

Back to Basics

A long time ago, a Chinese nobleman, by the name of Kong Qiu, lost his fortune.

And with that loss, he had time to ponder the ways of the world and the ways in which human beings can achieve joy, or sink into despair.

Kong Qiu took on some followers, who called him Kong zi, or Master Kong, and when his teachings came to the west, we called him Confucius.

The wisdom he discovered is that getting out from under ourselves, stepping outside of our own egos, seeing the world, not just occasionally, but consistently, through the eyes of the other guy or gal, that this way of life opens a doorway, a gateway, into a new world.

Confucius is the first person we know of who coined the golden rule: do to others as you'd have them do to you.

It's a manner of life that is directed outwards, toward others.

It's rooted in empathy and compassion and a sense of mercy for the foibles and failures that we all of us have.

The early Hindus embarked on a similar path, using yoga as a way to leave the ego behind.

They came to see the world not as a bunch of self interested individuals, but as a woven fabric, with everything and everyone connected, inseparable, united.

The Buddha too saw and embraced these truths:

"Silence the angry man with love.

Silence the ill-natured man with kindness.

Silence the miser with generosity.

Silence the liar with truth."

The Jewish people began their faith with laws that are intended specifically to create a just and equitable society, one that is especially attentive to the needs of the least, the lost and the left behind.

And that mandate of a Jubilee Year that we spoke of last week, the forgiveness of all debt, which was to occur every 50 years, was intended to give everyone a shot at a decent life, so that debt doesn't doom people for generations.

Yet what happens with every faith tradition is that these simple truths: to love one another, to forgive one another, to see the world through each others eyes, demand too much from us, or so it seems.

Because there's a part in me that likes getting wrapped up in my ego.

I like my grudges and enjoy my feelings of anger and superiority.

The invitation to let go of control seems a terrifying thing, and so I hold on tight.

And far too often our faith traditions bend to accommodate these false, indeed, dangerous, ways of living.

Suddenly, we decide that those of other faiths just don't measure up.

Or we resort to tribalism and nationalism and racism and all the other isms that keep us locked in our egos.

Locked in fear.

Locked, ultimately, in death.

And I think this is what Jesus is trying to get us to see in today's Gospel lesson.

He's taking us back to the basics.

The basics that every faith tradition shares at its roots.

That connection, with each other, with this good earth, with God, is the very heart of faith, whether you're a Christian, a Buddhist, a Jew or a Hindu.

It's said that in the other three gospels, Jesus tells parables; but in John's gospel, Jesus IS the parable.

We get that today as Jesus tells the uncomprehending Pharisees that he is not only the shepherd, but he is also the gate through which shepherd and sheep go in and come out.

They shake their heads, not having a clue what he's talking about.

In other places in John's gospel, Jesus is the bread of life.

The living water.

The Way, the Truth and the Life.

In Jesus, we are connected not only with the things necessary to sustain life, like bread and water, but we are connected to one another, and to God, as Jesus invites us to open our eyes to truth.

To relish in the magnificent freedom that comes when we finally allow ourselves to accept that all of creation is the free — and pointless — overflowing of love and compassion of the God who is madly in love with all of it, and with all of us.

Pointless that is, unless love itself is the point.

Thomas Merton, the monk and prophet of peace, encountered this reality in stunning fashion one day, while standing at, of all places, a Kentucky bus stop.

“In Louisville, at the corner of Fourth and Walnut, in the center of the shopping district, where I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I loved all those people.

That they were mine and I theirs.

That we could not be alien to one another even though we were total strangers.

It was like waking from a dream of separateness, of spurious self-isolation.

This was such a relief and such a joy to me that I almost laughed out loud.

I saw with perfect clarity the immense joy of being human.

A member of a race in which God Himself becomes incarnate.

How could the sorrows and stupidities of the human condition overwhelm me, now that I realize what we all are?

If only everybody could realize this!

It cannot be explained.

There is no way of telling people that they are all walking around — shining like the sun!

If only we could see each other that way all the time.

There would be no more war.

No more hatred.

No more cruelty.

No more greed.

The only problem is – we would all fall down and worship each other.” T. Merton, *Conjectures*, 156. (modified).

This is what Jesus is trying to get across to the Pharisees this morning.

That in Jesus, God becomes a human being.

And then proceeds to live out, to validate, to bless, the great truth that all faith traditions glimpse: that stepping out of oneself, out of ones ego, and pouring oneself out in self giving love, this is the gateway to real life.

In Jesus, God says “yes” to the truth behind every faith tradition, and does so by walking the path of self giving love – even to death, to death on the cross.

The thieves and robbers he’s talking about are all the ways we try to bend our faith to look more like us, rather than bending ourselves to look more like our faith.

The thieves and robbers are those who try to put God’s stamp of approval on greed or war or economic systems that reward the few at the expense of the many.

And Jesus says: “forget it!”

Listen and see that the way to life follows only one path.

Confucius saw it.

So did Buddha.

So do all faith traditions in their essence.

Get out of yourself.

Let go of controlling people, places and things.

When we do, a whole new world opens before our eyes, just like Merton experienced at that bus stop.

It's a world that surrounds us all the time, but we are blind to it if we stay wrapped up in ourselves.

It's the world as God created it to be — a world in which we are all of us One, with each other, and yes, with God.

Today, we are confronted with the starkest of choices.

As a pandemic races around the world, shall it be the forces of division and blame that prevail?

Or shall the gentle breezes of compassion, solidarity and hope seize the day?

Now more than ever we are called to renew our love of the gentle Messiah whose voice we know; and to trust the path he invites us to walk.

A path shared by all of the great faiths of this world.

Love one another!

Forgive one another!

Let go!

And remember this.

Marching fearlessly in front of each and every human person, is an angel, telling the world who you are:

“Make way for the image of God!

Make way for the image of God!”

May you have the eyes to see yourself for who you truly are.

And may you have the wisdom to live it.

+amen