

Getting Along

As we head into two Sundays where the focus is on getting along in the strange new world created by the kingdom of God, we began this week with that crazy story bouncing all over the media.

You know the story!

White Catholic high school boys from Kentucky wearing red Make America Great Again hats seemingly mock a Native American elder playing a drum, and surrounding them all are members of a group called the Black Hebrew Israelites.

And out of this fantastically diverse group of Americans, the news was all about whether the white kids were taunting the Native Americans and whether the Black Hebrews were insulting the white kids.

Ironically, it all takes place during the celebration of Martin Luther King, Jr Day and the third annual Women's March on Washington and the Indigenous people's march and the Right to Life march, all of which are presumably focused on issues of peace and justice between people and on the sanctity of all human life.

And while the initial story seemed to be a vivid example of white racism, it may be that what actually happened was much more complicated, but still a stellar example of our seeming inability to encounter one another not as stereotypes – but as fellow human beings.

Add to our social fracturing the fracturing of glaciers and Arctic ice as global warming accelerates, as Miami beach already experiences sea level rise in the routine flooding of its streets, not to mention the disappearance of some Pacific islands, all while politicians dither in forming a response.

And while it's tempting to just throw up our hands and wait for civilization to come crashing down, what this time in human history

really calls for is that we Christians figure out who we are and who we are called to become – and then get to it!

It starts with Paul's letter today.

Just look at what an encounter with Christ did to that guy!

He was an Israel First, Jew First, Men First, Pharisee First kind of guy who gets knocked on his backside by our Lord; and after that encounter sinks in, he suddenly grasps that the truth of our situation is that God is deeply and totally and unconditionally in love with each and every human being – no matter your culture, color, gender, nationality, language or creed.

The fantastic insight that Paul gets is that in God, all human beings are part of one another, that we are all of us as interconnected to one another as our nose is to our face, our fingers to our hands, our toes to our feet, and to pretend otherwise is the primary source of all of our pain and misery and hemorrhoids.

And he comes to see that in Jesus, we can and must rediscover our connectedness, our inseparability.

What Paul comes to see in Jesus is that the grand promises of the Older Testament have suddenly come true.

“In Jesus, the free gift of being “born again” means participating in a new Genesis, being part of a new creation, where the downward spiral of death and violence is not only rejected, but defeated, as we are all of us invited to be part of a movement heading up, a movement rooted in forgiveness and generosity, a movement that culminates in resurrection: the defeat of our harshest and most intractable enemy, the defeat of death.

To follow Jesus means taking part in a new Exodus, passing through the waters not of the Red Sea but of Baptism, it means eating a new

Passover meal, our Lord's body and blood, and being liberated from the powers that oppress and enslave.

To follow Jesus means we are welcome citizens into the "kingdom of God;" that peaceable kingdom imagined by the prophets and made real in Christ, learning what life in that kingdom is like, and then teaching others how to live there too.

So today, in his hometown, Jesus announces: "The time has come!"

The kingdom of God is at hand, it's within reach, it is near ... indeed, it's here, now!

If we are followers of Jesus, we can no longer say that the poor should be helped ... someday, that exploitation should end ... someday, that the planet must be healed ... someday, that we study war no more ... someday.

In Jesus, the prophet Isaiah's dream of good news for the poor, for prisoners and the blind, for the oppressed and those broken by debt — that dream is fulfilled today!

Today is the day to cancel debts, to forgive, to treat enemies as beloved neighbors, to share our bread with the hungry and our clothes with the naked, to invite outcasts for dinner, to confront oppressors not with nukes, but with kindness.

No wonder Jesus calls people to repent: if this bizarre kingdom is at hand, we need to change, now!" Brian McClaren, *A New Kind of Christianity*, (pp. 139-40) paraphrased, modified.

Okay, you sit there thinking, that's some nice pie in the sky for a Sunday morning, but no one's gonna do it!

It was GK Chesterton who said that "Christianity has not been tried and found wanting. Christianity has been wanted, but rarely tried."

As we make our way into the meat of the 21st century, perhaps it is finally time to try out our faith for real.

Imagine what might happen if we do.

For example, “what if our religious communities started organizing for the common good?

What if leaders of every faith tradition actually meet with one another — not for “inter-religious dialogue” — but to discover in one another friendship, companionship, solidarity?

What if our bishops show up in person when politicians start saber rattling, bringing the power of our faith to insist that those with power use it for good?

What if the example of religious big shots actually living out the truth of our faith inspires the regular folks, folks like you and I, to go a little crazy in forming friendships worldwide?

What if the haves come to see the have-nots as their sisters and brothers, fathers and mothers, sons and daughters?

What if organized religion organizes billions of people and trillions of dollars to reform our economic and political systems — systems the politicians are afraid or unwilling to tackle — like a planet ravaged by unsustainable human behavior and the growing gap between the rich few and the many poor?

Maybe people will say: “HEY! **That’s** what religion looks like!”

Impossible?

Perhaps.

And yet, with God, aren't all things possible?

Maybe that's what Jesus means when he says to us today:

"The kingdom of God is at hand."

It's not "in hand."

It's "at hand."

It's not out of reach, but it's not yet embraced either.

It's reachable, if only we have the faith to grab a hold of it, to unwrap it, to live it out in this broken world — with all the power that this kingdom offers." Id (pp. 250-52), paraphrased and modified.

For too many years we have spiritualized and sentimentalized the message of Jesus, trading in his challenge to make a better world for our versions of progress and prosperity, pushing off the dream of God's kingdom into the next life.

But any fair reading of the gospels says that this move is badly mistaken.

God made this world for reasons we cannot know, but for some reason we are here to participate in the grand scheme of God's creation.

Our lives matter.

Our bodies matter.

The goal of creation isn't a disembodied soul, it's the resurrected body!

What Jesus and Paul knew is that the incarnation is all about the spiritual becoming physical, so that both are inextricably linked.

That our destiny is resurrection is shown to us as Jesus cooks a beachside barbecue for his friends and eats the fish handed to him by those same friends, and this same Jesus moves through walls, then walks to Emmaus without being recognized, until he breaks the bread and there he is, until he's gone again.

God is going to do something with our bodies, and with this world, and with this life.

Which means that ultimately, every human being is far more than he or she may first appear to be.

Can we, as CS Lewis urges us, see among us a society of potential gods and goddesses, that even the dullest most uninteresting person you know may one day become that which, if you saw it now, your first impulse would be to bow down in worship?

All day long we are, in some degree, helping each other to this magnificent destination.

It is in the light of this overwhelming hope, it is with the awe proper to it, that we should conduct all of our dealings with one another, all friendships, all loves, all play, all politics.

There are no ordinary people.

You have never talked to a mere mortal.

Nations, cultures, arts, civilizations - these are mortal, and their life is fleeting.

But it is immortals with whom we joke, work, marry, snub, and exploit - everyone, an everlasting splendor." paraphrased and modified.

So let us this day recommit ourselves to a gospel life.

Let us be good news to the poor and a light to the blind.

If we live out our faith, trusting in God's Spirit to empower all we do, why, who knows but white MAGA hat wearing boys may make peace with drum banging natives, and Black Hebrews may embrace both the haole and the Indian - as we work for the day when the lion and lamb lay down together, when we shall make war no more.

+amen.