

Naked

Funny how the first thing the missionaries did when they got to Hawaii and Tahiti and Tonga was to put clothes on everyone!

As many of you know, my wife is Tahitian.

And every time our mainland nephews come to visit, there's my wife --- putting band-aids and masking tape on all the strategic places of all the paintings and drawings and silk screens of topless women that she has hanging all over the house.

So I ask you, is nakedness good, or is it evil?

In the first reading from Genesis this morning, we enter the scene just after our common father and mother, Adam and Eve, discover their nakedness because they now are empowered to define what is good and what is evil.

That's the fruit of the forbidden tree: the tree of the knowledge of good and evil bore that fruit, and they each took a bite.

You see, God apparently is just fine with nakedness -- it only becomes a problem when our first mother and father decide to compete with God in defining what is good -- in defining what is evil; and for them, to be naked was a bad thing.

And there we have it, humanities first, but certainly not last, disagreement with God.

The authority to say what is good, and what is evil, is something, from the very beginning, that God alone intends to have.

Remember: "My ways are not your ways?"

That's kind of God's point; but of course, most of the time, we don't listen.

When Adam and Eve, the arch-types of humanity, decide to compete with God, to say, for themselves, as we say for ourselves, "It's okay, God, we'll decide what is good, and what is evil;" well, my dear friends, that's when all hell breaks loose.

The fact is, and human history bears this out with sickening regularity, we are really, really bad at properly identifying what is good and what is evil.

President George W. Bush, during the build up and prosecution of the Iraq war, used to receive briefings from the Pentagon that had, on the cover of each briefing, this verse or that from the Psalms, about rooting out evildoers and the like.

The carnage that followed that escapade of pre-emptive war is only one example of the great difficulty we have in rightly deciding what is good, and what is evil; perhaps especially, it seems, when we believe our motives are pure.

I'm reading Robert Caro's exhaustive third volume on President Lyndon Johnson.

The book is a fascinating, highly detailed look at Mr. Johnson and it is a case study on how good and evil are so often intertwined, mistaken for one another -- confused so often by those who know -- in the very core of their being -- that they have the very best of intentions.

Some of the modern scoffers at faith, people like Richard Dawkins and Bill Maher, like to ask how any rational person can believe in a God who punishes humanity for eating an apple?

In fact, it's not God who's doing the punishing.

It is simply that God has left us with the consequences of our choice, a choice renewed every day in every human heart, to decide for ourselves, rather than leaving to God, the determination of what is good and what is evil.

Sadly, any honest examination of human history seems to bear out the wisdom that distinguishing good from evil is not humanity's strong point.

On any given Sunday, (present congregation excluded, thankfully), our churches are often among the most ethnically and racially segregated places on the planet.

The tone of our political discourse seems to become more toxic by the day, with each side convinced, without a doubt, of its own purity, its own moral righteousness.

And today, Mark's Gospel steps right in the middle of the debate over what is good and what is evil...

Today's reading starts in mid-sentence: "and the crowd came together again so they could not even eat."

And then the controversy begins.

"Who is this nobody from Nowhere Ville and who does he think he is by healing all this rabble that no self-respecting person would be caught dead with?"

His own family is on the hunt for him; planning a first class intervention for this son, this brother of theirs, who is obviously off his rocker.

Mark, in his gospel lesson today, brings us nose to nose with the conundrum of deciding what is good and what is evil.

On the one hand, we have the Blessed Virgin Mary, together with Jesus' immediate family, standing shoulder to shoulder with the educated scribes and men of letters; all of them dedicated to upholding the social fabric; all of them well acquainted with the word of God; all pillars of society to whom we should rightly listen.

On the other hand, there is Jesus; surrounded by the mentally and physically ill; those who are outcast because they are not clean; the unlettered; frankly, a motley crew who wouldn't know the word of God if it bit them on the nose.

All they know is this: they need.

They need compassion; they need understanding; they need the healing grace of God.

So what do the good folk do?

The good immediate family of Jesus says he's lost his mind; and the good religious leaders, folks like me and Fr. Fan, we say: "he's possessed by evil itself."

And Jesus responds by talking to us all about power.

He's here, he tells us, to bind up the strong man of the status quo; to loot the house of what we say is good; what we say is evil.

Jesus talks about power because it's power that got us in this mess to begin with: that first desire for power, to be like God, and to say what is good and what is evil: that's the bite of the forbidden fruit.

And over the years, we've built on that power; creating the powers of racism and sexism (declaring some races good and others evil; by institutionalizing a second-class status for women); and by creating the power of money and consumerism (declaring it good to have stuff and money -- and evil to be without); and the power of military might, since everyone knows that "might makes right!"

This kind of power is motivated by fear.

Fear of the other, fear of not having all I want, fear of being subjected to the power of someone else.

No wonder the most often used phrase in the Bible, when God comes near to us, is "Fear not" --- "Don't be afraid."

In the seeming chaos of God's love for the unlovable, of God's unbridled willingness to ensure that rules are meant to serve us, and not we the rules, Jesus gives to us a new kind of power; a power, that, seen through our everyday eyes, looks crazy; perhaps even demonic.

What is this new power that Jesus gives to all who are willing to accept it?

It is the power of love -- but of love crucified.

It is the power of sacrificial love: a love that turns the other cheek; that gives coat and shirt when only the coat is demanded; that walks the extra mile; that loves the enemy and has mercy on the broken; it is the love that dies rather than kills.

Such is the upside down power of the God who comes to us in gentle nudges and quiet whispers; a God who, when we find ourselves on the cross -- comes and hangs with us.

Which kind of gets us back to where we started with all of this: being naked.

God today invites us to strip away the many layers of certainty with which we have each of us clothed ourselves: certainty in deciding who is in and who is out; certainty in deciding who is right and who is wrong; certainty in deciding who should lead and who should follow.

Crazy Jesus says to us today:

“Get naked!”

Crazy Jesus says to us today:

“Lose all of that certainty and learn how to listen to the gentle God who loves the undeserving; who embraces the ugliness not only in them over there, but the ugliness in you and me too; this God who is content to let decisions of what is good and what is evil wait for another day.”

Those who can do so?

They are the brothers, the mothers, the sisters, of Jesus.

Pray God we may be found among them.

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