

Prosperity

Last week our Supreme Court announced its decision in the Hobby Lobby case.

Probably you heard about it.

The court said that business owners' religious opinions can outweigh our federal laws even when those religious opinions cause direct harm to female employees.

I bring this up not to give a law class this morning, but to remark on what so many supporters of the Hobby Lobby company said about this company in connection with God.

It's the take on God and God's will in all of this that got my attention and maybe it got yours too.

A whole lot of people kept remarking about how this company must be especially blessed by God because it began as a small Mom and Pop and is now worth billions of dollars.

Add to the spectacular financial success this favorable Supreme Court ruling, and what you have, so many say, is a sure sign of God's blessing.

It's another way of saying that those with money and power and good health and happy homes are the blessed of God, while those who are poor, powerless, sick or desperate, are cursed by God.

And yet, that view of God is so at odds with the life, death and resurrection of Jesus generally, it is at odds with our gospel lesson today in particular, and it is completely contrary to the truth lived out by the woman whose life I ask you all to remember this week, as we approach the anniversary of her death, our friend Lina Doo.

While it is not only an American thing to confuse material prosperity with God's blessing, we do seem to have raised this kind of thinking to a new art form, what with our delight in claiming America as God's chosen nation, the new Jerusalem, even as we watch purported Christians block bus loads of impoverished immigrant mothers and children seeking asylum in here.

That's why today's gospel is an especially good one for this day in particular, this 4th of July weekend - when we consider what it is to be a Christian living in America, when we remember our friend Lina, and her too young death, as we remember her courageous struggle with cancer and loss.

Is there a word from the Lord today about such things?

Perhaps there is...

Step into today's gospel for a time, lean in to the drama that is unfolding there this morning..

John the Baptist is chained up in Herod's cell.

John, in that cell, has his doubts about Jesus, (even though, if I may add, Jesus has no doubts about John) so John sends word asking if he is truly the Messiah.

Jesus seems so different from what John saw coming.

Jesus, in the midst of hearing John's doubts, has just returned from preaching in Israel's version of Manoa and Kaneohe and now he's back home in Mililani — and none of the smart set has a good word to say about him.

The only ones who seem to get him are some of the folks who live on the wrong side of the tracks, the Kalakaua Avenue hookers and some IRS agents down at the federal building.

And you wonder, how does he cope with the rejection, the doubt, the put downs from the "been there - done that" crowd?

Certainly he's aggravated.

He confronts the know-it-alls by pointing out that they are blind to no matter what God sends their way: John comes preaching fire and brimstone, half-naked man eating bugs and they say he's possessed by a devil.

Jesus shows up singing a new song, giving life where there is only death, and they say he's a party boy and a drunk, and oh, by the way, he's obviously possessed by the devil too.

But instead of looking for the approval of the powers that be, instead of seeking a pat on the back from the prosperity crowd, Jesus sees God's hand at work in a completely different way: he sees the finger of God alive with power, alive with insight, among the lame, and there among the deaf and blind, among the outcast and notorious sinners, there with the sick and with those who die too soon.

It's not in the winning that Jesus sees God operating, it's in the losing: a distinctly unAmerican thought if ever there was one.

And I guess that's why Lina's struggle seems so front and center for me this week, as we approach the anniversary of her death, July 12, this coming Saturday.

She was a woman of enormous talent and was full of life: a gifted musician, singer, director and teacher who cancer claimed far too soon.

If you're a prosperity fanatic, if you see God as all huddled up with the winners, you look at her death and see only a curse — but if you follow Jesus, you look at her death and see the hidden power of God; who illuminated her in so many ways during her struggle, who came in close as the time drew near, and who even now holds our dear Lina in the palm of his hand.

Jesus is the lens through which we can catch a glimpse of God, and the thing is that in order to look through Jesus so that we may gaze at God, it helps if we might bend ourselves, as Lina bent herself, so we might submit to his yoke, a yoke that is not a call to mindless obedience or slavery to doctrines or a ticket to the "I'm better than you" club.

Instead, the way to submit to the yoke of Jesus is to:

"Forget all Christian doctrines; forget your own certainties and your own doubts, when you hear the call of Jesus. Forget all Christian morals, your achievements and your failures, when you come to Him. [Forget all of it because n]othing is demanded of you, no idea of God, and no goodness in yourselves, not your being religious, not your being Christian, not your being wise, and not your being moral. But what is demanded is only your being open and willing to accept what is given to you, the New Being, the being of love and justice and truth, as it is manifest in Him whose yoke is easy and whose burden is light." Paul Tillich

When Jesus invites us under **his** yoke, he's reminding us that no matter our circumstances, we are always under one yoke or another, always.

Maybe it's the yoke of material success or the yoke of fame or fortune or power or influence or good looks or heroin or the elusive quest for happiness, you name your poison.

The question is never **will** we be tied to a yoke in this life, the only question is to **what** yoke will we submit?

The yoke of Jesus is God's yoke: the One who knows us better than we know ourselves, the one who is not only patient and faithful and true, but the one who comes most near when we are at our wits end.

Prosperity and health and good fortune will come and go.

They are neither signs of God's blessing nor are they, in themselves, a curse; they are merely circumstances of life; as are poverty, disease, and all passing things.

But what remains eternal is the gentleness and humility of Jesus; a gentleness dear Lina came to know first hand as she, as we, gratefully bend so we too might submit to the one whose yoke is easy, and whose burden is light.

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