And if you mess up, you will pay!

And here comes Jesus, who forgave sins without people even asking to be forgiven. Who hung out with the worst sort of people and called them his mother and brothers and sisters.

The stunning message of Jesus is that it’s not the stuff we do that makes us right with God, whether it’s old fashioned animal sacrifice or ritual cleaning or doing good

deeds or being a nice guy or a decent family man.

It's not walking the straight and narrow that makes us right with God. It's God who has made us right with God; and charged not a penny to us; but God paid the whole price in the life, death, and resurrection of his beloved Son.

All of which can be quite an upsetting thing to those who insist that our salvation depends on ourselves, on our attitudes, on our good deeds.

Fr. Bob Capon, an Episcopal priest, talks about it this way:

The church took the God in Christ who said he was the light of the world, and turned him into the electric company of the world, complete with access fees (lots of good deeds) to be paid before you could tap into his power, and the threat of a cut-off in service if you didn't keep up the monthly payments (with righteous acts). But if Jesus really shines as the light of the world the way the sun shines as the light of the earth, then nobody needs to do anything to get the light. The mystery of Christ shines from one end of creation to the other: the whole shooting match is lit up everywhere, free, for nothing. The church doesn't have to tear around telling people to get wired to Jesus. It just has to bring the hilariously good news that if only they will trust Jesus, and open their eyes, the darkness will be gone because, except for the blindness of our unbelief, the darkness was never there at all. Capon, *The Mystery of Christ*, 65.

This time we have, this Easter Season, these 50 days between Resurrection Sunday and Pentecost, this is the time of year for Christians to be giddy. "Giddy" meaning to giggle, to laugh, to exhale, to breath a great sigh of relief.

That's what these 50 days we are now in the midst of are for. What we tend to lose along the way is the absolute craziness of a God who pitches out all our parade of horribles, and pitches down his tent right here, with us. It's not about what we do for God. The ridiculous, astonishing, unexpected news of Easter is what God has done for us: he has welcomed us home. For free. With no entry fee. No magic ticket. We are, at this very moment, home free, embraced by the creator of all things.

At this point, our daughter Tea would say: "Dad, you're repeating yourself." And she would be right. But some things need repeating because at first blush, this is all terribly hard to accept!

It means bad things will happen to good people. It means seemingly bad people, and really and truly bad people may not get what's coming, at least not in ways we might understand or agree with. It means there will be suffering here, loneliness and hurt. But in the mix of it all, is the complete assurance that despite all signs to the contrary, God is with us, today, tomorrow and forever.

That is the message of the empty tomb. That is the consequence of Jesus raised from the dead.

Jesus gave control of his life over to the Father, and accepted suffering and abandonment and ultimately torture and death; what many of the “good folks” saw as being cursed by God.

We do that to each other, very often, you know. We do it without even realizing it. This “cause and effect” kind of judgment that is so short-sighted, so harmful.

Scott Saye tells the story of a young man named Steve who got a very aggressive form of cancer. Steve received a letter from a Christian woman telling him she knew it was God’s will for him to be healed. All he had to do was believe. Far from being a comfort, that letter struck Steve as a judgment.

After all, if he wasn’t healed, it meant he hadn’t believed enough, and his death would be entirely his own fault. This woman thought of divine providence as protection and control. Because she assumed that God controlled all events, she had to somehow justify God’s inaction if Steve in fact died. To keep God blameless, she had to blame Steve---God was ready to do the right thing, if only Steve had enough faith.

Steve responded to the woman in a letter. Too weak to write himself, Steve’s brother wrote down the words as Steve spoke them. “I share your faith in the almighty power of God to heal and sustain us. There may be times though when God’s greatest miracle is not the miracle of physical healing, but the miracle of giving us strength in the face of suffering. I sincerely hope that if my cancer continues to grow, no one will see it as a failure of my faith in God, but that perhaps people can see me as faithful even if I die while I am still young. I do not claim to understand God’s will, but I do know that I am in God’s hands, whether in life or in death.” Saye, *Following Jesus in a Culture of Fear*, 91.

We are each of us in God’s hands, whether in life or in death. So we can laugh today, we can exhale today. No matter the particular tragedy in your life or mine, today. Because no matter the pain or the loss or the hurt, it is a passing thing. What remains is this: a God who loves to annoy our good common sense, who loves to shock us, who delights in bringing us home.

The new life lived inside the resurrection of Jesus is not a distant fantasy; it is not a dream that maybe will come true only in some far off future. In our giving, in our forgiving; in walking the extra mile with one another; in meeting each other not in judgment, but with the benefit of the doubt; not with arms crossed, but with arms outstretched.....in that life, we enter the life of the resurrected Jesus; we enter the life of God.

Resurrection happens today. Right here, in Palama. And that guy or gal sitting next to you? He and she are the doorways into that life. So, happy Easter! Let's enjoy every one of these 50 days!

Amen+