

Naked and Unafraid

It was buried somewhere around paragraph 23 in the New York Times, that quote from the Archbishop of Sri Lanka, after the horrendous Easter bombing that killed so many innocents.

He said that he hoped that the people who caused such tragedy be "captured quickly and punished severely, like the animals they are."

Which, I must say, took me back a bit, since revenge and retribution, especially in this Easter season, are two of the most anti-Christian sentiments one can have.

So it was with some chagrin that I saw we have this reading today, our third Sunday of the Easter season.

Because just like that Sri Lankan archbishop, the very first leader of our church also seemed to keep getting it wrong.

Peter, our dear, oh so human Peter, thank God for him and his thick skull!

He gives space for me and my thick skull when my ways bump up against God's ways, as they do on a daily basis.

Peter, slow, thick headed Peter, who announces Jesus as Messiah and then gets lambasted when he rejects what it means to be Messiah!

Peter, who yanks his feet away from Jesus, as Jesus is about to show him what leadership means: "You will never wash MY feet!"

Peter, who betrays his friend over the warming coals of a charcoal fire, saying "I am not" three times when asked if he's with Jesus — this Jesus who repeatedly assures us "I am" ... bread, life, the way.

Peter, who today, shortly after our Lord's crucifixion, within hours of hearing he is risen, there is Peter, going back to his old job at Walmart, or is it fishing?

Peter, always missing the cues, the signs and signals that God's ways aren't our ways.

Much like the church itself, which so regularly exchanges God's radical all embracing love of all people and all creation for our home grown rules and regulations, as we worship customs and culture rather than the God who loves everyone.

Yet God is desperate to help us learn her ways.

So let's spend a few minutes with Peter today at that beach side barbecue, and ask, what does he have to say to us today?

At first it seems this encounter between Peter and Jesus is about bringing Peter back into God's good graces.

After all, he denied his friend three times, betraying him out of fear — even when the accuser was a young girl.

So at one level, this is a story of welcoming Peter back.

Three denials healed by answering three questions: "Do you love me?"

"You know I do!"

At the first level, we have something like an apology and an acceptance.

“I’m sorry.”

“You’re forgiven.”

A relationship can once again begin.

But Jesus never stays at the first level.

He’s always moving deeper.

And what might be deeper here, as Jesus sits by the fire, serving as the short order cook, is that he’s not just giving Peter a chance to make amends for his fear and denials, but he’s inviting Peter to look clear-eyed at himself — Peter who bragged about being jailed and killed for his friend — Peter who is quick to draw the sword, Peter is asked by Jesus to see himself as he really is.

That the bravado masks insecurity.

That the sword covers fear.

That his willingness to save his own skin at the expense of his friendship, shows him to be broken, weak and afraid.

It’s not a pretty sight.

Yet it’s one we most of us share.

And all too often, rather than facing these truths about ourselves, we do what Peter does, run and hide and then blame others, become angry with God – and with those to whom we are nearest and dearest.

But if we will face these shadows, these darker aspects of who we are, if we can muster the courage to sit with it all, sitting in the midst of our shame; rather than consuming us, it somehow invites the gentle mercy of God – who somehow acts to heal us, to embrace us, not in spite of our darkness, but because of it.

As Jesus experiences, as Peter will experience when he too is taken to places he'd rather not go, the path of transformation is a dance whose partners are love and suffering.

When we are new to this path, we often experience love and suffering as complete opposites, two things with nothing in common.

But if we continue this walk, we eventually come to see that love and suffering are completely intertwined, indeed they are inseparable.

Jesus invites us to embrace suffering with love, even to welcome it, because suffering, lived out in love, is the only way to become a truly human being, which is another way of saying, to become divine.

Which might not sound like very good news, until we realize that God always meets us where we are, in the midst of all of our foibles and weaknesses and lack of faith and fear.

Meeting us where we are is what's really going on in this question and answer session between Jesus and Peter.

Twice he asks Peter "Do you love me?", but the English is misleading.

Like the Eskimos who have a hundred words for “ice”, the Greeks have many words for love.

What Jesus says to Peter in the Greek is: “Do you ‘agape’ me?”

Do you love as God loves, ‘agape?’

Do you love fully and freely and unconditionally?

And twice Peter responds, “I ‘philio’ you” — I love you as a man, with all of its limits and fears and conditions.

So the third time when Jesus questions him, Jesus meets Peter where he is, as Jesus asks him: “Do you philio me?”

“Yes Lord,” is Peter’s reply.

Trusting that God meets us where we are frees us to face the truth about ourselves — yes the good, but also the bad and the ugly.

And in the facing, to be content that for today, it is enough.

That the God who humbles himself to the point of becoming a short order cook on a sandy beach, the God who stoops to wash our feet, the God who surrenders everything to live among us, to even die for us, this God says to each and every one of us,

“You are accepted.

You are accepted by that which is greater than you, the name of which you do not know.

Do not ask for the name now; perhaps you will find it later.

Do not try to do anything now; perhaps later you will do much.

Do not seek for anything; do not intend anything.

Simply accept the fact that you are accepted." Paul Tillich.

Because if the one who holds all things together becomes not only one of us, but comes as one of the lowest of us, what does that say to our pretensions for power, for wealth, for fame?

What does that say to our persistent need to ignore the destitute, the widow and the orphan?

"To know the incarnate God is to see ourselves as we really are: trapped in sin and encased in the lonely castles built of our own pride.

It means confessing our own complicity in the hells we find ourselves in and have made on earth." Willimon?

And more than this, it means spending ourselves on behalf of the poor, on those who exist at the margins of society, on those at the end of their ropes.

It means recognizing that as we stand before God, we are all takers, none are makers, and knowing this, perhaps our hearts can soften and our eyes can open to those around us who are in need.

"Is this not what it means to know me,' says the Lord, 'to defend the cause of the poor and the needy?'" (Jer. 22:16).

Truth be told, the incarnation, God making his home among us, from the manger to the cross to this morning's charcoal fire cooking fish and warming up some bread, is something we do not ask for, something we even reject out of hand; because it defies our logic and exposes our self-righteousness and bankruptcy.

It reveals how obsessed we are with ourselves.

And facing this image of ourselves, as Jesus leads Peter to do this morning, well, God coming among us can, at first blush, seem like very bad news indeed.

Which is why Peter gets dressed before swimming to shore, for just like Adam in that garden so long ago, he is ashamed to be naked before God.

But then God meets us, precisely where we are.

God meets us precisely in the empty, pain-filled, godforsaken places of our lives.

God meets us in our nakedness, precisely because God's aim is to defeat every godforsaken part of our lives, not through coercion or punishment, but through love, through compassion, asking only in return that we extend the same to one another.

Whoever and wherever we are, no matter what hell we find ourselves in, Jesus descends to us and invites us to descend with him.

And lo and behold, what we come to discover is that in our depths, the divine heights are revealed.

+amen