

Pentecost XVII

Is there no balm in Gilead? Jeremiah 8: 21

First of all then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for everyone. I Timothy 2:1

Whoever is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much. Luke 16: 11

I have found myself recently pondering, a bit more frequently than usual, why it is we church people do what we do. Partly I'm sure that's the aftermath of a lovely vacation – when I was not *doing what we do*. (I'm always most keenly aware of being on vacation when it's a Sunday and I am not in church.) Partly, I think, because of an impassioned and despondent email I got last Sunday from a friend of mine who was contemplating his trip to New Orleans this week to report on the House of Bishops meeting for Integrity, the Episcopal LGBT organization. And partly as well because of a recent visitor to my office who asked, "What do you teach at St. John's?"

But in addition to all this, I've read several articles lately about religion and morality. One was a short piece in the NYTimes Magazine a couple of weeks ago, a piece about Freud and religion. Freud was an atheist, and for most of his life and in his work was quite hostile toward religion. But toward the end – in his 80's in fact – he wrote a book called **Moses and Monotheism** in which he addressed the question of religious faith in more favorable light than previously.

"Freud speculates that one of the strongest human desires is to encounter God – or the gods- directly. We want to see our deities and to know them." He commends Judaism's "distinction as a faith (through) its commitment to belief in an invisible God, and from this commitment, many consequential things follow. Freud argues that taking Good into the mind enriches the individual immeasurably. The ability to believe in an internal, invisible God vastly improves people's capacity for abstraction... Belief in an unseen God may prepare the ground not only for science and literature and law but also for intense introspection." Aha –so Judaism paves the way for psychoanalysis, in that analysis.

And then we Christians came along and took a big step backward with "our panoply of saints", our desire to see God or images of God – a regression toward paganism, in Freud's view. Freud, ultimately, I guess, saw religion as "a source of inspiration and of practical inspiration about how to live in the world. To be sure, it often

takes hard intellectual work to find that wisdom. “ (All quotations from *Defender of the Faith* by Mark Edmundson, NYTimes Magazine, 9.9.07)

For Freud, religion was, or should be, all in the head, in the mind, perhaps in the imagination. And for him God was an abstraction, an idea. But for Christians God is personal, and chose to become incarnate (whatever we mean by that) as Jesus of Nazareth. Someone who touched and was touched, who lived and loved and died on earth. We talk of loving God and being loved by God, and so into our realm of faith comes God as lover – and what do lovers do but gaze on one another, touch one another, enter into emotional and physical intimacy with one another? Most of us yearn to come closer to God (whatever we mean by that). Our faith and practice is not simply intellectual and abstract, it is tactile and emotive: we lament and repent and celebrate and give thanks; we eat and drink the body and blood of Christ,

So our faith and practice, ideally, involves not simply imagining God or thinking about God, but loving God with *all our heart and mind and soul and strength*. Our Christianity takes in all of us, embraces all of us, or it is meant to.

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My friend’s disconsolate email of last week had to do with his fear that the Anglican Communion – in the persons, particularly, of the Archbishop of Canterbury and the Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church, are not enthusiastic about embracing all of us –not all of us who are not heterosexual, that is, not all of us who protest against hypocrisy and compromise in the treatment of our LGBT members. Not all of us who are tired beyond measure of being told to wait.

I share that fear of his. And yet I believe *we do what we do*, as church here at St. John’s, we do what we do because we are committed to trying to mean what we say when we say that Christianity takes in all of us, embraces all of us. I believe and hope that our calling at St John’s is, in our own humble way, to show the rest of the Church the path forward.

The path forward that takes in all of us, embraces all of us. Now I’m meaning *all of us* in several ways here. Last week a couple of people told me that they loved my sheep stories but that the real meat of the sermon came at the end when I said, *there are many faces of God, there are many paths to God, and those faces, those paths, do not need to divide humanity. And surely, God’s purpose is not to divide us but to join us together in hope, in healing, and in thanksgiving.*

So that's one aspect of *all of us*. I'm not talking about Christian triumphalism here, or Christian tolerance, but pluralism, where we recognize that other paths to God have equal validity and value, that Jesus may be our way but is not *the* way. I'm talking about embracing all of God's children throughout *this fragile earth, our island home*—embracing their faiths with gratitude and thanksgiving.

And then there's the *all of us* that we so frequently talk about here at St. John's and that my friend was focusing on last week, the *all of us* within the Anglican Communion who are not fully welcomed sacramentally or even fully tolerated. The LGBT community, and in some places, still, women. And others who are different in some conspicuous or problematic way, on account of race or ethnicity or class or physical or mental particularity.

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And then there's the *all of us* that in some ways the most difficult for us to embrace: the entirety of each and every one of us, the good, the bad, and the ugly that each and every one of us contain within ourselves. We bring all of ourselves to God, and by proxy, to one another in Christ, when we come together as a community of faith and practice. Nothing is hidden from God; God receives and loves us in our wholeness, and although we may see through a glass dimly God does not. God sees us face to face and understands us fully, as we hope someday to understand and to love fully ourselves.

I did not say all this to my questioner who wanted to know what we teach at St. John's. I said the short version: we teach God's passion for justice and equality, God's inclusiveness. And, referring to my sermon of last week, I said, *I guess I'm a universalist. I guess I teach that anyone can be saved.*

The other thing I said is that we teach community; we teach how to live together. I said that much of my work involves gathering and maintaining the community — describing acceptable standards and boundaries for behavior as we try to live together. The kind of behavior Jesus describes in today's weird and difficult Gospel — lying and cheating and short-changing one another, is not acceptable. So, I said, we try to teach complete welcome and acceptance in terms of identity, but not necessarily in terms of behavior. We don't welcome racism or homophobia, and we don't welcome hateful, or spiteful, or destructive behavior. We try, as I say with some regularity, we try never to let one another *stray from the path of righteousness without rebuking one another and*

encouraging one another at the same time. Or, to put it another way, we teach that there is no cheap grace.

So, a few thoughts on why we do what we do, as Church. Our practice is not a neat package, it's incarnational, messy, often confusing and contradictory – it has to be, if it is *to embrace all of us, all the alls of us.* It's a tall order. But, *Is there no balm in Gilead?* I think there is, I hope and pray there is, here in the midst of us, with God, *in whom we live and move and have our (all our) being.*

And we aren't required to fulfill the order all at once. Our Gospel tells us so. *Whoever is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much.*

So, my dear friends, let us go on being faithful in our own humble way, and perhaps the *much* we are promised is that the wider church will follow. And now, *I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for everyone.*

Alleluia! Amen