

Love

Today, Jesus is putting back the pieces to a puzzle.

Pieces that from the very beginning were intended to be of one piece.

A whole — that fell to pieces — because of us!

What are the pieces?

They are God, our neighbor and ourself.

In the beginning, in the garden, these pieces were inseparably One.

The love of God, one's neighbor and one's self was as natural as breathing, back in the beginning, back in the garden.

That changed when we decided we needed to know about good and evil; for in that knowledge, the unity of the garden's love is shattered.

The knowledge of good and evil creates hierarchies and castes, categorizes people as insiders and outsiders, and creates societies where the many serve the few.

It's in that shattered world that we live today.

It's that shattered world that Jesus comes to restore to wholeness, to unity, with each other and with the divine.

That's what Jesus is up to today.

Today in Matthew's gospel Jesus shows us the way of unity through his invitation to love one another, to love ourselves, and to love God.

Because what Jesus knows is that you can't do one of these without the other two.

It just doesn't work!

How does this three-fold love show itself in our day to day life?

Well, Matthew's friend John tells us quite explicitly in his gospel.

Where we find ourselves seated before Jesus, as he kneels on the floor before us.

There's a basin full of water shimmering in the stillness!

And that towel wrapped around his waist.

As he invites each of us in our turn, no matter our rank or station or privilege in life, to put our feet into the water — and allow him to wash them.

In that moment, we are struck — as if by lightning, at the sheer strangeness of the sight.

We who have spent a lifetime climbing the ladder of success, only to discover it's leaning against the wrong wall.

We who have spent so much time trying to control people, places and things, receiving in return only heartache and disappointed expectations.

We who struggle to forgive.

And there we sit, before the maker of all that is, as he washes your feet and mine.

The three-fold love that Jesus implores us to enter into is given flesh and bones through this act of humble service.

That unity between me and my neighbor, unity among and within our very own selves, and then unity by and between ourselves, our neighbor and God, looks very much like feet being washed.

Unity looks like the forgetting of self — so that, like the water itself, we learn to flow however, whenever and wherever the water is called to go.

And while much in our western tradition emphasizes the individual, in truth, the heart of Christianity beckons us to Oneness.

As Thomas Merton puts it: "We are already one but we imagine we are not. And what we have to recover is our original unity."

Or as Meister Eckhart says: "the eye through which God sees me is the same eye through which I see God."

Or, as we heard from the Gospel of Thomas just a couple of weeks ago, from Jesus himself,

"When you make the two into one, and when you make the inner like the outer, and the outer like the inner, and the upper like the lower, and when you make male and female into a single one, ... then ... you will enter the Kingdom." Gospel of Thomas, Logion 22.

I know this is tough stuff on a Sunday morning!

How much easier if the sermon was simply about being good and kind!

Brush your teeth!

And wash behind your ears!

But our faith really isn't about such things at all.

Or if it is, they are merely the first steps, the barest beginnings that will, if you trust, evolve into a fantastic kaleidoscope of excitement and joy.

A journey, if you are willing to embark on it, which will take you to places unimaginable and teach you lessons you never in your wildest dreams conceived of learning.

This call to unity, to Oneness, especially for us who grow up in the Western tradition, is something we have lost over the years, but it is the very heart of our faith.

Sometimes it's a unity born out of shared sorrow.

Like the struggles we are all of us experiencing as this pandemic continues to rage.

When it seems there's no end in sight.

No relief for the loneliness and longing to embrace one another yet again.

And sometimes it's a unity born out of shared joy!

Like when we discover the simple truth that every person discovers — when they decide to serve others.

That when I give, I receive far more in return.

When I serve, I learn that it's not me who's doing the teaching, it's me who's doing the learning.

All of which brings us to the strange and perhaps confusing ending of today's gospel lesson.

Strange and confusing to us perhaps because we're so far removed from Jewish history.

Jesus is recalling a Psalm.

One very well known to the religious big shots.

It's a psalm they look to, pray, hope in, as they long for the Messiah to come, whom they insist will be the son of King David.

And as the son of King David, they have certain expectations.

Just as David killed Goliath, the religious big shots of the day expect the Messiah to kill the Romans.

They hold those views even though they also know quite well the words that Jesus refers to at the beginning of today's gospel.

The commands to love God and oneself, and to love the neighbor.

But their understanding of those words is completely different from how Jesus understands them.

The religious know-it-alls understand these words through the lens of King David.

Meaning, they love the God who loves Israel best.

And their "neighbor" is the one who looks like, smells like, and travels in the same social circles as they do.

Is that any different from how we see God?

You know, the God of America?

The God who loves us — and hates our enemies?

Is it any different from how we define "our neighbor" these days?

Certainly our neighbor can't be those hungry Central Americans trying to cross our border.

Certainly they cannot be those fleeing refugees from the Middle East or Africa.

Never mind that our corporations loot the fertile soil of Central America — so that we can have 69 cent bananas.

Never mind that we started the current conflicts in the Middle East.

First by creating countries after World War I that never existed before; separating tribes, cultures and traditions with something like a meat ax.

Then by exploiting its oil.

Then by waging direct war against a government that had nothing to do with 9/11.

Why dwell on these unpleasant facts?

Because if we're to change, we need to acknowledge the similarities between what Jesus is calling out and the life we live today.

It's so easy to sit in judgment of the religious big shots that Jesus confronts while overlooking our own vast sinfulness.

Our own need to repent.

Our own need for "metanoia" — to enter into the larger mind of God.

So no, Jesus tells them (and us), the Messiah is not the son of David.

He is not a warrior king.

The Messiah is instead a humble servant.

Who washes feet.

Who feeds the hungry.

Who submits to death by the powers that be.

Even death on the cross.

Today's lesson is a stark reminder that we aren't called to be worshipers of Jesus.

We're called to be his followers.

We can only become his followers if we strive for that precious, that promised, union.

With one another.

With ourselves.

And with God.

For in that union, every dream and every hope, is possible.

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