

Salty People and Lightening Up

Why is it so much easier to observe the rituals of our faith than to actually live the challenges of our faith?

I'm thinking it's because actually living our faith brings us face to face with our fellow human beings, and truth be told, our fellow human beings..... are often a pain in the neck!

I have a hard enough time hanging around with MYSELF, living with MYSELF, never mind the one legged houseless woman in a wheelchair who's dealing drugs under my nose here at the church...or the drunk who just can't seem to remember that if he wants to drink, he needs to do it NOT HERE.....

There are days when I find myself nodding my head at the famous line from the Peanuts cartoon: "I love humanity, it's the people I can't stand!"

None of this is new.

Our first reading has crotchety Isaiah, spouting off 2500 years ago about our love affair with the "looks" of faith – while running for our lives from the hard work our faith truly involves....

Faith, Isaiah insists, isn't about following rules for rules sake....

It's about sharing our bread with the undeserving hungry.....

Covering the willfully naked....

Sheltering the houseless, even when drink and drug causes the problem....

In short, it's not about me and God figuring out a way to save my personal toukus in the hereafter.....

It's about us and God, looking after our **collective** rear ends, perhaps because we are not saved alone, perhaps we are saved together.....despite the fact, or maybe because, my fellow human beings are often a royal pain in the keister.....

Which brings us to why we do what we do, why we put up with the homeless and the drunk and with each other....?

Not because it feels good..... it often doesn't!

Not because it's something we're naturally inclined to do....we aren't!

We do this stuff, quite simply, **because Jesus tells us to.**

You are salt!

You are light!

NOT — you **will be**....but — you **are!**

And if you're not, then fold up the tent, because the only way to our true home, to our true selves, is on this path that Jesus walks first, instructing us to follow along.

Every other option is a dead end.

Deitrich Bonhoeffer, the Lutheran minister who is arrested and executed for plotting to assassinate Hitler, comes to this realization, sitting in a Nazi concentration camp.

"The followers of Jesus are not faced with a decision.

The only decision possible has been made for them.

Now they have to **be** what they **are**, or they are not following Jesus.

The followers are the visible community of faith; their discipleship is a visible act which separates them from the world — or it is not discipleship.

Discipleship is as visible as light in the night, as obvious as a mountain jutting up from the flatlands.

To become invisible, is to deny the call.

Any community of Jesus that wants to be invisible, is no longer a community of Jesus." Bonhoeffer, 2001, 134 paraphrased.

Too many of our churches are indeed invisible.

There's the group of Christians who throw their lot in with the houseless, spending part of Holy Week, the week before Easter, living on the streets.

On the third night, the weather turns ugly.

At around 1 in the morning, looking for shelter, they come across a church holding an all night vigil, preparing for Easter.

The vigil is well attended, full of devoted religious folks....

"Perfect!" they think.

"We can pray!

We can get warm!"

The group is led by a well-known priest, who comes face to face with a security guard at the front door of the church.

The priest explains that they're cold and wet, they need a place to pray and get warm.

The priest forgets that his matted hair and three day old clothes make him look just like many others living on the streets.

The security guard politely, but firmly, says, "I'm here to keep you homeless people out, so, move it along please...."

And out they go, into the cold, wet night.

The prayer vigil inside the church continues, uninterrupted.

And then there's Clarence Jordan, who founded an inter-racial farming community in 1950's Georgia, a time when such things simply weren't done.

Clarence asks his brother Robert, a lawyer destined to serve on Georgia's Supreme Court, to represent this inter-racial community in its legal affairs.

"Robert says:

'Clarence, I can't do that.

You know my political aspirations.

Why, if I represent you, I'll lose my job, my house and everything else.'

'We might lose everything too, Bob,' Clarence replies.

'It's different for you,' says Robert.

'Why is it different?'

'I remember,' Clarence continues, 'that you and I joined the church the same Sunday, as boys.

I expect when we came forward, the preacher asked you the same question he did me:

Do you accept Jesus as your Lord and Savior?

I said yes.

What did you say?'

'I follow Jesus,' Robert says, 'but only up to a point.....'

'Could that point, by any chance be, the cross?'

'That's right, I follow him **up** to the cross, but not on the cross.

I'm not getting myself crucified.'

'Then,' says Clarence, 'you're not a disciple of Jesus, you just admire him!

So go back to the church you belong to, and tell them you're an admirer, not a disciple.'

'Well now, if everyone who felt like I do did that, we wouldn't have a church, would we?'

'The question,' Clarence says, 'is, Do **you** have a church?'" McClendon, 1990, 103, paraphrased.

It is self-interest and fear and power and insecurity and ego and pride and greed that turns us from followers of Jesus into admirers of Jesus.

That's because we instinctively fear loss, abandonment, death.

But when we do follow, rather than simply admire Jesus, we can leave all of that, particularly the fear, behind.

Because in Jesus, death is defeated!

The absolute faithfulness of God is proved — Christ is risen!

So we can be brave, especially as we come face to face with one another, especially when “one another” means the houseless, the sick, the addicted, the poor, the different ones.....

And when we meet these folks not on our terms, but on God’s, what we find is that they too are human beings, afraid, alone, fearing abandonment, loss, and death.

The truth is, “Jesus doesn’t call us to love suffering, but to love those who suffer, to live vulnerably in solidarity with them, to alleviate and end suffering by overcoming evil with grace.

Sharing in the sufferings of Christ means joining him in loving others deeply; especially the least, even when it’s hard, even when the love isn’t deserved; because that’s precisely how God loves me, how God loves you.....Flood, Healing the Gospel, 84.

“In the suffering God we meet the protesting God — a God who wants us to weep, who wants us to question, who wants us to resist.

The cry against injustice is planted deep within the human soul precisely because God pushes us to question suffering and injustice.

Our faith isn’t about high brow discussions concerning the nature of God, nor is it about a passive acceptance of suffering or wallowing in guilt; it’s about joining with our protesting and suffering God to end human misery, to end injustice.” Id. at 85, paraphrased.

Perhaps the cross stands at the center of our faith — so that one day, because of our faith, there will be no more crosses.

Is it worthwhile?

Just listen to Paul....

“No eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the human heart conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him”

So on those days when my fellow man has me feeling like a sourpuss, i try to remember..... to take it with a grain of salt..... and when I do, lo and behold, it's safe -- once again..... to lighten up.

+amen

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