

Tea Sets

I've always read this gospel lesson with "blaming the victim" eyes.

I mean, how can someone sit anywhere for 38 years and not fix what needs to be fixed?

Somehow?

Using one's wit, imagination or skill?

But I'm wrong.

Maybe this story isn't so much about a single, unimaginative fellow.

Perhaps it's about how we all of us encounter God?

Perhaps we too are those who sit poolside.

Unable to get where we need to go, if we're to experience the grace and glory and peace of God.

I have a story that might shed some light on this very common dilemma.

It's about a Turkish man and his friends.

They live in a far corner of Turkey and the man's friends have a son; a highly regarded doctor.

The son lives in the big city and so son and parents rarely speak, this in the days before any internet or cell phone.

One day the Turkish man visits his old friends and there in the living room is a large chest.

On it, the parents have lovingly placed their various tea sets.

The decorations are beautiful.

They enjoy sitting before it and admiring their new piece of furniture.

“This chest’s a gift from our son!” they proudly explain.

But something about the chest bothers the friend, so after a few visits, he finally asks the parents if he can take a closer look.

And when he does, he turns the chest around, removes some remaining packing material, and discovers that this isn’t a chest for tea sets at all!

It’s a fully functioning ham radio set which, for the under 30 crowd, is the way folks talked to each other from far away, back in prehistoric days, before Face Time and Instagram. C. Bourgeault, Trinity, __, paraphrased.

Rather than a piece of furniture to be admired, it’s instead the very means to communicate with their beloved son.

And thinking about this story, and the story of the man sitting poolside for 38 years, got me thinking about people sitting in church for 38 or 18 or 88 years.

And about those who will never come near a church.

It got me thinking about my own relationship with God.

And how often I have mistaken the stirring waters (and ham radio sets), in other words, how often I have mistaken invitations to encounter the Living God, for simply a nice piece of furniture.

Jesus never says: "Worship me."

Jesus always says: "Follow me."

And yet for most of the nearly 2000 years since he walked the dusty roads of ancient Israel, we have declined the invitation to follow.

We prefer the far easier task of worship.

We have long decided that it's far better to admire the tea set rather than risk communicating with, and risk being changed by, our disquieting God.

And the change we are invited to undergo?

It has almost nothing to do with accomplishing or achieving anything.

Instead, it's all about learning that the only place we actually encounter God is in the act of letting go.

Like, letting go of grudges or fear.

Letting go of controlling people, places and things.

Particularly those we love the most.

Particularly when I'm right!

Paradoxically, rather than enslaving us to the whims of others, letting go brings a freedom that's simply amazing.

Instead of getting all wrapped up in trying to bend life to what I want it to be, we discover the flow of life.

Opening vistas that are surprising and delightful!

Paul's adventures this morning show us what a surrendered life looks like.

Paul's adventures begin with a vision.

His itinerary says: "It's time to go to Asia!"

But those plans are nixed by the Risen Lord.

Jesus, the travel agent!

Who gives Paul a vision of a man from Macedonia, part of what's now Greece.

So Paul changes his plans and begins a journey that would make Jonah and his whale proud.

Paul's trip is like taking a small boat from Oahu to Maui (about 60 miles) in rough seas, then from Maui to the Big Island, (about 100 miles), then walking from Hilo to the top of Volcano; all of which he does with "great haste."

When he reaches the end of this exhausting trip, he goes looking for a Jewish synagogue, and the 10 men needed to make a quorum for the Sabbath prayer.

But there is no synagogue.

Nor are there 10 Jewish men.

You might expect Paul to be chagrined that all that hurried travel brings him not to a synagogue, nor to any men, but to a riverbank — and a few gentile women.

But Paul isn't chagrined, because Paul understands that to love Jesus is to do what Jesus does.

Even if it brings hardship.

Even when things aren't as expected.

Because Jesus spares no effort for us.

Jesus goes to every length for us and with us.

And Jesus is chock full of surprises for those who'll take their chance with him.

So what does Paul do?

He tells us:

"We sat down and spoke with the women."

What a way to live!

Just taking things as they come.

Trusting, that “all will be well, and all will be well, and all manner of things will be well!”

Julian of Norwich.

Little does Paul know that on that riverbank sits the beginnings of the most faithful community the young church will ever know.

The church at Philippi.

The Philippian church will soon support Paul’s mission with money, prayers and deep friendship.

As Paul later writes to them:

“My dear, dear friends, I love you so much!

You make me feel such joy, you fill me with such pride.” Phil. 4:1 (The Message).

One of the women at the riverbank this morning is Lydia.

Funny how so many Christian denominations, including our own Episcopal Church until the 1970’s, exclude women from the ministry, when in the early church, women regularly shared in leadership!

So here we are with Lydia, who sells purple cloth.

The cloth of royalty.

She's probably pals with the first century’s version of Beyoncé and Cher.

But Lydia is also this:

A woman open to a radically new way to encounter life.

To encounter God.

And so she becomes the first European Christian.

Her legacy begins this morning, on a riverbank.

All arising out of the serendipity of Paul taking life as it comes.

Letting go of control.

Going with the flow of the wildly unpredictable Spirit of God!

It's a poet who says it best when we come face to face with the Reality that is the living God.

God is not rescuer.

God is not safety.

God is not benevolent or critical Father-knows-best.

God is not puppet or puppeteer.

God is not who I thought/was taught he is.

God is love
reckless, spendthrift, indiscriminate, passionate.

God is pursuer
relentless, determined, tireless seeker of souls.

God is challenger

demanding movement, journey, change, growth.

God is creator
delighted in me, her creation. ***

God is spirit, wind, and fire uncontainable,
she will not tolerate the tidy boxes
we painstakingly construct for her.

God is light
exposing, revealing, searching out all that I would hide.

God is unknowable
yet constantly revealing herself to me
with a richness and intensity
I cannot ignore."
-The Reverend Virginia Going, abridged.

Jesus invites us into an adventurous life!

A life of risk?

Yes!

A life of suffering?

Perhaps.

But most definitely a life that calls us off of our couches!

And into the great unknown whom we call "God."

As we settle into our pews here, don't be misled.

What might seem to be some lovely furniture, lovely tea sets to admire, is the very heartbeat of God's love.

Because the bread you shall soon consume, is the very body of the one who holds all things together.

Consuming you, as you consume it.

So that you may never forget that within you – dwells the very fullness of God.

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