

Like Goes With Like (No More!)

It is wonderful to be back home here at St. E's after a very long time away.

So many of you did so much this summer to keep the ministry of this place alive and well. Thank you so very much.

I have missed each of you and am so grateful to God for this reunion.

I look forward to swapping stories of our various adventures from these last three months.

And so for this morning, allow me to begin with a story.

It seems there was a priest who, every Sunday at the conclusion of the Mass, bragged to his parishioners that he was going off to a distant town to feed the hungry and clothe the naked.

Each and every Sunday he went on and on about these plans, patting himself on the back for being such a good Christian.

But in fact, each and every Sunday he didn't go out and care for the poor and needy, no indeed, instead he made a beeline for a secluded golf course and played, all by himself, a round of 18.

This went on for YEARS!

Some angels spotted his nonsense and after trooping in to see God, demanded that God do something about this scallywag.

God says, "I know just the thing...."

The next Sunday rolls around, and the priest is up to his same old tricks.

Braggs about heading out to visit prisoners and feed orphans, but, like a car on autopilot, makes straight for the golf links.

He tees up at the first hole, and, miracle of miracles, hits a hole in one!

First in his life!

He goes to the second hole, smacks the ball, and, *OMG*, another hole in one!

He plays 18 holes like that, each and every time a hole in one; so that at the end of his round, he's done the impossible; something never even dreamed of by the likes of Ben Hogan or Tiger Woods: he's shot a perfect round of 18.

The angels, who are anxiously waiting to see how *God* handles this fellow, go storming back to *God*: "This is how you take care of that hypocrite??

You give him a perfect round of golf??

God only smiles before saying to the angels:

"Yes, he got the perfect round, ..., but who's he going to tell?"
Rollins, *Insurrection*, 121.

A friend from seminary days used to say (I'm pretty sure he was kidding):
"It's not so much about *being* good, you have to *look* good!"

Looking good is what got that shifty clergyman to lie to his flock and is what finally, with a little help, hoisted him on his own petard.

Looking good instead of *doing good* (remember, Jesus warns, nobody **IS** good except *God* alone); trying to make sense of which of these I'm opting for on any given day or moment; this is what takes us by the hand today as we explore the hidden nooks and crannies of today's three readings.

Looking good, you see, has everything to do with pleasing the people who are most like us.

After all, like goes with like.

The same people are *used to* the same things, often *desire* the same things, *often live* very similar lives.

Like tends to go with like.

This is a fact as old as humanity itself.

In traditional cultures, people refuse to travel far from their own village for fear of meeting up with someone **not** like them: because such meetings often result in a fight or an injury or even a death.

"Like" sticking with "like" isn't an easy thing to change, its been with us a very long time.

In my travels this summer, I got a hefty dose of "like" meeting up with "unlike."

Almost daily, I was the only white person among tens of thousands of black Kenyan people.

Children stared it seems half in wonder, half in terror and half in disbelief!

I know that's three halves, but that's how it was!

They pointed, yelling: "MIZUNGU!!" and sometimes entire classes of school children ran along side our van just to get a peek at the oddity in the green hat.

The collision of "like" and "unlike" caused quite a stir!

In Jesus' day, "like going with like" was not only important, it was the way things were done, period.

The properly religious person showed he was properly religious by associating only with his peers.

The poor, the unclean, the disabled, the blind, were NEVER invited to have a bite with the proper folks; NEVER.

Like, after all, goes with like.

And here comes Jesus, the very image of God.

The one whom, if you want to know how God acts, if you want to know what God values; if you want to know what God's hopes and dreams are for us all -- -belly up to the bar and have a drink with Jesus - he's the image of God among us.

And what's Jesus up to today?

You know the answer; he's making trouble with the way we've set things up.

Here comes Jesus saying and showing that "like goes with like - no more!"

I'll grant you, he starts off pretty slow, pretty easy.

He starts off with advice you might get from Dear Abby or Miss Manners.

"Don't make a fool of yourself by sticking your nose and your rump in the front row when you're invited out - the host may send you packing.

Go last, and maybe you'll get an invite up."

But this is Jesus, and I know and you know he's not quite done yet.

Just when he seems to be whittling around the edges, he takes that knife - and plunges it in deep, right into the heart of our prejudices, our comfort zones, our way of doing business.

Jesus says loudly and clearly today: "Like goes with like, no more!"

And so, as we just heard from the gospel this morning: "He said also to the one who had invited him, "When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, in case they may invite you in return, and you would be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous."

Now you know and I know that this is crazy talk.

It was then.

It is now.

Crazy, that is, to our ears; but, unfortunately for our settled ways, not crazy to God.

For with God, "like goes with like no more."

And yet, lest you think Jesus is making this stuff up as he goes along, or is simply trying to provoke the authorities, just take a gander at our first two readings today.

The whole history of God's call to Israel, the whole foundation of Israel being the chosen people of God, is to show the world that "like" and "unlike" can meet, that "like" and "unlike" can embrace, that "like" and "unlike" can become friends.

It is for failing to live up to that calling that Jeremiah, the teenage prophet, puts Israel in the defendant's seat - because Israel - like the church so often today - is refusing to be that sign of God's way to the rest of humanity.

God's way welcomes strangers, cares for widows and orphans, feeds the immigrant and forgives debt.

The rest of the world? Not so much.

So out of Jeremiah's mouth comes God's accusation that Israel is choosing to be just like everyone else, insisting that "like only goes with like," by forsaking *what and whom* they are called to become.

They have given up on the God who provides living water and instead worship fake gods whose rancid water leaks out of cracked jars: gods like Baal and Milie Cyrus and stone carvings and expensive cars and golden calves and

patriotism and Bank accounts and personal achievement and sterling reputations.

These are false idols - they were then - they are today....

The letter to the Hebrews carries the same pointed reminders.

In the Greek and Roman cultures of the day, things like empathy and compassion are nothing more than signs of contemptible weakness.

"Caring for the destitute or widow or needy, concern for strangers or prisoners or the sick are the concerns of weak-minded idiots," so say the movers and shakers of first century Rome and Athens.

The letter to the Hebrews takes up the great calls of Jeremiah and Jesus, insisting that "like goes with like, no more."

We don't need to stay in ancient times to wonder about the challenge of "like going with like, no more."

On Wednesday, young James Fitzpatrick and several of our youth joined thousands of people across the nation in ringing church bells exactly at 3 pm to remember the now famous March on Washington, and the speech by our modern day saint, Martin Luther King, Jr, when "like going with like, no more" finally came home to roost in what we hope might someday become the world's most inclusive democracy.

Not so long ago, black people were barred from sitting at the same lunch counter with white people or swimming in the same public pool with white people or drinking even from a fountain of cold water on a hot day, because the sign said, and the police enforced: "whites only."

While many of the more obvious barriers are now gone, there remains a good many structural and social barriers that still need rectifying; that continue to enforce "like going with like" despite God's thunderous voice commanding each and everyone of us to find ways to join hands and sing: "Like goes with like, No More!"

I must say, in looking out over this, our congregation of St. Elizabeth's is that the conviction that "like" and "unlike" can meet and kiss and embrace is now and has always been part of the deep waters that flow through this place.

From our earliest days of welcoming Chinese and Japanese and Koreans and Hawaiians and African Americans and Portuguese and Haoles; through today when we are all of those and more, and now as we welcome Tongan and Chuukese and Filipinos and so many more, we have struggled to become a community that strives to resemble the great banquet hall of the Kingdom of God - a feast that invites not just the high and the mighty, but also folks from every place and from no place, from every background and pedigree, all together, at one table - grateful children of the most high God.

I'm happy to be back with you.

May God bless you and keep you all the days of your lives.

+amen.