

Rivals

2 Samuel 11:1-15
Psalm 14
Ephesians 3:14-21
John 6:1-21

How do we see each other?

That's the question each of today's readings invites us to sit with.

And the fact is, the way we often see each other is as rivals; you have what I want, whether that be money or a house or a girl or boyfriend or power or a name.

It's in our genes.

How else to explain the kindergarten class that has 10 identical stuffed bunnies, only to find the children fighting over just one?

Being rivals over anything and everything is all around us.

I remember my first year in the seminary.

Some very pretty school teachers came by to talk to us about volunteering to teach at the nearby Catholic Middle School.

As I and one of my classmates did our best to flirt with this one lovely teacher..... bam!

My brother in the Lord -- socked me in the ribs!

I'm sure I made a smart aleck remark that deserved the punch.....because rivalry is everywhere.

The flip side of being rivals is to think about what brings us together.

When you think about it, what seems to bring us together most quickly is when we find ourselves faced with a common enemy.

Look at how united the country was after the September 11 attacks, if you weren't a Muslim.

The people of Chattanooga have said over and over how the recent shooting has brought people together like nothing since 9/11.

And many of you will recall, when this country entered World War II, there was amazing unity -- unless you were Japanese American, who found themselves in internment camps.

Unity against a common enemy is as old as mankind.

It's still rivalry, but instead of me against you, it's us against them.

Even the Bible is chock full of rivalry!

And there's no better example than today's story about King David.

You'd think you're watching an episode of that TV crime show, 48 Hours, what with King David arranging for the murder of his new girlfriend's husband.

Just like the TV show, there's plenty of intrigue before David does the dirty deed.

First, he gets her pregnant!

Then, he starts manipulating — make it look like the husband is the father — bringing him back from the battlefield, getting him drunk, sending him home to what David hopes will be some romance by the soldier on leave.

But Uriah is a stand up guy — no fun for him while his pals are at war!

So David moves to Plan B, arranging Uriah's murder — shamelessly putting the murder contract in Uriah's own hands, making Uriah the delivery man for his own death sentence.

Such are the things that rivalry does.....

Fast forward to today, we have the amusement provided by the Republican party's presidential front runner (you know? Mr. Trump?) who categorizes and labels and then dismisses whole swaths of humanity.

And this, it seems to me, is exactly what Jesus is trying to free us from, when he sees this great crowd — and encounters them not as rivals but as people, created and sustained by the Living God.

The disciples see only a hungry mob, rivals for food and for the money needed to buy that food.

Seeing with those eyes, they start to divide: 5000 by a few loaves and a couple fish equals not nearly enough.

But Jesus, seeing with the eyes of God, begins to multiply: Grace times the people's need equals more than enough!

Jesus comes to put an end to rivalry.

How?

By becoming himself the common enemy.

He becomes the common enemy not only of the religious and political big shots, but even of his own followers who run away, feeling afraid and betrayed.

And as he hangs from the cross, forgiving us all our hatreds and jealousies and rivalries, is that enough to pry open our tightly closed eyes, so that we might see that the source of all that exists is made up entirely of "purely gracious giving,..., with no desire to control or dominate — inviting us — God's creatures — to share in that same kind of life with one another?" J. Alison, *The Joy of Being Wrong*, 99.

When I was young, my parents used to ask the five of us kids who we thought was the favorite child.

Everyone named a different child as the favorite.

What Jesus reveals is that we are each one of us the beloved child of God, each one of us is God's favorite, and all God asks of us is to acknowledge that, and to live as if it were true — because it is true!

For if I am the apple of God's eye, what room is there for jealousy, what room is there for envy?

And if you are the apple of God's eye, what is there to control, what is there to dominate?

I know that's easier said than done.

Which is why our gospel lesson ends with Jesus walking on water — because for you and me to see each other not as rivals, but as the beloved sons and daughters of God, well, that seems as impossible as walking on water.

But here's the best part: we CAN walk on water!

Old Russian ladies walked on water the day German POWs came marching through their town.

"The pavement swarms with onlookers, cops and soldiers block the way.

The crowd of Russian women, stand, shoulders hunched from the burden of war.

Everyone of them has a loved one killed by German soldiers.

The column of those hated Germans appears.

The generals first, their arrogant demeanor meant to show their contempt for their Russian captors.

The cops and soldiers can barely hold back the furious crowds.

But then something happens.

The German grunts, the privates, the infantrymen, appear.

They hobble along, leaning on one another, the only sound is shuffling boots and thumping crutches.

An elderly woman pushes forward, touching a policeman's shoulder, saying: "Let me through."

He steps aside.

She approaches the column, and takes from inside her coat something wrapped in a colored handkerchief.

It is a crust of black bread.

She pushes it into the pocket of a soldier, so exhausted he can barely stand.

Suddenly, from every side, women start running toward the soldiers, pushing into their hands bread, cigarettes, whatever they have.

The soldiers are no longer enemies, they are people." Y. Yevtushenko, *A Precocious Biography*, 26 (paraphrased).

As Russian women walk on water.....

But you can walk on water not only in the drama of a world war — you can walk on water at an ordinary bus stop.

The mystic Thomas Merton remembers:

"In Louisville, Kentucky, at the corner of Fourth and Walnut, I was suddenly overwhelmed by the realization that I loved all these people, that they were mine and I was theirs, that we could not be alien to one another even though we were total strangers.

The truth is, the whole idea of a separate existence is an illusion....

This sense of liberation was such a joy to me that I almost laughed out loud!

It is a glorious destiny to be a member of the human race!

Yes, we are dedicated to many absurdities and we make many terrible mistakes: yet, with all that, God Himself glories in becoming human.

How can I tell people that they are all walking around shining like the sun....?!

Can anyone understand that there are no strangers.....?!

If we could only see each other as we really are, there would be no more war, no more hatred, no more cruelty, no more greed....." T. Merton, Conjectures, 140-2. (modified).

Or as Tom Long says: Marching before each human being is an angel, bellowing out:

"Make way for the image of God!

Make way for the image of God!"

How do we see each other?

Shall we be rivals — or shall we be glorious daughters and sons of the good and gracious God?

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