

Sermon

Carnival Sunday | February 26, 2017 | Peter Lane

In Jacmel, Haiti this weekend, there is a great celebration of Carnival. Different groups put on fantastic, colorful costumes, wearing huge, grotesque, beautiful papier-mâché heads, like huge versions of the horse over there or the little giraffe over my head. They will depict animals and demons, angels and figures from the Haitian revolution like Toussaint Louverture. See the mask that the boy on the cover of our bulletin will wear? Awesome. Other groups of young men will cover themselves with mud and run through the streets. Brass instruments will sound out. Prestige beer and Rum Sours will be consumed. Fried chicken, beans and rice, plantains, goat in creole sauce. The normal social hierarchies flattened because half the people are wearing masks! Men and women, both the beautiful and the plain, cavorting. In a city that has little running water and not much electricity - joy. In a city with little garbage pickup - beauty. In a city that knows strife - community. Haitian poet René Depestre describes Carnival as "a [frenzied] time of Catholic feasts, Vodou, and being free-spirited at the table and in bed."

We are doing something funny today. We are bringing that party in to the church. Carnival didn't begin in the church. Just the opposite. Hundreds of years ago, carnival developed next to the church, a time and a place where a little steam could be let off, where normally unacceptable behavior would get a pass, where social hierarchies could be questioned, where the sacred and the profane were wedded. The Church focused on the purity stuff. The communities created carnivals in the margins to allow the full flowering of the rest of human goodness.

So, we bring carnival into the church, with stories of Haiti, with great food from New Orleans, with our choir singing a Jazz mass, with me wearing Cubs World Champion cufflinks. You say, that's nice, but the church can't *really* party. Well... The point is important. Christianity can not just harp on purity. Can not just approach bodies with anxiety. Christianity must celebrate the creation that God called very good.

Christianity has had a mixed relationship with the body, often dismissing it. Listen to the Apostle Paul, "Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?" (Romans 7:24) Some Christians have run with that and have chosen to cover bodies, especially women's bodies, viewing bodies as mostly sources of temptation. Reformer John Calvin said, "[Our] perversity never ceases in us, but continually bears new fruits--the works of the flesh...just as a burning furnace gives forth flame." If that is what you think of bodies, you better cover them up. You better restrict them with burdensome hierarchies. It is that spirit that helped usher in the sumptuary laws of Elizabethan England, laws that guarded against too much extravagance and made sure that social hierarchies were clearly visible in one's dress. A church cynical of the body limits praise in favor of penitence. A church skeptical of the body favors hierarchy over freedom.

Let us not fall into trap. We read the story of the Transfiguration this morning. It is tempting to see the transfiguration as an epiphany of Jesus' divine nature, as the escape from this world awaiting all of us. But what if we read the transfiguration as not as a moment in which Jesus left his humanity behind, but read it as an illustration of the potential of his humanity? Even the

sober Swiss Calvin said, "There are unfailing signs of divinity in man" and "The universe is a spectacle of God's glory" (Institutes 1. V). And let's not forget that as Episcopalians, we have taken on the important duty of reminding other denominations of the glory of Creation. John Westerhoff puts it, "We [Episcopalians] believe that the extraordinary is to be found in the ordinary. We affirm life in this world and believe that the body, pleasure, and material reality are fundamentally good."

For too long, the church has been portrayed narrowly as a place where we sinners must go to get off the hook. It is a dour and incomplete view, but often held. Not today. Today we enjoy the great gifts of creation and we break down unnecessary social hierarchies.

The mask helps with both. Haitian writer Edwidge Danticat writes, "There are masks that shield us from others, but there are masks that embolden us, and you see that in carnival. ...Sometimes we mask ourselves to further reveal ourselves..." Sometimes wearing a mask allows us to drop our social pretense, allows us to live out those parts of ourselves that we subsume for one reason or another, allows us to bring joy to others. You have seen the incredible masks that accompany Carnival. Putting on a mask, we can step out from behind ourselves and be who we are. With the mask there can be an intensity of experience. And wearing masks, it is not immediately obvious who is the banker and who is the Barista, it is not obvious who is the police and who is the protestor. Wearing the mask, we can speak across class lines and race lines and gender lines. With good cheer, in carnival we briefly approximate the beloved community.

I'm not naive. People are made of mixed yarn. There is that of God in us and there are strands of evil and selfishness. Our bodies lead us astray. Some social hierarchy helps us organize. I know. But Lent is coming. We will have plenty of time to talk about the strands of evil. Today we pull out those strands of goodness and attend to those times when our bodies have resonated with the divine, recall those moments when we have

been attuned to our humanity, when grace has shown itself to the world through our bodies. I hope you will be here on Wednesday at 5:00 or 7:30, when we will invite you into a season of penitence of fasting. But today and tomorrow and Tuesday and maybe during each Sunday during Lent (they don't count in the forty days) I hope you will resonate with the divinity in you, glory in the holiness of your humanity, attend to the ways that grace shines forth through you. Confuse the hierarchy of our city. Hang out with the uncommon. Take a day to resist your normal role. Brew a batch of beer. Play a Bach Sonata. Knit a scarf. Bake a pie. Run a 5k. Wear your favorite jewelry. Make love. Take delight that the universe can be a spectacle of God's glory.

AMEN