

Monkeys All -- Pentecost+8C

Perhaps you've heard the Cuban proverb: "Aunque la Mona, en la vesta de seda:" "A monkey dressed in silk..." "Mona se queda..." is still a monkey.

Although we are not likely to refer to one another as monkeys, we might do well to look for a level of identification with the proverb, in order to avail ourselves of its wisdom. Especially when the scientific community has taken firm steps to end the use of chimpanzees as laboratory subjects. Thus even among the most secular elements of society, our kinship with our tree swinging, cousins of ours is being increasingly considered as we look for ways to make ourselves more comfortable and happy in life.

So no, while we are not monkeys, silkily dressed or otherwise, surely we must be less arrogant this week about our triumphant primacy in the animal kingdom. We are the only species that regularly kills its own, not for food, but out of fear and loathing, revenge and spite. We are the species that has created and maintains an environment of regular and avoidable violence. We have been unable to admit to each other the roots and ongoing propellants of this violence, let alone diminish, much less control it.

We are slaves to the laws of violence – the violence from which God in Christ is longing to set us free. As such, we are far more absurd, hypocritical and pointless than any monkeys ever were. Dress us up in wondrous silken clothes or grandiloquent cultural accomplishments, or great

achievements, or richly complex religious piety, but, left to our own devices we can still be fearful, greedy, spiteful beings – far more powerful and dangerous than the rest of God’s Creation. Whenever we indulge in exaggerating our importance, we obscure, obstruct and oppose the plans God has made.

The story we just heard is Jesus’ most powerful and straightforward attempt to convey the will of God on the subject of our relative importance in the big scheme of things. As always, it is through the power of story that Jesus conveys wisdom and allows us a glimpse of perfection, but are we able to listen, absorb and allow this story to work on us? *The Good Samaritan* seems plain enough: Don’t be like the two other fellows: too busy to help the injured man; be like the one who helps, who goes the extra mile to care for a stranger. Of course all this is right and good, but what would Jesus have us do differently by virtue of this story? Is there anything else to learn other than: “When you see someone in need, don’t ignore them?” How can this help us escape the horrifying cycles of violence to which we are so achingly prone?

In the time and context of the Gospel writings, the word Samaritan was a marker – code – for wrongness, badness and undesirability. So the contrast is not just between some temple officials and a nondescript citizen; the contrast is between normal, legitimate, mainstream people and someone utterly beyond the pale – an unspeakable wretch. As is so often the case, Jesus makes this persona non grata into the hero of the story. We are being asked to wholly revolutionize our idea of heroism and model behavior.

Furthermore, there are a few, possibly good reasons why the other two men don't stop for the injured man: the dangers of the road, the possibility of ritual defilement, etc. They are not patently evil or unreasonable in their choice to pass on by. They have their responsibilities, and so they have their rationales. What they lack is the perspective – the holistic vision if you will – that Jesus both represents and demands.

We have heard “there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, man nor woman, we are all one in Christ Jesus.” This story is the embodiment of these declarations, and then some. It's not that the Samaritan is better than the others; he's nobody – or he's anybody – who he is doesn't have any significance. The point is, he does not discriminate.

The Rabbi asked his students how they could tell when night was ended and day was on its way back. “When you see an animal in the distance, and you can tell whether it is a sheep or a dog?” suggested one. “No,” answered the Rabbi. “Aha! It is when you see a tree in the distance, and you can tell whether it is a peach or a fig tree!” declared another. “No.” “Well then what is it?” they demanded. “It is when you look upon the face of any woman or man and can tell that they are your sister or brother, no matter who they are. Because unless and until you can do that, it will always still be night.”

When it is your sister or brother, you don't abuse your power by shooting first and asking questions later. When it is your brother or your sister, you don't lurk cowardly

behind the skirts of a peaceful demonstration against violence so you can perpetuate your own vile, murderous agenda.

“O Lord you search me and you know me, you know my resting and my rising, you discern my purpose from afar. You mark when I walk or lie down, all my ways lie open to you. Before ever a word is on my tongue you know it, O Lord, through and through. Behind and before you besiege me, your hand ever laid upon me. Such knowledge is too wonderful for me, too high, beyond my reach. O where can I go from your spirit, or where can I flee from your face? If I climb the heavens, you are there. If I lie in my grave, you are there. If I take the wings of the dawn and dwell at the sea's furthest end, even there your hand would lead me, your right hand would hold me fast...”

If we would be subjects of a loving God; if we would be followers of a living Christ; if we would attempt to order our lives according to the inescapable truths and joyously uncomfortable wisdom in the stories Jesus tells, must we not admit and accept that every social calculation, every excusable discrimination, every rationale we have for passing by on whatever other side of the roads we travel, including the road of perpetual violence unaddressed, is known (and yes forgiven) by that same God? Must we not ponder the truth that our ways of living egregiously waste the time and grace and glorious gifts we have been given; and that each day we stand aside and let the violence continue, we confound our very existence as small, monkey-like wonders of creation? We must stop it, or our children will be lost.