

The Way of Love -- Proper 4C

Today we begin what's called the "Season after Pentecost" or "Ordinary Time" in the Church year. Technically, as the Season after Pentecost, Ordinary Time started last Sunday. But because we are reluctant to let go of the spiritual excitement and energy of Eastertide and Pentecost, we have a tradition of celebrating the three-in-one-ness of God on the first Sunday after Pentecost, calling it Trinity Sunday. But today the party season is truly over for a goodly while, and we get back to business. The good news is that the business we get back to is the business of living out and living with all the promises and joys we've been celebrating.

It is as if the festival has ended and we can have our town back, or the guests have all gone home and our house is ours again; the wedding and the honeymoon are over and the marriage begins. As the songwriter James Ingram so beautifully wrote,

How do you keep the music playing? How do you make it last?
How do you keep the song from fading too fast?

How do you lose yourself to someone and never lose your way?
How do you not run out of new things to say?

And since you know we're always changing How can it be the same?

One way we go about answering these questions is to look deeper into the stories that comprise our faith, especially the gospel narratives, in the hope that our changing will always be for the better. The method of deeper looking involves taking one of the Evangelists at a time and listening more closely to what he has to tell us. This year it's Luke's turn. Between now

and Christmastime, we will hear stories from almost every chapter of Luke's gospel; he will be our tour guide, our tale spinner, our window and mirror to the godly life.

Likewise, our readings from the Hebrew Bible, the Old Testament, are arranged in a three-year cycle to allow (and compel) us to experience the entire Bible. Sometimes the Hebrew Bible readings are clearly related to the New Testament and Gospel, sometimes not. The psalm is usually chosen to complement the Old Testament. All of this is part of what's called the "Revised Common Lectionary." Christians of many denominations all over the World are using it. So on a given Sunday, we are all literally 'on the same page.' Pretty moving when you think about it.

In today's Epistle, St. Paul is yelling at the Galatians specifically because they have taken to alternative, in Paul's opinion skewed versions of gospel stories, wandering from the only true gospel there is. Paul would like the Common Lectionary. He would certainly have plenty negatives to say about denominations, but he would like the lectionary – and let those who tell a different story be accursed!

So it is we begin a deeper and more careful listening and consideration of Luke's gospel. He is acknowledged by scholars as the cleverest, most creative and most effective writer in the New Testament, using the same material the others, but in ways that capture our attention and compel our consideration more powerfully than the others. Luke is thought to have been a doctor by profession, but he was also very much a literary artist. Some scholars think he wrote the Book of the Acts of the Apostles first, then constructed his Gospel narrative so as to connect and resound with what was to come in Acts. Today's story is a perfect example of how this would work. In the tenth

chapter of Acts, there is a story about a Roman Centurion whose great faith is revealed in the company of Peter. We heard it a few weeks ago. Peter is impressed and gratified by the faithfulness of this Gentile follower of Jesus. And the story helps lay the foundation for expanding the Christian faith beyond the Jewish world.

In the story we heard today, we have a Centurion whose faith is the catalyst for the healing of his servant. Notice, Jesus doesn't even do anything: The Centurion says, "Only speak the word and my servant will be healed." Then Luke writes, "When Jesus heard this he was amazed at him, and turning to the crowd he said, 'I tell you, not even in Israel have I found such faith.' And when they got back to the house, the slave had been healed." Luke reports no action on Jesus' part. It's almost as if he is part of the crowd of bystanders, saying, "Gee whiz, this Centurion guy is amazazing! What faith and humility! Well I never!" And meanwhile the healing takes place within the Centurion's house.

We are trying to encounter God in the most authentic way possible by listening to Jesus, by observing Jesus, by praying to Jesus. The great theologian Karl Barth observed that Jesus did not found a religion, he let us see God. That is our enterprise, our task, our joy as we move through these stories: to encounter God. Not just because it's how our religious life is organized, but at a deeper level, to encounter God within ourselves, to find and follow more confidently and more joyfully the way of love.