

Life

What a week this has been!

The Supreme Court is on the verge of announcing that State governments, rather than individual women, get to choose how to handle pregnancy, upending nearly 50 years of settled law.

The war in Ukraine has no end in sight, as nuclear saber rattling continues at an alarming pace.

And as several primaries this week in several states reveal, political factionalism seems to be getting worse, not better.

So what does our faith have to say to this life that so often feels like we are sliding down a razor blade?

Well, we begin with a miracle story.

Tabatha, aka, Dorca, an early church leader, as women often were in those early days (imagine that!), has died.

And recalling what they learned as they followed Jesus around not so long ago; recalling Jairus' daughter whom Jesus raises by whispering to her "talithacum, little girl, get up;" then the widow's son at Nain who is on the funeral pyre as Jesus touches him and he sits up; not to mention the raising of Lazarus who'd been three days dead – Peter is summoned to do the same.

Because what the early church learned is that where God is, there is only life, not death.

So Peter comes, and like Jesus, without fanfare, calls this faithful woman back to the land of the living.

A story our 21st century ears have a lot of trouble with.

The dead stay dead, we say.

A nice story, we say, but surely not actually true.

But perhaps our skepticism says more about us than about Jesus.

Or about Peter.

Or about the early church.

It's something like the time St Francis was being shown around the newly built St Peter's Cathedral, with all of its lavish art, marble columns and gold leaf.

The Pope leading the tour says to Francis (with obvious pleasure):

"We can no longer say with St Peter 'I have no silver or gold to give you...', recalling what Peter said to the paralyzed man begging at the gate.

To which Francis replies, "nor can you say to that same man: 'take up your mat and walk...'", which is also what Peter said - and the paralyzed man obeyed!

We have too often exchanged enchantment and faith for cold hard cash.

We have too often exchanged hope for cynicism.

Generosity for greed.

And love for lust.

Truth be told, we live in a society that is enthralled with death.

From the military industrial complex being our primary economic engine, to the state of war we've been in almost non-stop since the end of WWII, to the rancid financial system that now allows 8 people to hold as much wealth as half the world's population. Philanthropy News Digest, 1/18/2017.

And yet, none of these things shall have the last word.

That's the promise we hear today from the Book of Revelation.

It's God's enduring pledge that the day will come when hunger and thirst, tears and despair, shall finally be defeated.

How do we get there?

That's where John's gospel comes in, with that astonishing last sentence:

"The Father and I are One."

Which comes after Jesus spends a really long time, in the chapter leading up to today's lesson, explaining to the Pharisees that:

"I am the good shepherd."

"I am the gate."

"I am," as every observant Jew knows, is the name God tells to Moses when Moses asks God for a name.

And yet, after all these “I am” assertions, here we are in today’s reading, with those same folks demanding of Jesus:

“Tell us who you are!”

So he does, again.

And they are furious.

What are the consequences, what are the challenges laid out for them, for us, when we are faced with such an outlandish claim?

That this itinerant preacher from nowhere — is One with God?

I read an interesting blurb this past week from one of our evangelical church friends who had this to say:

“The second thing Jesus prays for all believers to have ... is UNITY.

But the unity Jesus is talking about here is not a unity among people, it is the unity of the relationship Jesus had with His Father.

That we would have a depth of unity with God our Father like Jesus had with the Father.

And then Jesus goes on to say that if we have this same depth of unity with the Father – that the world will know about our God, because of that unity.” River of Life.

Except, that’s not what Jesus says.

The unity that Jesus prays for is always focused on the unity between all people.

John's gospel practically shouts this fundamental truth from the rooftops!

"That **all of them may be one**, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me." John 17:21

"I have given them the glory that you gave me, that **they may be one** as we are one." John 17:22

"Holy Father, protect them by the power of your name, the name you gave me, so that **they may be one** as we are one." John 17:11(b)

This isn't theological hairsplitting.

It's what lies at the heart of the present difficulty in much of what passes for Christianity in America today.

A "Me and You, God" relationship, that excludes how we relate to each other, that even allows professed Christians to demonize and ostracize others with the supposed blessing of God, is not our faith.

Here's why.

It's very easy to pretend that we are unified with God, if we don't have to measure that relationship against the hard standard of how we treat each other.

That hard standard which Dorothy Day summarized with:

"I only love God as much as I love the person I love the least."

Without that hard standard, we are simply back to creating God in our own image.

And when we do that, "unity" is a cover for worshipping my own ego.

Or tribe.

Or cult.

And while we all begin our spiritual journey with our egos firmly in control of every aspect of our life, that's not where the ego ought to be as we mature spiritually.

How ironic that we can fool ourselves into thinking that the journey's end looks just like the beginning!

No, the unity that Jesus urges us into is indeed a unity with God, but unity with God **as measured by our unity with one another.**

Which requires surrendering the ego, the tribe, the clan, the nation and the cult.

That's not me saying so.

Listen to what St John has to say precisely on this topic!

"Whoever loves sister or brother abides in the light, and there is no cause for stumbling. But whoever hates sister or brother is in the darkness and walks in the darkness, and does not know where they are going, because the darkness has blinded their eyes. 1 John 2:10-11.

“For this is the message that you have heard from the beginning, that we should love one another.” Id., 3:11.

“But if anyone has the world's goods and sees his sibling in need, yet closes his heart against them, how does God's love abide in that person?” Id., v.17.

We are living in what for all the world looks like treacherous times.

The challenges facing us are legion.

More than ever, the challenging, yet life-giving gospel of love, compassion, justice and mercy urges every person of good will to get involved.

To pray, yes.

But also to act!

Over these many years of preaching, I've learned that some sermons are fun.

Some are comforting.

And rarely, a sermon might even soar.

But sometimes, the boss (that's Jesus!) says: “buckle up!”

We're at the precipice.

Much needs to change.

And how much time is left, before time runs out?

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