

Sermon, Father William J. Albinger

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Easter 5B 2009

In the Name of our one ever living, ever present God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Well we returned last night at 10 from 11 days in Boston and NYC only to remember that it is still Easter. For Christians, the truth is that it is always Easter and we are fundamentally an Easter People! That is what our Gospel lesson is getting at. John in our Gospel reading is doing what in seminary they call “theological reflection”. His community has been a Christian community for several generations and they have seen enormous changes in the world in that time. Seeing the changes in the world and in his people since the first Easter, he ponders on what God is doing, what this tells us about God and our relationship with God. It is new stuff, this Christian stuff, back then. What John realizes is that Easter is not just about raising Jesus of Nazareth into new life, but also about the raising of all humanity into a new relationship with the Creator. Easter is as much about us as it is about Jesus!

We get our ideas about things, about people, even about God from our experiences. In Jesus’ time and in much of the ancient world, the way life was organized was what is called the patron/client system. The patron was the guy who controlled access to power and wealth and people attached themselves to the patron to get a bigger slice of the pie. The client could not repay the patron, but could only serve the patron by going about praising him and helping him keep his authority. The problem is that the patron could remove his favor at any time for any reason. Being a client had its advantages, but it also was a life of constant worry and fear.

That is how most people then viewed God – God was the ultimate Patron and was often accessed through clients who became sub-patrons. It is the God with white hair and a beard sitting on a throne that we may have seen in Sunday school books. In many ways the world is still that way. Think of the corporate and Wall Street “top dogs”. Think of the way politics sometimes works. When I was back in New York City I was reminded of how much that is still with us. No wonder many of those who still believe think of God that way still. No wonder so many have little use for such a God.

Our readings today tell us that God through his self-revelation in Jesus might be otherwise. That is still considered heresy by many Christians. But I believe it enough to be standing here today. Our readings tell us that God is love – not the emotional love that is feel good stuff – but the total self-giving and ever faithful love revealed in Creation and now in the Resurrection of the One who brought that love into the world in human terms. Jesus tells us that we live and thrive in that and that we can be part of that by being in relationship with God through belief and relationship with him. God own the vineyard and Jesus is the living vine. We live and thrive by being branches attached to the vine. Not only that, but God’s creation can grow and improve through our being part of it!

Our reading reflects the experiences of the early Christians. Jesus changes everything about our view of life and of God. He moves us from a patron-client world into personal relationship with our Creator – one of friendship not slavery; one of partnership in ongoing creation. Now it is a two-way street. We, too, can give and “be about our Father’s business”. Our operating principle is no longer fear but love – faithful attachment to the other and to God.

Let's move from the readings into our own life experiences. The love of a child who has been punished and criticized constantly is hampered and fearful and incomplete. That can change by a loving trusting relationship but such a child is often afraid to be open to this. A child who grows up secure in the parents' love can love without fear even when parental correction is exercised. Isn't that true of all human relationships? In NYC we say a play, *Impressionism*, with Jeremy Irons and Joan Allen. The play shifts back and forth in the lives of two characters focusing on how they developed through life experiences and how those experiences impede or aid in being able to respect and faithfully attach ourselves to another. That should come as no surprise to us who are married. It is all about respect and faithful attachment.

So what can we take from these readings? First, believe! No not the head stuff but the heart stuff – be willing to be open to the other and to God and to trust our way into faithful attachment. Second, wallow in it. It is real - give thanks and rejoice that we have a vineyard owner who gave us a vine we can be part of and not only live by grow and thrive.

Most importantly, be confident! Be like Phillip in our reading from Acts. When God told him to get up and go to an Ethiopian eunuch in the desert, he got up and went. He didn't think about what other thought of Ethiopians or of eunuchs as maimed people or their being impure under Jewish law. Be confident like the Ethiopian eunuch who wanted to know God enough that he was willing to risk rejection when he invited Phillip to sit and talk with him and when he was bold enough to ask to be baptized! Both men by being able through the Spirit to respect one another were able to transcend their fears and find a mutual love of God in Jesus Christ.

Can we accept this Easter message? Can we see God's invitation to relationship in the raising of Jesus and the gift of the Spirit? Can we accept that God's love for us is big enough and faithful enough to cover our failures and shortcomings?

Today is Mother's Day and I would be remiss to leave this out of God's history with us. We couldn't have Easter; we couldn't have new life in Jesus Christ without Easter. Our Christian story all started with a poor young woman named Mary who was lovingly and trustfully attached to God so that she could say yes to something she couldn't understand. Just as we can't have Easter without the cross, it is equally true that we can't have Easter without Christmas. So let us remember Mary's role in the Easter story as we honor our own mothers' roles in our stories.

Amen