

Form Over Substance

I feel for that poor rabbi in today's gospel lesson.

He's trying to hold a prayer service together when all of a sudden Aunty May, who's been stooped over for decades, suddenly starts dancing the jitterbug!

It's sheer pandemonium!

And all that poor rabbi wants is to get through the service so he can go home, turn on the evening news, and have his dinner.

Who can't relate to that??

Because, in our heart of hearts, what we really and truly want is a respectable, predictable, God, one who rewards the good and punishes the bad and who shows up when we ask and wins our fights for us.

But in Jesus, much to our chagrin, God isn't like that at all.

Instead, there is God in the flesh, eating with the worst sort of losers, commiserating with tax collecting sell-outs, then topping it all off by dying a criminal's death, a death reserved for slaves and rebels.

All of which is telling us that God doesn't usually walk in the front door at an appointed time, but instead is usually crawling through a side window at midnight or sticking her head in the door just as we settle in on the toilet or when we collapse on the recliner after finishing that hard day of work.

Jesus says: God is on the loose and you'll never find him where you expect him to be, so stay loose too, and maybe you'll recognize this God who's always ready to surprise.

Which means how we approach our faith, how we approach our life, really does need to change, all because of Jesus.

In law school, one of the first things they taught us to be careful about was something called form over substance.

What the heck is that, we asked?

Well, it's something like this woman's confirmation class back when she was 12 years old.

She's excited and curious about her faith and feeling pretty grown up as she thinks about being confirmed in her faith.

She starts asking the priest questions about sin and evil and what it means to be fallen yet restored creatures, and much to her shock, the priest... starts... getting... mad!

He wants to talk about how to hold your hands the right way to receive communion, to be sure that they've memorized the Lord's Prayer... and this youngster then and there feels a light that has been burning so brightly around her young faith, well, she feels that light go out... rediscovering her spiritual journey only years later... in the Hindu faith....

That's form over substance.

It's what's happening in today's gospel.

Jesus is worshiping on the sabbath and heals a long-suffering woman, causing the rabbi to go bananas.

But why does the sabbath exist in the first place?

Why do we need a day off every week?

Isn't it so that we might be refreshed, and in the refreshing, be healed?

Form over substance means getting caught up in the unimportant small things, while missing the deeper, truer, meatier, meaning of what is right before our eyes.

And then there is substance over form...

Like when our beloved Presiding Bishop, Ed Browning, first became bishop of Okinawa.

He visited folks suffering with Hansen's disease, what used to be referred to as leprosy.

He was there to confirm a number of these folks and as they had always done in the past, they showed up with a piece of linen cloth covering their head — so the bishop wouldn't have to actually touch them when he laid hands on them to confirm them...

Bishop Browning had everyone remove those cloths, saying that if Jesus can touch the bodies of those suffering from illness, can a follower of Jesus do any less?

Now that's substance over form.

It happened again when Bishop Browning made his first speech after being elected Presiding Bishop of the United States, when he said that in this church there shall be no outcasts.

Which is a pretty audacious thing to say, since most denominations define themselves by who they exclude, and he walked that talk when he ordained Barbara Harris, the first female bishop in the entire Anglican communion.

Substance over form.

We are these days at a crossroads in Christianity.

For far too long, the substance of our faith: compassion, mercy, dying and rising, was exchanged for the form: as in, saying the right words, showing up at least a few times a year, pinning our hopes on a fluffy cloud and a 12 string harp when we take our last breath.

How different from the faith of our early Christian mothers and fathers, who knew that they "have come ... to the city of the living God, ... to innumerable angels in festal gathering, ... to God the judge of all, to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word..."

Our faith calls us to live as a new humanity, one that doesn't get caught up in the small stuff, and one that doesn't fear death — because in our baptism we are already dead in Christ: dead to consumerism and war and fear and hate.

As Christians, we are dead, but definitely not dying.

Meaning that a life of dying is a life lived in fear — fear of the stranger, fear of losing money or reputation or social position, fear of weakness, a life consumed with apprehension, with worry.

But Jesus doesn't come to save the dying — that's why he waits two days before showing up to save Lazarus!

Because for those two days, Lazarus is dying, but not yet dead — and Jesus comes to save the dead! R. Capon, Parables, 261.

That's the substance of our faith...and most folks can't stand it.

We want to be strong, handsome, wise and powerful.

We want to be in charge and bend other people to our way of doing things, our way of running the show.

An email that came by last week from a friend seems to sum up this way of thinking very nicely.

He's commenting about the relationship between faith and national security, saying, and I quote:

"National security interests in the U.S. (whether right or wrong) override your teachings of Jesus..."

What a remarkable sentence.

It sort of took my breath away, actually.

I'm pretty sure he was making an observation, not giving an opinion.

As an observation, it's right on the mark.

Clearly our national policies give a nod to God — and then we happily ignore everything Jesus commands us about loving enemies and laying down the sword...

We have thought for several hundred years that science will bring us to the promised land.

For nearly a hundred years, we worship at the altar of consumerism, hoping that by increasing material comforts, we can fill the hole that we carry inside.

Perhaps now, having lived with all of these things and seeing that they don't produce fulfillment but only more emptiness, perhaps now it's time to return to that place on the path where we left God behind.

The form is our lip service; the substance is how we actually behave, and the struggle between form and substance is as old as our faith.

The substance of our faith, as Isaiah reminds us this morning, is to offer food to the hungry, to satisfy the needs of the afflicted and to take up the daily challenges of living within the tension of being fallen creatures who, in the midst of our fallenness,

are at the very same time and in the very same breath, royalty in the kingdom of God, a kingdom that is even now invading the earth.

“Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us give thanks, by which we offer to God an acceptable worship with reverence and awe; for indeed our God is a consuming fire.” Heb. 12:29

+amen