

The Oak is in the Acorn
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Pent. 16C – August 25, 2013

A friend of mine thinks the Episcopal Church should advertise better. I agree – I’ve said for years that the Episcopal Church is the best kept secret. So why shouldn’t we get the word out? Only my friend wants to do more than just get the word out – he’d like to use provocative ads – ads that point out the stark contrast between Episcopalians and the *other* denominations – Catholics and Baptists. His ad would list distinguishing factors in a column on the left - and off to the right would be a checkmark for “Yes” - So the ad would read something like this: **The Episcopal Church Welcomes You...** Women Clergy...check... Think for Yourself ...check...Everybody welcome *and we mean everybody*...check...Open contraception...check ... You interpret Scripture check. My buddy proposed this ad to the bishop – but the bishop was scandalized. *We are not going to offend our Catholic and Baptist friends.* But you have to wonder, *why not?* Why shouldn’t people know that there is a place where grace really is free? I’m proud of us for this characteristic.

I’m reminded here of the bishop in another denomination who revoked the first communion of a seven year-old girl - the girl was allergic to wheat, so her priest served her communion in the form of a rice wafer – *Wrong*, the bishop warned. *Jesus used only wheat*, he said. Really? WWJD? *What would Jesus do?* And don’t get me wrong – Catholics and Baptists don’t have a monopoly on narrow faith. And there is much to admire in the Catholic tradition, such as a lovely spirituality that we would do well to emulate.

*Perhaps you’ve seen the online post of a sign battle between two churches – Our Lady of Mercy church and its neighbor, Cumberland Pres? The Catholic Church posted a sign that claimed, *All dogs go to heaven.* The Presbyterians didn’t like this, so they posted,

Only humans go to heaven; read the Bible. To which the Catholic Church responded, *God loves all creation, including dogs.* The Presbyterians answered, *Dogs don’t have souls; this is not open for debate.* Catholics: *Get “dog souls” free with conversion.* Presbyterians: *Dogs are animals. Rocks don’t go to heaven, either.* Catholics: *All rocks go to heaven.*

Seriously, though – just because the Episcopal Church is broad-minded does not mean we get it right all the time. We don’t. We, like they, are an *imperfect* church full of *imperfect* people. Sure, we officially welcome gays, but I know of gays who have left perfectly good Episcopal churches because parishioners made snarky comments. Same is true African Americans. And the Episcopal Church *is* pretty white. But what about St. Stephen’s? Someone’s going to say, *now the preacher’s meddling!* But think about the peace – or coffee hour – and who hasn’t *accidentally* shut out a visitor just because you wanted to talk to a friend instead? But we *aren’t* blind to the real needs of others, are we? Like the woman at synagogue? Jesus castigated the head of the synagogue – their rector, if you will – for not seeing this woman’s desperate need. Commandment trumps compassion, the synagogue leader believed. But no – compassion trumps commandment. Jesus went so far as to say: you can break one of the ten commandments if it means this woman have to suffer one minute longer. Commandments are for healing, not for division.

*Christian writer John Milbank talks about how religions create necessary boundaries – boundaries that define groups and distinguish beliefs. But, Milbank observes, Jesus regularly pushed back against religious boundaries – and there’s the paradox:

Christianity must have boundaries, but it must constantly push against the very same boundaries. Put another way, authentic Christianity is self-critical. Which means, authentic Christians are self-critical; Scouring your own faith and soul for ways that you perhaps coddle the cuteness of your beliefs at the expense of human need and dignity.

When God called Jeremiah – he touched his tongue, and inserted word into Jeremiah’s mouth. Jeremiah objected. *I’m too young*, he said. *Find someone older, a person*, as my old boss used to say, *with gray hair*. But, seasoning matters little to God. Heart matters much. To God, time is a mere abstraction. Does time even exist to God?

Perhaps God lives above, or outside, time. Either way, time does not **bind** God the way it binds us. When God looks at an acorn, he sees the mature oak.

Just like when Jesus saw an immature Peter fishing at the Sea of Galilee, he saw a man of great faith. TS Eliot captured this immutable nature of time in his poem *Four Quartets*,

In my beginning is my end: Meaning, that you and I hold in our bodies all of life’s promise, at this very minute. Your life is hand-written into your DNA. TS Eliot continues, *the end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we started*. And with God, there is no past or future, only their intersection, this point, here, now. And this woman bent double is standing off to the side while Jesus is speaking to the people – She is invisible to everybody but Jesus – Nobody sees her burden, Nobody sees her pain – Like the Sam Cooke song, *nobody knows the trouble I’ve seen*...Only Jesus knows, Jesus *sees*. He sees her, not bent double, but standing upright. He sees her not defeated by life but as a whole, complete person.

And just like God touched Jeremiah’s tongue, Jesus touches her. And when Jesus touches her, she physically stands to her full spiritual stature. Her soul that had been in prison until now is now free. For this, too, is a child of Abraham. And all I can think of when I read this is the number of people – even here in Marin – who live bent double. Carrying untold burdens – and all the religious institutions seem to want to talk about is whether dogs go to heaven, or whether Jesus served wheat rather than rice.

What *would* Jesus do?

I’m pretty sure Jesus would welcome every single person – *every single person* - would see in every single person the hope of life, the maturity of the oak.

The promise of grace, you see, is already written into your DNA.