

Saving Us All

Our modern world seems to be splitting into increasingly smaller factions.

Rival political parties, that once saw each other as the loyal opposition, now see each other as blood enemies.

The vaccinate vs. anti-vax debate seems to be devolving into ever deeper wormholes of misinformation, conspiracy theories and even violence.

Religious denominations struggle to find common ground with one another, and even within each denomination.

Our United Methodist friends agreed to split apart over issues of sexual orientation and gender roles.

Just as we did when the Anglican Church of North America split from the Episcopal Church.

Just as conservatives in the Roman Catholic Church speak of schism as a result of reforms sought by Pope Francis.

I don't know how many sermons I've preached about "us against them" – but I'm pretty sure this won't be the last of them!

Why are we so obsessed with our own superiority?

Why, like the apostles today, is our favorite past time "I'm better than you?"

Why is nearly every religious tradition tied up in knots over deciding who is saved and who is condemned?

Isn't that a question particularly important to us — who claim to follow Christ?

Because, in Christ, those obsessions are roundly and repeatedly and resoundingly rejected!

As Jesus makes perfectly clear this morning.

When Jesus embraces that little child, putting her in the midst of the disciples who only moments before are arguing over who is the most wonderful, he's showing us that God's reach includes everyone — and all things.

Even those we dismiss.

Even those we discard.

Even those we despise.

And so the question becomes:

Why is it so difficult to take Jesus at his word when he promises that "when I am lifted up, I shall drag **the whole world** to myself"?

Why is it so hard to take Paul at his word when he's given the profound insight that "**all of creation shall be delivered** from the bondage of corruption into the liberty of the glory of the children of God." Rom. 8:21.

Or again, as he comes to see that in Christ, God "... **reconciles to himself all things**, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by his death on the cross." Col 1:20.

Or again when he's given the grace to accept that "neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, nor height nor depth, **nor anything else in all**

creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord." Rom 8:36-8.

Isn't all of this just another way of saying that at the end of the day, everyone shall be saved?

From the holiest saint to the lowest sinner?

From St. Thomas to ... Trump?

That our common destiny, simply by virtue of being human, is to become One: with each other, and with God?

Isn't the root of our stubborn insistence in dividing people into various camps our mistaken, yet oh so human assumption (or is it a need, a hope, a desire?) that eternal damnation awaits "those" folks?

And yet, what if, at the end of the day, God wins?

What if God brings everyone, even the worst among us, into unity and peace and fellowship?

And if we can begin to believe that, can we then perhaps turn down the temperature of our debates, conflicts and disagreements?

That if I can see in the face of the person I like the least the face of God, perhaps God's kingdom can inch one step closer to being realized on earth.

Of course, universal salvation is a hard thing to swallow.

Ministers in some denominations have been fired, defrocked and run out of town for suggesting such a thing.

As broad as the Episcopal tent is, one wonders if universal salvation fits under it or not.

And yet, before Christianity became a state sanctioned religion, before Christianity took on the robes of secular power and privilege, many of the early church mothers and fathers believed exactly that.

They took Jesus and Paul at their word.

Fr Richard Rohr got me thinking about this in his meditation last week, as he quotes a former fire and brimstone evangelical who did some research, and traded in the fire and brimstone for the warm light that saves everyone.

For example,

"St Augustine who lived in the 300's AD in Northern Africa, and who is one of the four great Latin/African church fathers (which include Augustine, Ambrose, Jerome, and Gregory the Great), acknowledges that:

"There are very many in our day, who, though not denying the Holy Scriptures, do not believe in endless torments."

Origen, who lived from 185 to 254 and founded a school at Caesarea is considered by historians to be one of the great theologians and scholars of the Eastern Church.

He writes:

“We think, indeed, that the goodness of God, through His Christ, may recall all His creatures to one end [that is, salvation], even His enemies being conquered and subdued...

For Christ must reign until He has put all enemies under His feet.”

Universal restoration and salvation is often embraced, and widely debated, in early Christianity.

‘At the consummation of the universe, all are to be restored into their original harmonious state.

We all shall be made one body and be united once more into a perfect [person], and the prayer of our Savior shall be fulfilled: ‘that all may be one.’

So says St. Jerome, the scholar who first translated the Bible into Latin.

And then there is Gregory of Nyssa who concludes that:

“It is evident that God will in truth be all in all when there shall be no evil in existence.

When every created being is in harmony with itself — and every tongue shall confess — that Jesus Christ is Lord.

When every creature shall have been made one body.”

Finally, let's eavesdrop on a conversation between a monk and a hermit that happened over 100 years ago.

This hermit, self-sacrificing and holy, declares to the monk with quiet satisfaction:

'God will punish all atheists.

They will burn in everlasting fire.'

Visibly upset, the monk says:

'Tell me.

Supposing you went to paradise and looked down and saw somebody burning in hell-fire?

Would you feel happy?

'It can't be helped', says the hermit.

'It would be their own fault.'

The monk looks at him with a sorrowful glance, and says,

'Love can not bear that.'" Richard Rohr, OFM quoting C. Pearson on Universal Reconciliation, modified.

It was Julian of Norwich who came to the very same conclusion after many years of pondering her encounters with Christ.

She came to see that love is the ultimate resting place for everyone.

"I saw very certainly that before God made us, he loved us, and that love has never lessened — and never will.

The moment of creation is when we begin to exist.

But the love through which God creates us — exists even before our creation.

In this unending love, we live and move and have our being, always."
Showings, para 86, paraphrased.

In these contentious times, I wonder if we can begin to see in every person a future roommate?

A friend?

Where the dross in my life and theirs is removed by the burning fire of God's stubborn love?

Which allows us to take a step back from confrontation, anger and judgment?

Can we come to a day when we look for the best in each other?

Give a pass to the worst?

And seek those places of common ground that allow for the blossoming of the beloved community?

Perhaps we can — if we at long last return to the simple yet difficult command of Jesus.

That humble service to one another, joyfully washing each other's feet, happily letting go and letting be, that this is the better path.

The path blessed by God as good.

As holy.

Shall we begin?

+amen