

Sin and Sight

So a couple of weeks ago a woman, who is definitely Buddhist, asked me to be part of the burial service for her late husband, who was possibly Christian....

It was all fine and dandy until the wife says to me: "Can you please not say anything about the afterlife during the funeral service?"

At first, I'm kind of miffed, and so decide to bow out.

After all, how can you ask me to preside at a funeral service and not talk about something that is so central to our faith?

But as I sat with this for a while, I was reminded about how dense I actually am.

Because the afterlife is not, in fact, a central tenant in our faith.

The disembodied soul heading into an eternal afterlife is not a Christian idea at all.

It's Greek philosophy.

It's Plato.

The Greeks and Plato, indeed, all religions, divide stuff up between the holy and the profane, the natural and the supernatural, the human and the divine.

But Christianity doesn't divide heaven and earth, nor does it separate the profane from the sacred, the natural from the supernatural; because Christianity is not about humanity bridging the gap with God, Christianity is about God bridging the gap with us.

And lest you think I'm losing my marbles by saying such things to you, just listen to one of the most respected and brilliant religious minds of our time:

"To be Christian, to believe in Christ, means, and has always meant, this: to know in a strange and yet absolutely certain way, called faith, that Christ is the Life of all life, that he is Life itself, and therefore, my life, here, now, today.

As John's gospel says without apology, 'in him was life; and the life was the light of the world.'

And so all Christian doctrines — the incarnation, redemption, atonement — these are explanations, but they are not the 'cause' of faith.

Faith is the acceptance not of this or that 'proposition' about Christ, but the acceptance of Christ himself as the Life and light of life.....

And so, Christian faith is completely different from 'religious belief.'

Its starting point is not belief — but love, not a proposition, but a person." A. Schmemmann, *For The Life of the World*, 104. paraphrased.

Okay, it's early on a Sunday morning and here he is blitzing us with head scratching mumbo jumbo about our faith.

And I am blitzing you.

But it's not mumbo jumbo.

In fact, it's what our entire gospel lesson is all about this morning, what with the man born blind being given new eyes from Jesus, as he creates with spit and dirt the means by which this man may at last see; as Jesus confronts the religious Dudley Doo-Rights, so convinced that they see despite the fact that they are blind as bats to the things that really matter...

It's a truth about our faith that, unless we get it, we risk exchanging the wild freedom of the Holy Spirit for mere piety, we risk losing out on joy — and replacing it with its' poor step sister, whose name is: "a good conscience."

There's an old movie about a man blind from birth who receives his sight as an adult.

You'd think he'd be overjoyed, but in fact, receiving his sight nearly drives him crazy — because everything he knows about how to relate to the world is as a blind person.

When it comes to faith in Jesus, we are all that man born blind.

We are used to dealing with the world on our terms: terms that make assumptions so ingrained that hardly anyone questions them, like, brave people die for their country, but only crazy people die for their faith; like, belief in God is all well and good as long as it's a private affair, but please, don't talk about God in the square of public policy.

We are all, to one degree or another, consumed by the need to be in control, to protect ourselves, to band together in tribes so we can be safe against whatever "them" may be out there.

And here comes Jesus showing us not so much in word as in deed that real life is found in breaking down the walls that separate people, that real life exists in freely giving ourselves to one another, that real life is consumed with forgiveness and kindness and gentleness; not revenge, hate or nationalism.

So it's no wonder that when we are invited into something as amazing as this life Jesus calls "eternal life," it seems as if we too must almost go crazy before we can adapt to this entirely new way of living.

Perhaps that's why for so many people, it takes a real crisis in life, the loss of one deeply loved, an injury or accident or illness, something big to shake us out of our love affair with blind adoration of the ways of this world, before we can even begin to catch a glimpse of the kingdom of God.

And what we see, when at long last we begin to see, is that sin is not so much your peccadillo or mine, it's not so much the bad stuff we do, as sin is our refusal to face the fact that Jesus is the Life of the world, that all Life is taken up in him, redeemed by him, saved through him, existing from him, not once we die, but now, today, this very moment!

Out of that refusal flows all of the lesser sins of the world: because that refusal is what leads us to take matters into our own hands, instead of dedicating our lives to service, leaving the rest in God's hands...

Sin is our insistence on defining what is good and who is evil, failing to recognize our own innate brokenness, our own blindness.

Sin is our failure to see in Jesus the face and character and heart of the Living God, and our failure to give ourselves over to that truth.

Jesus, you see, doesn't come to make us nice, he comes to make us new!

Because our destiny isn't a disembodied soul — but a transformed body — that lives in the new world God is even now creating.

That the opposite of sin is faith in Jesus means lining up our lives with the one who welcomes the outcast, who loves a good laugh, and who is determined to save not just the few and deserving, but the whole wide world, and who does so, not with some magical wave of a wand, but by loving every single person to death, to his death, a death on the cross, as God uses the ordinary things of this world, bread, wine and loss, to renew the face of the earth.

That the opposite of sin is faith in Jesus means coming to believe that God is like a wildly pregnant woman in the midst of agonizing but hopeful labor, preparing to give birth to you and I as complete human beings, and in some baffling but magnificent way, entreating all of us to join in the labor, to join in the mud and spit, in the after-birth of the Holy Spirit – to proclaim the gospel not with our words – but with our lives.

“Jesus rejects the false “opposition of the ‘spiritual’ and the ‘material,’ the ‘sacred’ and the ‘profane,’ the ‘religious’ and the secular,’ and denounces, abolishes and reveals this monstrous lie that tries to separate God from humanity and the world.

The only true temple of God is humanity, and through humanity – the world.

Each ounce of matter belongs to God and is fulfilled in God.

Each instant of time is God’s time, and is fulfilled in God’s eternity.” Id.

So while the afterlife will always be a fascinating thing for us to think about, in Jesus, the deepest truth is that God redeems this life, our life, today.

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