

"Eat, Pray and Love"

Sermon on Sunday, June 30, 2019

Based on Luke 8: 31-46

The minute I read the gospel reading for this Sunday, I came to regret my earlier decision to call this service, "Eat, Pray and Love." What was I thinking? I usually align our themes to at least one of the readings. I'm not pulling them out of a hat. Well, upon further review, these texts don't mesh with our theme for this morning. I don't find much here about eating, praying, or loving. No one can read Jesus' comments and come away thinking that he's a fellow who fits our stereotype of the "nice religious man," the loving, eating, waste-line expanding, praying pastor. Instead, he tells some folks that they are not fit for the kingdom of God for lack of dedication. He rejects people who are eager to follow him, saying they don't know what it takes. Especially in the second part of the reading we are confronted with the DNA of a person who went as far as dying for a cause, dying for us - a true uncompromising radical, that Jesus. What was I thinking to come up with this innocent theme, fit for a summer night at the ice cream parlor: eat, pray and love?

So let's start over again and read this difficult passage anew. In the beginning, Luke tells us that Jesus set his face to Jerusalem, which is not unusual. To this day, devout Jews pray facing Jerusalem. Synagogue architecture is defined by where the Holy City is. The "ark," the cupboard used to hold Torah scrolls, is built in the wall that faces Jerusalem, no matter how far away the synagogue is from the Holy Land. That little detail of religious practice may explain why our Lord wasn't welcomed in the Samaritan village, why the people there "didn't receive him," in Luke's words. Samaritans followed a different religion, and often enough that alone is a cause for tension, - someone being different, from the other side, not one of us, following different customs. I have to say, in the face of those types of tensions, maybe people should do this: eat, pray and love, and find ways of doing it together!

We had family members go to Croatia this past week, a breathtakingly beautiful country in the Balkans with rugged coastlines, old churches and intricate coastal towns. They sent us nice pictures home. But do you remember what a mess that region was 25 years ago? At that time, the artificial state construct of Yugoslavia had just broken apart. The many ethnic groups that had been force-united under the iconic dictator Tito re-discovered age-old resentments that had been suppressed for too long. The entire region was in a free fall of hatred and retaliation, the likes of which Europe had not seen since WW II. And the religious component played a role. Not a good one. It separated people. It deepened their differences. Croatians were, for the most part, Roman Catholic, as were Slovenians. Serbs and people from Montenegro were mostly Orthodox. The communities in Kosovo tended to be Muslims. All was set for a perfect storm of ethnic unrest. It turned out to be so hateful that former neighbors slaughtered former neighbors. At the time they said people became animals, but I am not so sure that animals are ever that cruel. And then you ask yourself: how can religion ever, even passively, even remotely, assist hatred? How can our religion ever fuel violence? - A religion formed by someone who ate with people who were different and marginalized, who prayed not to fall into temptation, who loved unconditionally and who, in this story, held back two of his closest disciples from vengeful retribution, who never used force, ever, except for toppling those stupid tables in the Temple!

The key for our understanding of this passage lies in the beginning when Jesus refuses to give in to the passionate plea of James and John, who are in another gospel called, "sons of thunder."

These two impulsive brothers had apparently misunderstood what Jesus was about. "Do you want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them?" they ask. And Jesus just looked at them, shaking his head. By the way, let's remember, that's exactly what happened in the Balkans 25 years ago: lots of fire raining down from heaven on people as a response to feelings being hurt, entire villages getting wiped out as a result. And as in the gospel, there can be no doubt that Jesus would have turned and rebuked any of those actions that took place in the Balkans in the 1990's. But as far as I know, he wasn't asked.

Then there are these interesting comments by our Lord about not looking back. Interesting indeed! Because, how often are nationalist conflicts fueled by people looking back with nostalgia, wanting to re-create an illusion of what their old world and identity once was? We should be careful when we indulge in fantasies of old glory. Sometimes we chase a ghost. Jesus simply says, "No-one who looks back is fit for the kingdom of God." Of course, we don't have to denigrate what has been, we can love and celebrate history, but spiritually, Jesus says, we need to look forward. Another question. How often are conflicts fueled by a sense of loyalty with one's tribe and family, by pride? Jesus simply says, "Let the dead bury their own dead. But as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God." The kingdom of God, as we know, transcends any particular culture, any particular identity. In the Apostle's Creed we confess that we believe in the Holy catholic Church (small c), that is: the universal church, the church that runs across ethnic groups, cultures, and knits people together in the Sacrament of Holy Communion when we eat and pray and encounter the love of God as one community, as a holy community!

In the beginning of my sermon preparation, I didn't know what to do with some of these harsh, prickly statements that abound in today's gospel. Why for instance would Jesus deny a young man to bury his own dad? Most Bible scholars say that the meaning of this expression was not that the young man's father had recently died and he needed to go home to bury him, but his father was aging and this was a common expression to say, "I need to take care of my elders, I need to care for them until they die." Jesus' reaction is pretty shocking. We want to take care of our elders. That's part of our core family values. That's what we do, right?

The more I thought about it, the more I became convinced that these are statements made in a tense and extreme situation. Jesus set his face toward Jerusalem, but he did so, not just as any devout Jew would, praying toward the Holy City, but as one who looked his own fate in the eye. Luke says, "He set his face **to go** to Jerusalem." It would be his destination, his suffering death, his sacrifice. He didn't have the luxury to look back. It would be a lonely path to the Holy City, surrounded by people but alone inside. In the end, he was even abandoned by his disciples. We are touching here on the holy ground of the gospel, the cross, the willingness of Christ to sacrifice his own body for us, love in the extreme form of giving. What does that mean, for us and for our values?

Sometimes, God may ask us to go against the majority, the main stream, even against family loyalties for the sake of something bigger. Of course, it has to be for a good reason, not to be confused with selfishness or self-grandeur, and it has to be truly for a greater good. As we eat the holy meal remembering his death, as we pray, as we love and encounter God's love and grace in this meal, let us prepare our hearts to be faithful to the gospel when it counts, when it may be difficult, when it may sting a bit. That too is good news, when people of faith are willing to pay a worthy price for the gospel, shining the light of Christ into places where it's badly needed. Can you think of such places? Then go: eat, pray and love. **Amen.**