

Sermons at Christ Church

Love, Re-Imagined

Pentecost X

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Let my heart be the vessel of God's Love. Let my thoughts be the blossom of God's Love. Let my words be the expression of God's Love. Let my actions be the fulfillment of God's Love. Amen.

Jesus' pronouncement about family divisions in the gospel reminds me of numerous stories that I have heard over many years from parents about their grown-up children, who having grown in church and served in many capacities no longer participate in the life of the Church. Parents share these sentiments out of the deepest love for their children and the desire to see them hold on to the faith that nurtured them. If for nothing at all, these parents believe, that their personal life stories and testimonies offer credible evidence of the extent to which they have been blessed by faith. Within the depth of love for their children is also a hint of frustration over their inability to present an alternative narrative to convince these grown-up children to re-embrace their faith and to live into its promises. Parents thought they planted a vineyard with grapes, but now have wild grapes. There's a story of a frustrated grandmother who actually baptized her grandchild-without the knowledge of the parents who wouldn't bring the child for baptism.

Whether your grandchild is brought for baptism or not, there is a part of the story that acknowledges the inherent problem with faith. What is it about faith that I do not see but some way, somehow, my children have figured it out, and as a result, are reticent about their involvement with it? To be honest, they have as much questions as those who gather weekly to worship. The problem is we feel that by affirming their questions, we betray our tribe and the text. Quite apart from the feeling of being ill-equipped to tolerate legitimate questions, our inability to affirm their questions distort our conversations, creates awkwardness about certain topics and leaves all of us vulnerable, wounded and empty.

As parents and grandparents, we know that the world has been changing rapidly, and our concern for our children and grandchildren takes prominence over many things. We want them to embrace the cloud of witness who shaped our successful and fulfilling lives. But we are often left to

wonder, would those we love chase after the other gods Isaiah railed about? Or, how do we help them in their discernment?

We know that the character of the gods we chase leads to a dead-end. Our own lives attest to that. We know that the community we seek to integrate ourselves, the love we seek to embody and the compassion that fills our lives and hearts, compels us to see ourselves, not apart from others, but it encourages us to look past the otherness of others in order to look to the identity we all share. That which is life-giving is the joy of knowing that our words and actions find their meaning and value in the light of the Word we call God.

The divisions within households that Jesus inaugurates stems from whether you believe that God has given you a smaller world than a bigger world. You live in a smaller world if your faith feels shackled to limits driven by divisions. But one with a liberated faith believes in a bigger world which understands what it means to be human- and that is to be pregnant with possibilities, to accept religion as a work of the imagination, a work of art that invites us into a relationship or covenant in a community that is unafraid of difference. Our human divisions only become profound leading to conflicts, when we fail to recognize religion as a quest for meaning and for a community within which we find new life and energy that heals rather than wound, loves rather than hate, and embraces difference rather than seeking to eradicate it. When your world is smaller than what God has given you, you weaponize difference.

To many of these children who are now adults, the life-giving faith for which the cloud of witnesses testify with their lives doesn't square with some of the problems that have come to associate with faith. Part of their resistance stems from this simple question, what is the relevance of faith in the context of their world, and of today's world? More critically, how does the life-giving faith account for all the atrocities that has been committed in its name? In the absence of a credible alternative narrative, many have come to believe in the myth that the human nature is perfectible by its own efforts and that the quest for truth is over-but it is not. It is therefore up to the new cloud of witnesses to point out that there is always more to see and learn about God.

The Letter to the Hebrews shares the likes of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David and Samuel, in order to recount their deeds of faithfulness in a community where some had abandoned

the life-giving community to chase other gods. By their life of faithfulness, they carved a way out of the dead-end and called the people of Israel back to faithfulness with Yahweh.

Think about it, religious stories are about the relationship or covenant with God and with one another. The Israelites were able to pass through the Red Sea because of their relationship with God.

Rahab was able to save herself and her family because of the relationship she developed with the spies at Jericho. The hollering of Isaiah-the vineyard that I planted, which has now given me wild grapes instead of grapes, speaks about the failure of Israel to honor God's relationship with them. Jesus' presence was about a God who sought community and relationship with the people that He created for Himself. The idea of relationship and covenant are essential to our own individual and communal stories. Martin Buber wrote "I have no teaching, but carry on a conversation... . In the beginning was the relation." Buber takes us back to the Garden of Eden, establishes Adam as nature's first priest, and points out that Adam existed only in relation to God. And so does you and me. We cannot exist without God and each other. The point then is, before we can talk about God, we need to be able to trust each other. We must be willing to create circles of mutual blessing-for the children of Lake Elkhorn Middle School and ourselves, circles in which people are capable of sacrifice and enchantment; for we know that humanism without the promise of grace and forgiveness is pure fantasy, and to be human in covenant with others is about finding yourself in order to give yourself away.

For some families, in order to maintain some amount of civility, they agree to disagree on these and many other questions related to faith. The point of family cohesion overrides any polarization that comes with discussing faith or even politics. For the sake of family unity we fail to sing God's goodness.

Maya Angelou wrote that "If you have a song to sing, who are you not to open your mouth and sing to the world?" Go ahead and sing. We may shed silent tears over children who have not embraced faith as much as we would want them to, or tolerated the unknown for the sake of their belief in certainty. But God has given us a much bigger world to which we can sing, God has made us a part of the cloud of witnesses, we can bear testimony to God's gracious goodness. And I

encourage you to do so with the deep assurance that it is God who is in charge of the mending, it is God who manages the process of mending. You bear the responsibility of testimony, and God bears the responsibility of transformation.

Humans are both tribal and scribal. We are tribal because we are married to our tribes. We feel comfortable among our tribesmen and women. We are also scribal because we are married to texts. We are comfortable among people who believe in the same text. We do not easily accept people into our tribes nor do we like to deviate from our texts because we like to live in a smaller world than the bigger world which God has given to us.

So, if the Letter to the Hebrews offers any guidance at all, if the same Jesus who brings division and not peace is the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, then maybe, the division is about breaking up our tribal and scribal allegiances-the small world in which we box ourselves, just so we can begin to see the bigger world into which God invites us.

The question this summer morning is, what stories are we telling about ourselves? What has been our testimony to the world, our children and grandchildren? Maybe, the fire that Jesus brings is one that will rekindle us to look at faith anew, to reinvent faith, if you will. Pope Francis refers to this new way as an era of change-where we look at faith as a state of being grasped by an ultimate concern-God. If God so grasps us, then we can begin to look at faith as being that one thing which invites us into a community where being human would mean finding yourself in order to give that same self away. Amen.