

The Reign of Love:

Sermon for Sunday, November 21st, 2010 by the Rev. Joe Summers

(Readings for the day: The song of Zechariah, Jeremiah 23:1-6, Colossians 1:11-20, Luke 23:33-43)

Though the cause of evil prosper,
 Yet 'tis truth alone is strong;
Though her portion be the scaffold,
 And upon the throne is wrong,
Yet that scaffold sways the future,
 And beneath the dim unknown,
Standeth God within the shadow
 Keeping watch above his own.

James Russell Lowell, 1845

This last Sunday of the Church year is a Sunday in which we celebrate one of the great mysteries of Christianity, and that is the claim that Christ reigns, that love reigns, even here in the midst of our world. Part of the power and mystery of this proclamation is that it claims that this victory is won, not on Easter Morning, but on the cross, that somehow, beyond our comprehension, there, in that all too-broken human figure upon the cross is God's triumph and the reconciliation of heaven and earth.

But mysteries only function as mysteries, only become transformative, if we begin to plumb their depths, if we begin to bring our realities to them and see what strange light they have to shed on them. So today, I want to see how this mystery speaks to one of the biggest struggles we seem to face, one of those realities that seems to destroy us as individuals, couples, families, friends, communities, and nations.

This reality is one we find, at the heart of today's gospel. Jesus is there on the cross. Part of what makes the cross such a potent tool of social control is that it invited public humiliation, public mockery and scorn. It's hard to die well when you're slowly being tortured to death; that much harder when you're surrounded by people laughing at you. It tends to call forth the experience of abandonment. We like to think that weakness and affliction invite compassion, but actually our initial response is often hatred. According to psychology and anthropology, this is because one of the ways we as human beings have learned to handle our individual and collective stress is to project what we don't like in ourselves onto others and then attack them for it. The one who appears weak reminds us of those parts of ourselves which we despise, because we think they make us vulnerable and weak--and so we strike out at them. This is what is at the heart of a lot of bullying. This is why bullies are provoked when they perceive weakness. This is what we see so clearly in this dynamic around the cross. People come to mock those dying on crosses, because it becomes a way of distancing themselves from what they fear and hate in

themselves. Thus it is that Jesus is mocked, not only by the political and religious leaders who sought to see him discredited, not only by the soldiers whose job it is to please their leaders, but even by one of his fellow condemned who takes up the cry: "If you're the Messiah, save yourself and us!". It is so ugly. It is so spiteful. And yet I would say, it's a reality we struggle with--daily.

What do I mean? I mean this little incident, this little story, confronts us with something that happens to us daily, when we live in that unreconciled space in which we refuse to acknowledge and claim the width and breadth of our humanity and, instead, project what we hate and fear in ourselves onto others. Or when we live in that unredeemed space of resentfulness, where we go around feeling victimized and alone and like life and everyone else owes us. I'm talking about our tendency to see ourselves as victims and persecutors, and then have those perceptions feed a resentfulness that then reinforces these perceptions and roles that neither have much to do with the width and breadth of the reality of who we are, nor allows us to live the life of the beloved, the life in which we experience ourselves as beloved and truly loving others.

It's easy to say, I know people who are like this; it's people like those Tea Party folks. Certainly, coming out of that camp we have heard many expressions of this kind of victim/persecutor rhetoric, but it would be so much nicer if this was just a tea party problem. Instead I know that part of what triggers me about them is that they remind me of parts of myself that I don't like, parts that many of us struggle with on a daily basis.

Lately, I have been struck by how hard it is for many of us to be in life partnerships and not let ourselves and our relationships be undermined, or even swept away, by resentfulness. Somehow, instead of seeing and valuing and loving our partners or our children, our parents, our friends, our neighbors, for who they are---we end up rejecting them because they are not who we think they ought to be, or do not do what we think they ought to do. As near as I can tell, often this "ought to be or ought to do" bears little reflection on what we really value and want--its more like expectations and programming we've inherited from the past, or through our culture, or who knows where, but its there---constantly yapping in our ears, leading us to judge as hateful something we don't like, leading us not to be able to see--the miracle of who they are --that is right in front of us.

Nathaniel Hawthorne wrote a little short story about this demonic energy. It's about a man who loves his wife completely, except that she has one imperfection - a small mole on her face. But, partly because she was so perfect in every other way, that one imperfection loomed larger and larger to him, so that he finally convinces her to have it surgically removed. And, of course, in those days before antibiotics, any kind of surgery could be dangerous, and so she ends up dying. And I think Hawthorne's left us with a clear-eyed vision of the dangers of ways of seeing and behaving that we justify all the time. Ways of seeing and behaving that sacrifice the reality of who we and others are-- for the sake of ideas of how we or they are supposed to be, ideas that may have no more grounding in reality than this man's silly ideas on what constituted perfect beauty. (By the way, the musical, Hair Spray, has a great running commentary on this whole

theme, and how it gets played out in terms of race, class, sexual identity, and body type.)

It is absolutely horrifying that we can go through our daily lives not experiencing the living miracles that are the people around us are-- because we've got these little idols telling us who they really should be and leading us to withdraw our love and affirmation, leading us to strike out and punish them for not meeting these ideals.

Let us be clear. I'm not talking about not struggling with each other around the ways we need to grow and change. That's a part of any healthy relationship. What I'm talking about is the refusal to live in this world, in relationship to real people, for the sake of ideas, which, if we examine them more closely, are ultimately pretty petty or at least don't merit our taking the axe or the knife to the bonds of our intimacy.

So if you, like me, struggle not to demean and punish those you love; if you, like me, struggle to let yourself be loved, over and against voices, which I think are there constantly, even if, most of the time, we're able to suppress them, telling us all the good reasons why we don't deserve to be loved, why we should resist letting others love us--- what are we to make of Christianity's talk of the reign of love? What are we to make of the promise we hear in Jeremiah today that God will be our shepherd, so we shall not "fear any longer, or be dismayed" or get lost? What are we to make of the promise we heard in the song of Zechariah today, that in the tender compassion of our God, the dawn from on high shall break upon us, and we shall be free to worship "without fear" and come to know salvation--by the forgiveness of sins? What are we to make of the extravagant claim that we hear in Colossians today that we have been "rescued (past tense!) from the power of darkness and transferred into the kingdom of the beloved and the reign of Christ?

The only thing I can say with certainty is that I don't fully understand it.. but...it's part of why I'm here --- knocking on heaven's door-- because I do want to know--- life that's not about fear, shame, or being lost. I want to know about living in the realm where I know myself to be beloved and love others with that same kind of love. I want to know the power of the forgiveness of sins that allows me to experience salvation--not after I'm dead, but here and now, in terms of the multitude of ways in which, each day, deadly ideas seem to block the heavenly song of loving and being loved.

The author of Colossians calls us back to this scene with which we began - Jesus on the cross. For "he is the image of the invisible God." And, "In him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him, God was pleased to reconcile all things, whether on earth, or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross." (Colossians 1:11-20). (Notice this language of pleasure and desire that is so different from the language of moral judgment that constantly justifies our distancing ourselves.)

What does the cross mean for the author of Colossians? It means---the war is over. It means we no longer need to be judges, deciding who gets to be loved and who doesn't (and this includes

ourselves!). Not only do we not have to do it, we've got no business doing it.

But if we don't have any business sitting on the throne of judgment either in regards to others, or ourselves, --- where does that leave me with all my resentfulness, all my anger, that's dying to go somewhere?

Simone Weil says that Christ on the cross is an image of God inviting us, saying to us, I can handle your murderous anger-- don't hold back. Let me have it, so it doesn't harm you or others. Don't worry about whether it is right or wrong, justified or unjustified. Don't get caught up in feeling self-righteous or bad about it; just give it to me, so that you can take your part again in the circle of life and again sing the song of the beloved, the song of those who love and know themselves to be beloved.

It's a disorienting message, for so much of our sense of who we are tends to be defined by seeing ourselves as better or worse than those around us. It's a humbling message. It's a call for us to get off the throne of judgment and stop trying to be God. It's a disarming message. Stop thinking that, by punishing others, you're going to help them be righteous. Stop thinking that, by punishing yourself, you're going to learn how to be in right relationship with others. Honestly ask yourself, whether a lifetime of punishing yourself, by holding yourself in contempt, by isolating yourself and resisting the love and affirmation of others, has helped you be in right relationship with yourself and others and God? Or has it been more of a barrier? Has your punishing them really helped your partners, siblings, children, parents, friends? Or has it been more of a barrier?

But if we're not going to coerce others and ourselves into being in better relationship--how is it going to happen? How do we help hold each other accountable, if it is not through punishment? What would that look like? Can we really trust ourselves and others simply to respond to the call of love? Those are some of the important questions we're still trying to live into.

The story of Jesus on the cross is a story, a narrative, that helps us to let go of one vision of the world and the ways of being in the world that it gives rise to, and helps us to enter into another world and the possibility of new being.

The vision that we are somehow being righteous and holy when we kill others, in small or big ways, for righteousness sake, reveals itself to be a lie. It reveals itself to be nothing more than scapegoating.

The vision of people as so rotten that the only way for them to do the right thing is for someone to coerce them, reveals itself as corrupted. "Forgive them, they know not what they do." If people don't know what they are doing, it's not about coercion, it's about helping people gain knowledge.

The vision of people as only being able to know the reality of heaven, the reality of being fully

and wholly known and beloved of God, if they are righteous, dies in the vision of the one who says to his fellow criminal--"today you will be with me in paradise."

It's a story that leaves us in a very mysterious, vulnerable world, the world as it is, people as they are, we as we are--stripped of all the abstractions, through which we have sought to control this world, and others, and ourselves. Freed now--- to live no longer as masters or slaves, but as free human beings, living under the gracious rule of love.

This story, codified in the word "the cross," has redemptive, transformative power. We come to this table to enter into this story through bodily participation. We come to this table to know the tree of life, the tree whose fruit of forgiveness opens the door to the communion of the beloved. We come to this meal to let the idols, the petty gods, we feel we need to be, or want others to be, die on the cross, so that we and they can be reborn and live-- as ourselves.

We come to dwell in the One in whom we no longer have to be afraid of, or controlled by, the magnitude of our feelings; the One in whom we are freed to live, no longer afraid of our fears or anger, no longer live, controlled by shame or condemned by guilt, no longer live, bound by false perceptions or expectations of ourselves and others and the resentfulness they give rise to.

We come here to experience the realm of thanksgiving and the ability to appreciate life and people and ourselves for who and what we are. And this place of thanksgiving, this heaven in which love reigns, in which people love and are loved, is not some fantasy, some saccharine, sweet world dripping with honey, but the world as we know it, the world of the cross, the world of here and now.

The Great Mysteries of faith are meant to be doorways to transformation. May we have the openness and courage to enter through them.

For if we are willing, God is able, and if we are ready, God has already gone ahead to prepare a way for us. Amen.