

Happiness or Holiness?

I think it's safe to say that many folks look at Sunday morning in Church as a time to find some peace, a place where conflict is to be avoided at all costs, a place where we leave our assorted baggage at the door.

Of course one of the most comforting things about church is that it's familiar.

We know each other.

Many have their own pew spot.

We know who and what to expect, and truth be told, we like it that way.

And yet the whole history of God's people is not one of peace but of conflict; whether it's Saul and his relatives giving the newly appointed King David the hairy eyeball or Paul's constant letters to the new Christian communities who are constantly at each other's throats, to even Jesus, home again today for his last visit to the small town that raised him, only to have those nearest and dearest to him ask just who the heck does he think he is?

Probably we wouldn't have half of Paul's letters if it wasn't for one crisis after another in those very first communities.

It's not surprising when you think about it.

The whole story of the gospels pits God's thinking against our thinking and you know how that ends: Jesus, spiked to a tree, because all he stands for is so upsetting to our way of life.

So maybe today's readings are asking us to look again at conflict, and maybe reconsider how we react to it: should we run from it — or might we actually learn to run **with** it?

And this Independence Day weekend is as good a time as any to think about these things because it asks: is our chief goal the pursuit of happiness or is it the pursuit of holiness?

They are two very different goals.

The pursuit of happiness tries to avoid conflict at all costs.

The pursuit of happiness is very good at dividing the world into good guys and bad guys; it draws bright lines, and creates sides, all with a goal of avoiding pain, avoiding loss, avoiding death.

Which explains our culture's intoxication with botox injections and Touch of Grey hair coloring and our obsession with the young and the beautiful.

It explains our unwillingness to open our borders to poor neighbors from Central America or those getting creamed by wars that we laid the groundwork for.

But it also explains why we church folk so often shy away from conflict, paper it over, or just excuse ourselves from the whole affair.

The pursuit of happiness is pretty much focused on me and my own; but the pursuit of holiness heads in a very different direction.

The pursuit of holiness remembers that it's an irritant, a pest, a bothersome thing that works its way into the oyster, and only after a great deal of irritation, does the beautiful pearl come forth.

The pursuit of holiness doesn't fear the bad stuff in life; the disappointments, the failures, the loss, because the pursuit of holiness sees in everything that comes our way the hand of God, shaping us into who and what we are destined to become.

The pursuit of holiness recognizes that....

A human being is something like a guest house—

Every morning someone new arrives.

Her name may be Joy or Depression, even a Meanness, coming as an unexpected visitor.

No matter who appears, welcome them all!

Even if they're a crowd of sorrows,
who violently sweep your house
and empty it of all you had,
yet still, treat each as an honored guest,
who knows, he may be clearing you out for a new delight.

-Rumi (modified)

It's what Paul is getting at this morning when he boasts not about his money or success or his holiness but about his abject weakness, the thorn in his side.

It is, he seems to be saying, not through our coolness, but through our cracks that God's light can shine through us into the world.

He seems to be saying, don't regret your cracks, your loss, your weakness, your sin, even your shame, it is through those cracks that God's light shines into the world.

The fact is:

"Climb as high as we may on the ladder of success, we progressively lose our grip.

We start out healthy and end up sick.

We start out in possession of our faculties and end up losing our marbles.

But above all, we start out alive and end up dead.

Dead poor sometimes, or dead drunk, or dead in our sins — but always and without fail, just plain dead." Capon, *The Foolishness of Preaching*, 16.

That's why the pursuit of happiness is a fool's errand; it tries so hard to avoid the unavoidable; whereas the pursuit of holiness meets the inevitable at every turn, and takes it in, losing herself in it — allowing God to find her.

Not long ago, we got an email from our Bishop that discusses in gruesome detail what it means to be a church that welcomes folks: and what it means to be a church that won't.

The article is entitled "The Autopsy of a Dying Church."

The gist of the article is this: churches that welcome all kinds of folks in; churches that look like the neighborhood they live in; churches that reach out and serve the needs of their neighbors; these are the churches that thrive.

And the churches that stay closed in on themselves; that are locked tight from Monday through Saturday, that are afraid to venture out: these are the churches sitting on death row.

It's just a matter of time until they're dead.

It's true that inviting strangers increases the odds of conflict, and yet, funny how the effort to avoid conflict so often results in death, while creating circumstances for conflict to arise so often brings life.

All of which brings us, I think, to the gift that Jesus gives to those who do what Jesus does:

it is his peace.

The peace of Jesus isn't the absence of conflict.

In fact, if you choose to follow Jesus, you may find more conflict in your life than ever before.

It doesn't mean that the nitty gritty of paying the bills and earning money for rent goes away; nor does it solve all problems with our spouses, our children or our friends.

As the Buddha remarked, "Before enlightenment, I chopped wood and carried water; after enlightenment, I chopped wood and carried water."

But what the peace of Christ does give is a way through all our fears, all of our needs, all of our anxieties.

It is a peace that assures you and you and me that no matter the trauma or anxiety or fear standing in front of us, we are always and forever held by the sure hand of the One who creates all things, the one who sustains all things, and the one who raises to life even the dead.

As usual, it is a poet who says it best when we come face to face with the living God.

God is not rescuer.

God is not safety.

God is not benevolent or critical Father-knows-best.

God is not puppet or puppeteer.

God is not who I thought/was taught he is.

God is love—

reckless, spendthrift, indiscriminate, passionate.

God is pursuer—

relentless, determined, tireless seeker of my soul.

God is challenger—

demanding movement, journey, change, growth.

God is creator—

delighted in me, her creation.

God is nurturer—

feeding her hungry children at the breast. ***

God knows me, penetrates and forms me, recognizes and claims me as she has from my mother's womb. -The Reverend Virginia Going

"Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong."

+amen