

**7 Pentecost
July 8, 2018**

**In the name of the God of all creation,
The God alive in each of us as God was alive in Jesus,
And the power of God known in the Spirit.
Amen.**

This has been a rather long ... and hot ... July 4th week. I hope some of you enjoyed the fireworks over the Nation's Oldest City on Wednesday evening. For me this week has had a feeling of being discombobulated. As best I can recollect, Monday morning was fine ... until I realized that the office wasn't going to be open on Wednesday, and Caren was scheduled for second cataract surgery on Thursday. All at once I had to get a full week's "To Do" list done in two days. Then there were the fireworks. We sat in front of our house to watch ... with one very frightened dog crawling all over us whenever a loud boom of a rocket bursting into a colorful star ... no matter how far distant. Then, Thursday morning at 7am, Caren had her surgery. Cataract surgery is rather routine ... many of you have been through it ... but juggling two dogs and transportation to the Eye Doctors that early in the morning is anything but routine.

Thank God for humor! Thank God for being God! Thank God for being able to find God in the middle of being discombobulated.

In this week's Gospel reading, Jesus returns to his hometown of Nazareth after a wildly successful ministry debut. In the weeks preceding his return, he has developed a widespread reputation for his wisdom and authority. He has proclaimed God's kingdom with provocative parables. He has earned the trust of twelve loyal disciples. He has cast out demons, healed the sick, calmed a storm, and raised a little daughter from the dead. He has become, in other words, the dream returnee. The hometown boy made good.

Or so we would think, if the author of Mark's gospel didn't so quickly correct us. In the reading, Jesus entered the synagogue of his boyhood, and began to teach. At first, things went very well; Jesus was received with astonishment and curiosity: "Where did this man get all this? What is this wisdom that has been given to him? What deeds of power are being done by his hands!"

But then something happens. Someone in the crowd, perhaps a jealous old neighbor of Mary's, or a childhood rival of Jesus's, pulled out an old story and started circulating it around the synagogue: "Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon? Are not his sisters here among us?" And they took offense at him. In other words, "Who does this smart-aleck kid think he is?"

Interestingly, New Testament scholars tell us that the only reason to identify someone by his mother in Jesus' day was to question his legitimacy. "Is not this the ... son of Mary?" highlights

the fact that no one knew for certain who Jesus' father was. In other words, to refer to Jesus as "the son of Mary" ... and not, "the son of Joseph" ... was a calculated act, a weaponized use of Jesus' story of origin to shame him into silence. It is the same tactic used in the case of questioning President Obama's birthplace. In Jesus' case it was not considered possible for someone like Jesus ... a mere carpenter of questionable parentage ... to amount to anything. In other words, he had no business rising above his dicey beginnings, no cultural permission to outgrow his origin story: We know exactly where you come from! Don't get too big for your britches! Remember your place!"

I imagine that most of us know something about Jesus' experience ... or maybe the experience of his family. Our children leave home and come back with so much knowledge they don't know what to do with it. The economy major home from college begins telling her parents how they ought to be changing their investments. The physical therapy student starts criticizing our exercise regimen. The son who got a job with an architectural firm tells us that we painted the house the wrong color. Oh, well ... they'll grow up and learn ... at least we hope.

But it is true on the other side as well. I can remember my oldest son, Trace, coming home from college one weekend and saying he was dating a graduate student studying marine biology. My response was, "Oh, right. That means he sat next to her on a bar stool for five minutes." Well, he proved me wrong ... they've now been married for almost 30 years.

When Jesus returned to his hometown his family thought he was mad. They tried to take custody of him. "He's lost his senses," they said. The people of Nazareth ... his friends and neighbors and those he had grown up around ... said he was insane and demon-possessed. Later in the gospels stories the religious experts said he was a glutton and drunkard who partied with sinners. Many of his closest supporters stopped following him. At the end of three years of public ministry, political pundits complained that he told people not to pay their taxes ... and so he was executed.

The story this morning tells us that those who knew Jesus best "took offense at him" ... literally, "they were scandalized" ... "they were embarrassed." But for his part, Jesus was "amazed at their unbelief."

The truly sad and astonishing thing about this story is that the townspeople's suspicion and resentment diminished Jesus's ability to work good on their behalf. "He could do no deed of power there," Mark writes with grim finality. In some mysterious and disturbing way, the people's small-mindedness, their lack of trust, and their inability to embrace a new facet of Jesus's life and mission, kept them in spiritual poverty. They were unable to welcome the unfamiliar within the familiar. They were uninterested in glimpsing the extraordinary within the ordinary. They couldn't imagine a newer and roomier story when the old one was so juicy. So they missed the presence of God in their midst.

Whatever the people of Jesus' hometown saw in Jesus ... this craziness that had to be controlled ... was not the same thing that God saw in Jesus. God's way of seeing is different

than the ways that humans see. For me that is the point of the story. For me, that is where I can connect this story to me life ... especially this week. This week may have been discombobulated for me, but not for God.

In our first reading we heard more of the saga of David ... this part of the story is David being anointed king over all of Israel. The story of David shows how God looks at things differently than we do. David was the last and the least of Jesse's seven sons. The first six sons had all the marks of regal authority, but God told Samuel: "The Lord does not look at the things that man looks at. Man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart." David might have looked "ruddy," but God directed Samuel: "Rise and anoint him; he is the one." And so the least likely political successor was anointed king of Israel, and grew into its greatest leader ever.

Do you get the point? Sometimes God uses different criteria ... a different set of values ... than do we humans. The apostle Paul seemed to grasp at least a taste of this. In today's reading from Paul's second letter to the Christians in Corinth he wrote, speaking of his faith, "whenever I am weak, then I am strong." The Corinthians spurned the apostle Paul. They complained that Paul was a hypocrite ... bold in his letters but underwhelming in person. In contrast to his "weighty and forceful" letters, they mocked his physical presence as "unimpressive." His speaking, they said, "amounts to nothing." Invoking biting irony, Paul apologized for preaching free of charge, and admitted that he was not a "trained speaker." He turned the tables on the Corinthians with the paradox of a gospel of divine strength in human weakness.

Jesus, David, and Paul all embodied the stark contrasts between the sacred folly of God's kingdom and the secular wisdom of worldly ways.

As I mention at the beginning of this sermon Caren and I had another one of those interesting weeks that happen every so often in our lives. Most of you have your own version of the circumstances. First, it was a week interrupted by the Independence Day holiday. Just as the week gets started it stopped. Then it got started again, but all jammed into just a couple of days. A 7am cataract surgery ... Caren's second in three weeks. Her second cataract surgery was supposed to be a week after the first, but the laser machine was broken. So, when she finally had the surgery ... the day after the fireworks ... the question was, "Did they really fix it?" Another sleepless night. Plus, the week was filled with all those other things we call "life." You know, "Life is what happens in the midst of making plans."

But Caren and I are no different than any of you. I know that most ... if not all ... of you have weeks like this ... sometimes months. So ... where is God in all this? That may not be the first question we ask ... but maybe it should be. For me, when I am caught up in all the mess life throws at me I can become very anxious. If ... and sometimes that is a big IF ... if I can stop and ask that question I can find God right in the midst of what is happening, and it has a way of helping that anxiety dissolve. I think it has something to do with opening myself up to the sacred folly of God's way of seeing things instead of the way the secular world wants me to categorize them.

One of my favorite poets is Wendell Berry. He has a wonderful way of seeing things differently. He describes these two very different ways to look at life in his ***Manifesto: The Mad Farmer Liberation Front***. I've read parts of this poem before, but it is one that I read to myself often and I think it is well worth repeating. It even speaks of a different way to be a true patriot as we end this Fourth of July week. It begins with a description of the way of the world, and moves to the way of the sacred and divine.

Love the quick profit, the annual raise,
vacation with pay. Want more
of everything ready-made.

...

When they want you to buy something
they will call you. When they want you
to die for profit they will let you know.

So, friends, every day do something
that won't compute. Love the Lord.
Love the world. Work for nothing.
Take all that you have and be poor.
Love someone who does not deserve it.

Denounce the government and embrace
the flag. Hope to live in that free
republic for which it stands.

...

Go with your love to the fields.
Lie down in the shade. Rest your head
in her lap.

...

As soon as the generals and the politicians
can predict the motions of your mind,
lose it. Leave it as a sign
to mark the false trail, the way
you didn't go.

Be like the fox
who makes more tracks than necessary,
some in the wrong direction.
Practice resurrection.

Practice resurrection.

Jesus, David, and Paul all embodied the stark contrasts between the sacred folly of God's kingdom and the secular wisdom of worldly ways ... the way God sees us and the world, and the way we humans see each other and this world around us. Sometimes, even we are invited to look at the world ... and the many others who are fellow occupants ... through a different lens ... a lens that God might choose to use. We are invited to use the criteria of God rather than that of humans. If we are to take seriously what Jesus took seriously than it can become a practice.

As Wendell Berry wrote:

So, friends, every day do something
that won't compute. Love the Lord.
Love the world. Work for nothing.
Take all that you have and be poor.
Love someone who does not deserve it.

...

Denounce the government and embrace
the flag. Hope to live in that free
republic for which it stands.

...

Go with your love to the fields.
Lie down in the shade. Rest your head
in her lap.

Live life looking through a divine lens and you will see the world differently ... even when life seems discombobulated.

Amen.