

The Bumper Sticker

The other day, my 15 year old looked at the bumper sticker on my car.

You know the one – that quote from St Francis that we've turned into our unofficial slogan here at St. E's:

"Preach the gospel at all times, when necessary use words."

She sees it, as she has a million times before, but this time she says:

"OH!

I get it!

It's better to **do** the gospel than to **talk** about it!"

My buddy Charlie Steffey poked his head in my office last week and said something along the same lines.

"You know," he said, it dawned on me last Sunday that Jesus didn't up and leave us after Easter – he's in the word we hear every week – he IS the Word and he's alive in the Word and that hit me like a lightning bolt!"

It is this kind of sight, and insight, from what used to be blindness and ignorance, that gets us to our gospel reading today.

You see, today's gospel is really the ending part of another story; the story of Jesus and the man born blind, which causes the disciples to ask:

"Who sinned, he or his parents?"

Leading Jesus to reply:

"Neither!

And by the way: Stop judging people!

God is not about cause and effect!

This man's condition exists to teach the whole world something about God."

You know the story.....

Jesus makes mud out of dirt and spit, (just like God, at the very beginning, takes some earth and forms the first human being), and patting the mud on the man's eyes, gives him new eyes: because to be in the presence of Jesus is to be in the presence of God – and to be in the presence of God is to have a front row seat to the miracle of creation.

Which causes the religious busybodies, who are so in love with rules and simple answers, to have a conniption when the God of freedom and life shows up.

The religious stormtroopers go nuts when they come face to face with this now formerly blind man and throw him out of their club, out of the Temple.

They insist that Jesus is the worst kind of muckraking, rule-breaking, troublemaker they've ever encountered.

That's what's happening just before this morning's gospel lesson, and so the crowd Jesus is talking to is this very group of outraged pious folks who are beside themselves that Jesus has the gall to allow a blind man to see.

And that's when Jesus starts talking about sheep and gates and voices.

At first blush, it's all pretty familiar territory, just like that bumpersticker, just like thinking of Jesus as the word of God.

After all, who hasn't seen a picture of Jesus as the good shepherd and who hasn't sat through endless homilies about the word of God?

And yet, just like the bumper sticker, just like Jesus as the Word, maybe there's more going on than meets the eye.

In the other three gospels, Jesus **tells** parables.....the kingdom of God is like yeast, or a pearl buried in a vacant lot; or a farmer throwing seeds everywhere.....

Stories that may seem obvious on the surface, but poke a little deeper and you're neck deep in a riddle, and the more you poke the deeper you go –

So while in the first three gospels, Jesus **tells** parables; in John's gospel, Jesus **is** the parable, as in: "I am the **bread of life**; I am **the living water**; I am **the good shepherd**; I am **the gate**."

Is it any wonder that "they don't understand what he's saying to them?"

As you know, these "I am" sayings of Jesus appear only in the gospel of John.

"I am" is what God tells Moses when Moses demands to know the name of the one speaking from the burning bush.

So when Jesus says "I am" – the bread, the living water, the good shepherd, and the very gate of God; Jesus is saying about himself what Paul says about him: that Jesus and God are one and the same, that when we see Jesus at work, we see God at work, and that because God is the sustainer of all life, the provider of all nourishment, the source of all light and life and love and gentleness and healing and comfort and joy, well then, God, in Jesus, is here among us to bring to completion not just the chosen few, not just the holy, but the whole of creation, which happily includes everyone.

As in: "When I am lifted up, I will draw all things to myself"

As in: "For God so loved the world, that he sent his only Son not to condemn the world but to save it."

And God does this wonderful thing by becoming that which is the heart of our problem:

"God made him who knew no sin to become sin ... so that we might become the righteousness of God in him." 2 Cor 5:21.

Jesus takes back from us what our first father and mother stole from the garden: the power to tell good from evil, our original sin, and Jesus replaces this power with the power of faith in Jesus.

By becoming sin for us, Jesus takes back the very thing that causes our separation from God: our insistence on saying what is right and who is wrong, and replacing that with faith in Jesus.

Determining what is good and who is evil is our undoing because in our insistence on defining these things, we fail to recognize our own brokenness, our own blindness, our own limited, stunted, miniaturized vision of the who and what and wherefore of God: which takes us to the very root of sin as St. John understands it: sin is our failure to see in Jesus the face and character and heart of the Living God.

The opposite of sin is NOT following the rules.

The opposite of sin is faith in Jesus.

Meaning not that we merely admire Jesus, not that we merely believe in Jesus up here, but that we actually follow this preacher from Galilee – who welcomes the outcast, who remakes rules so the rules serve humanity, not humanity the rules, who loves a good party, who is determined to save not just the wonderful, but the oddball, the queer, the outcast, and who does so, not with a magic wand, but by loving every single one of us to death, to his death, a death on the cross.

It's scandalous really, when you think about it; how the way to God isn't through moral perfection or our own efforts, but by the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus – that the way to God is purely a gift from God, solely by the grace of God.

Which is a crushing blow for an egotist like me, who wants so badly to deserve, to earn, to be entitled to.....

And this scandal has consequences.

It means saying "yes" to this God who is even now hard at work, bringing creation to completion by mixing spit and mud, smearing it on my blind spots, on your hurts, on our fears.

It means saying "yes" even when that "yes" puts us in danger.

Even when that "yes" makes us vulnerable to evil and hate and harm.

It means changing our image of God trading in the fierce or indifferent old man in the sky for the true God who is perhaps more like a wildly pregnant woman in the midst of agonizing but hopeful labor, a labor that is even now giving birth to you and me as new human beings..... and in some baffling but magnificent way, begging all of us to join in the labor to start mixing mud and spit and to proclaim the gospel, to speak the Word, sometimes with our mouths, but even more - with our lives.

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