

Stepping On Toes

Last Sunday before church started I was at my usual post over there by the side door saying hello to folks when Collette came walking up the ramp with her little 3 year old grandson, Aiden – who took one look at me, pointed, and yelled out:

“There’s God!” – as he ran up and hugged my leg!

And while Collette was quick to correct him that no, that’s Fr David, not God, I’m thinking that the youngster actually had a point!

Not that I’m not getting delusions of grandeur, but taking today’s gospel to heart, that little boy is actually tuned into what gets Jesus in so much trouble today.

And it’s all about God.

And where, and in whom, we encounter God.

Jesus has returned home today.

In a reading that began last Sunday, he’s at his family synagogue, back home with the aunties and uncles and neighbors and childhood friends.

He picks up the scroll and begins reading a beautiful piece of scripture, telling everyone the day of prophetic promises has at long last arrived, and just as the people are ready to make him leader of the parade, just as the Mayor is about to name him Man of the Month, Jesus pokes a stick in their collective eye!

The name of that stick is the inconvenient truth that God is fond not just of us and our kind, but that God is fond of everyone!

Even pagan generals suffering from horrific skin disease, even Jehovah Witness widows – even illegal immigrants – even Muslims – even

druggies — even the houseless — even over-dressed rectors in gold leaf robes!

And the folks in the crowd go crazy, because perhaps the most deeply held human belief is “I’m okay, but you’re a mess!”

That’s the thinking that gives us tribes and nations, races and ethnicities, genders and sexual orientations.

We love whatever distinguishes “us” from “them”.

And Jesus says to this way of thinking: time’s up, game’s over, God exists in every human person and if you claim to love God, then start with loving every human person...

Which is, let’s face it, fine for some pious but insincere lip service: “oh yes, how sweet that God lives in every person, uh, ... pass the salt please....”

But Jesus isn’t about paying lip service to this central truth of our existence.

Jesus insists that we apply it to our daily lives; in which case, our toes are guaranteed to be stepped on...hard!

Because if every human being is indeed the image of God, then what does that say about our economic system that keeps so many trapped in poverty, not to mention the 50% of our population that lives in a never ending cycle of paycheck to paycheck survival, dreading the day when an unexpected bill, or government shutdown, throws their financial life under a train, while billionaires gasp in horror at the mere thought of a 2% wealth tax on their vast riches.

If every human being is the image of God, how can we possibly tolerate the continued racism and sexism and bigotry of all shapes and sizes that continues to infect our social relations?

What Jesus does today is frighteningly drastic because he rejects moderation and easy does it and live and let live.

Instead, today, he begins his ministry by taking up the aching radical consequences of love.

Paul knows these consequences.

We hear it today in his letter to the folks at Corinth.

And while today's reading is one we're used to hearing at weddings, Paul isn't writing this ode to love for a couple of newlyweds.

He's writing this letter to folks who are at each others throats!

And what he's getting at is the politics of what a Christian community looks like.

Yes, politics: meaning, how we organize ourselves, how we set boundaries on acceptable behavior, how we in essence agree to live with one another.

Which is why those who insist that the church and politics don't mix fail to understand both politics and the church!

Because to follow Christ is not primarily about my individual keister — it's about the Kingdom of God, it's about God's royal banquet, it's about the cloud of witnesses!

In other words, it ain't about me — it's about us — all of us!

And Paul spells out what life is like when what matters is ... us:

"If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.

And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to move mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing.

If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.

Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude.

It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth.

Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.”

What Paul knows, what Jesus died for, what we are called to live out is the truth that each and every human being bears the image and likeness of God - and therefore each and every human being is to be cared for, related to, interacted with as if he or she is the most profoundly significant thing in this world.

I don't do that.

Perhaps some of you don't either.

And I think what both Paul and Jesus are trying to drive home today is that while there is much harm in the failure to live up to our high calling when we deal with one another - the greater harm is when we fail to live up to our high calling - while pretending that we do.

We see this everywhere today in the fake moral codes that blame the victim and insist that the poor deserve their plight, when we withhold mercy and compassion to avoid “enabling” the needy.

Jesus, not so respectfully, disagrees.

“You see, Jesus goes and does the one thing you’re never supposed to do, even to strangers, let alone to friends and neighbors:

He tells them the truth, the truth about their pettiness and prejudice, their fear and shame, their willingness, even eagerness, to get ahead at any cost, even at the expense of another.

And so they want him gone, permanently.

And let’s face it; that’s pretty much the way it usually is.

Because the gospels aren’t just about Jews or Romans, they aren’t just about folks from Nazareth or Jerusalem.

No, the gospels are about every race and nationality, from every time and place who, when they meet someone who tells them the truth about themselves, will go to almost any length to kill the messenger.

From the prophets of Israel to our own prophet, Martin Luther King, Jr., the keepers of the dream are rejected, beaten, and shot, as are the truth tellers too.

And so here we are, at the very outset of Jesus’ ministry, and already we see how it’s going to end.

Because while Jesus escapes today, the day is coming when he won’t.

They’ll listen a little longer, get a little madder, and then lay their hands on him and nail him to the cross.

So here’s the other interesting question for the day: do you think things have changed all that much?

I mean, do you think Jesus' sermon about change and equity and release goes over any better today, in a nation tied up in knots over whether millionaires should pay higher taxes or whether it's fair to limit how many assault rifles one man can own?

Jesus, whenever and wherever he speaks, still makes people see red."
David Lose, paraphrased.

When Martin Luther King sat in a Birmingham jail cell during the early days of the civil rights movement, it wasn't the KKK as much as it was middle class white preachers like me who really gave Dr King heartburn.

"I have almost reached the regrettable conclusion that the Negro's great stumbling block in his stride toward freedom is not the Ku Klux Klanner, but the white moderate, who is more devoted to 'order' than to justice; who prefers a negative peace (which is the absence of tension) to a positive peace (which is the presence of justice); who constantly says: 'I agree with you in the goal you seek, but I cannot agree with your methods of direct action'; who paternalistically believes he can set the timetable for another man's freedom; who lives by a mythical concept of time and who constantly advises the Negro to wait for a 'more convenient season.'

Shallow understanding from people of good will is more frustrating than absolute misunderstanding from people of ill will.

Lukewarm acceptance is much more bewildering than outright rejection."
MLK, Jr, Letter from a Birmingham Jail.

A little boy runs up the church ramp and pointing to the priest says:
"There's God!"

Are we willing to join with that little boy and begin to see God in every human person?

If we are, then indeed the kingdom of God has drawn near.

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