

## Thinking Lightly

Today's gospel lesson is an invitation to take a step back from our usual ways of looking at life, at each other, and at the problems facing the human family in this day and age.

It's an invitation to hold our beliefs lightly, not tightly, since love and freedom and Spirit are more like water than they are like stone.

And while we often think of our religious beliefs as carved in stone (think of Charlton Heston, or even Moses, coming down the mountain with the ten commandments!); in Jesus, a living faith is far more fluid — because it responds to actual human needs and predicaments — which are always different, always changing.

We begin today with our poor rabbi.

He's not a bad guy, but he's tied up, handcuffed, by his own ideas about God.

For him, God sets the rules and we follow, no matter the actual human need that is staring him in the face; and since it's the sabbath, there will be no healing!

His devotion to his notion of God creates a place of worship where rules live and people die.

But God is a God of liberation.

God's cry is: "Let my people go!"

And that's the crux of today's adventure with Jesus.

In the reading just before this one in Luke's gospel, 18 men are killed when a tower collapses and the people ask Jesus if this misfortune is due to their sins, since everyone knows that bad things happen to bad people.

Today, this woman suddenly appears who, for 18 years, has been afflicted, bent over, with the unspoken agreement of those present:

"She's a sinner, she deserves her condition."

Into this tied up, handcuffed view of God, comes Jesus.

Who says of the 18 killed:

"They were no different from anyone else - bad things happen because, in life, bad things happen - it's not God pulling those strings."

And the woman bent over for 18 years is not a deserving sinner, but a daughter of Abraham, a fellow human being, once invisible; but now, because of a touch, you can see her; once chased off into the margins, now, because of love, she commands center stage.

There's an old story of an elderly African-American woman who comes to worship in an all white church.

She's thrown out by the congregation, yet, undeterred, she stands up, brushes herself off, and begins to walk down the road, where she meets Jesus, who takes her by the arm, and as she sings alleluias, she steps off the dusty road, up into the air, arm in arm with the savior of the world.

How we see determines how we behave.

How we see determines what we believe.

This week marks the 400th anniversary of the arrival of African people into the United States, people who were the first of what was to become 12.5 million enslaved human beings.

My white forebears saw these people as little more than animals, to be bought and sold, worked to death, controlled and dominated.

My contemporary white brothers and sisters too often look at their own place in our society and believe white people are socially dominant because of their own education, skill, ingenuity and hard work.

Yet in truth, the wealth of this nation was built on the backs, and sweat, and tears, of the enslaved African people.

It was that uncompensated labor that created the vast cotton industries in the south, and the commercial shipping and trading in the north, paving the way for the industrial revolution.

The vast wealth that was created was channeled by, for, and in favor of white folks.

When slavery ended as an institution, steps were almost immediately taken to ensure the situation did not change very much.

There has been for 150 years the mass incarceration of black people (slavery in jail is permitted, according to the U.S. Constitution).

For those not imprisoned, Jim Crow laws denied African-Americans the vote.

Banks, arm in arm with our federal government, engaged in red lining residential areas, a policy that barred blacks from desirable neighborhoods and access to mortgages so that the wealth we white folks can pass on to our children was not available to black children.

And then, like the crowds at the collapsed tower, like the folks at that synagogue so long ago – we blame the victims for their predicament.

And like that all white church who threw the woman of color out on her ear, we create a God who is fine and dandy with these horrific situations.

But Jesus invites us to a new place.

And to get there, I think, requires us to learn something about who God actually is – and that requires contemplation.

NOT that you gotta wear brown robes and enter a monastery; you don't even have to join Wallyhouse!

Contemplation happens any time we quiet ourselves, whether in a church pew or during a walk on a sandy beach, in a rain forest or sitting at the kitchen table.

Contemplation invites us to sit peacefully – nestled in the lap of God – not thinking, not asking, just being.

Contemplation helps us open up to the vast, to the mystery, to that which is Really Real.

And in that opening we come to see that the root of our violence and fear and treating fellow human beings as “the other” “is the illusion of separation — from God, from ourselves and from creation.

When we don't know how to live in this place of `union' (which is simply another word for `love'), we resort to violence, fear, prejudice and judgment, rejecting anything that is not like us, that we cannot control.

Contemplation teaches us to honor differences, but to also realize that we are so much more than our nationality, skin color, gender, or other labels which are all temporary window dressing on this passing, and therefore false, self.

Contemplation brings us back to our True Self, to who we are in God.

Contemplation allows us to discover that when we become little enough, naked enough, and honest enough, then we discover, lo and behold, that we are more than enough.

This is the wisdom of the Gospel.

At this place of both poverty and freedom we have nothing to prove or protect.

We can connect with everything and everyone, because the truth is, everything, and everyone, belongs.” R. Rohr, paraphrased.

And yet, “spiritual awakening doesn't leave us immune to the human condition.

Quite the opposite.

It brings us into the heart of reality, where we mourn and rage, bow and give thanks, to that place where we might ache, and surrender." M. Starr, *Wild Mercy*, 200, paraphrased.

The word from Jesus this morning is that real faith, real religion, finds itself in the trenches, in the hopes and fears of daily life, in sickness and joy, in heartache and wonder.

As Gibran said so long ago, "Your daily life is your religion" ... so don't look for God in riddles, but find him in the waving of trees and the softly blowing breeze, find her in the laughter of children, in the grief of a widower saying goodbye to his bride.

Recognizing, then healing, the false separation between heaven and earth, creation and the divine, IS the Christian mission.

Whether it is Jesus on a sabbath day "working" to heal a woman, or God letting go of everything and becoming a human being, the whole point and purpose of our faith is that everything is sacred, everyone is holy, and all shall be saved.

Because otherwise, how could God be God?

So with that insight, that truth held firmly and with a smile, we can encounter one another not as enemies or challengers, not as competitors for scarce resources, but as the sisters and brothers we have always been and shall forever be.

As the prophet reminds us this morning, "if you get rid of unfair practices, quit blaming victims, quit gossiping about other people's sin, if you are generous with the hungry and start giving yourselves to the

down-and-out, your lives will begin to glow in the darkness, your shadowed lives will be bathed in sunlight." Isa. 58:9-10. The Message, TR.

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