

Turning Left

I must confess to you that I have a terrible sense of direction.

If I'm getting off an elevator and my instinct says turn right, the place I'm looking for is always to the left.

Same goes with driving!

If there's a long way to get somewhere, I'll find it.

I share this with you not so that my wife can knowingly nod in agreement, but because of something that strikes me in today's gospel lesson....something about how so many of us may be making a wrong turn when it comes to our relationship with God.

Maybe it's not as common among my cradle Episcopalian friends, but for a lot of us who come from a different religious tradition, it's as common as white rice.

Here's how one gal says it, and I wonder if some of you can relate:

"You can take the woman out of church but you can't take church out of the woman.

Or so I used to think as my mother carried out dramas of temptation, sin, and redemption by means of ice cream and broccoli.

She had left behind the ceremonies and celebrations, but not the anxiety that all mistakes are unforgivable.

We believe in perfection, which ruins everything, because the perfect is not only the enemy of the good, it is also the enemy of the realistic, the possible, and the fun." R. Solnit, *The New Yorker*, 12/22&29/14, 76. (paraphrased).

Meaning, I think, that many of us believe that our task in life is to walk the straight and narrow, to do good, to follow the rules, all so we can earn the love of God.

In other words, many of us spend a lifetime beating ourselves up for our inevitable failures, mistakes, yes, sins, thinking that unless we are perfect, God will never love us.

And that's what hit me between the eyes with today's gospel lesson, the baptism of our Lord, which is followed by the Spirit pushing Jesus into the desert to face his demons.

That's the lesson.

You know it as well as I do.

And what I see today, what I've missed the 999 times I've read this lesson before, what is right before my eyes, is this:

That the love of God doesn't come AFTER we face our demons, it doesn't come as a RESULT of our efforts to please God: the love of God comes FIRST; before we confront our demons, before we embark on a life of trying to be faithful.

That's the astounding news we hear when Jesus steps into the muddy river, submits to John's baptism, and sees the heavens torn apart with the Holy Spirit descending like a dove:

"This is my son, the beloved, with whom I am well pleased."

The love is there first, at the beginning, freely given, not earned.

Now, you may be thinking to yourself, that's all fine and dandy for Jesus, but I'm not Jesus.

What makes you think God's love is there at the beginning for ME?

I will tell you.

As with Jesus, so with us.

That's why Paul tells us over and over:

"We were ... buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life." Rom 6:4.

And again:

"Now if we are children, then we are heirs--heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory." Rom. 8:17

In other words, we stand on the shoulders of Jesus; and the love given to him is given to us as well, not as something to be sought after or earned, but as the free gift of a loving God who never lets us go.

And it is from that place, snuggled up in the love of God, that we, like Jesus, can then go off to confront our demons.

The demons Jesus faces are the demons of power, fame and wealth.

Your demons might be an abusive childhood or alcohol or a feeling of self-hate or an intolerance of people who are different.

We all have our demons; yet we are called to confront them as part of our journey to spiritual maturity NOT to GET TO the place of God's love; but we confront them in the firm

assurance that God is on our side, deeply in love with you and you and me, and from that place we can find the courage to face and eventually, perhaps, even embrace, even forgive, the demons in our lives.

We often say that the heart of Christianity is love, and in a sense it is.

But we modern people have so gussied up that word, so sentimentalized it with Valentine's Day cards and mushy romantic doo wops that it really has lost the meaning intended by the life, death and resurrection of Jesus.

Maybe a better word for the heart of Christianity is not love, but reconciliation.

Making broken things whole.

Doing the hard work of digging deep to see my role in conflicts.

Examining my past hurts; hurts received and hurts inflicted; and letting a trusted other in on the whole process.

This is the road to the spiritual life.

This is what it means to be Christian.

It's why my friends who say they are spiritual but not religious are, I think, missing the point; because the spiritual life, to really be lived out, requires community.

We need each other to bounce off of, to comfort, to challenge and sometimes even to confront.

Making broken things whole is not easy work, and it is not something I can do by myself.

We need the community, otherwise, I just keep turning right out of the elevator when the true destination is over there, to the left!

Things got broken in the beginning when our parents in the garden decided to embrace the one thing never intended for us to embrace: the knowledge of good and evil.

We weren't then and we are not now equipped to know the difference between good and evil.

The fact is, arguments over who is right and what is wrong lie at the heart of every war between nations, families and spouses.

And if we ever needed any proof that we are not and never have been equipped to know right from wrong, especially as a church, just consider that the best religious minds and the most sophisticated political minds agreed to kill the Son of God....if we can't get that one

right, how can we expect to get it right in deciding whether cousin Blanch should have left her third husband or whether democracy is the cure for what ails some middle eastern country?

So this morning, we come to the riverbank with Jesus, and step into the Jordan.

And there, as we feel the mud squish between our toes, as we feel the water pouring over our heads, may we too be open to the God who loves us from the start, who takes us by the hand to face our own demons, and who never, ever, not in life and not in death, leaves us alone.

"For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing, will be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord." Rom. 8:38-39

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