

Sermon

June 25, 2017 | 3rd Sunday after Pentecost
Text: Jer. 20:7-13; Mt 10:24-39 Preacher: Dan Puchalla

If you've been around Episcopalians for any length of time, you might have come across the Latin expression, *Lex orandi, lex credendi*, which roughly translates as *the law of prayer is the law of belief*. A modern paraphrase of this expression that I like is, "If you want to know what we believe, come worship with us." In this is a core feature of the Episcopal branch of Christianity: We are hesitant to issue magisterial statements about doctrine. Instead, Episcopalians have this thing, *The Book of Common Prayer*. It holds within it the shape and character of how we worship. Though here at SPR we don't worship directly out of BCPs, the bulletins you all hold in your hands are essentially pulled right from these pages. We just make it more user-friendly and don't make you juggle a library of hymnals. It remains the case that it's what we do in this space that expresses best what we believe.

One of the implications of this is that our worship doesn't make definitive statements without also raising questions – even unsettling, possibly impious questions.

Let's take the baptism we're about to perform. The main business of a baptism, besides the dunking, is affirmation and reaffirmation of what we call the Baptismal Covenant. The Baptismal Covenant is split in half: The first half is the Apostles' Creed put in the format of question-and-answer. "Do you believe in God the Father? I believe in God, the Father Almighty, etc etc." The second half asks a different set of questions, including among them these two: "Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself? Will you strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being?" The reason for these questions is the notion that those who profess belief in God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit must also promise to live in a certain way. Belief in this God has *ethical* consequences, in the largest meaning of the term. Our bishop, Jeff Lee, likes to call these the *So What?* Questions.

But the liturgy of Baptism raises for me unsettling questions about the relationship between the first set of questions and the second, between the Creed and the So What, between what we're supposed to believe and how we're supposed to live.

Today's gospel is an example of what I mean. On the one hand, Matthew's Jesus gives one of the most beautiful images in the Bible of God's love: "Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. And even the hairs of your head are all counted. So do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows." This is the biblical warrant for that last question in the Baptismal Covenant: "Will you strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being?" God has counted the hairs on Philando Castile's head. God has counted the hairs on the head of each denizen in Grenfell Tower and on the heads of the poor and elderly and women who need government funding for chronic illnesses, nursing homes, and reproductive health. God has counted them. Why haven't we?

The image of the sparrow is given by a Jesus we follow gladly, even if far from perfectly, here in this community. This Jesus is the Jesus who welcomes sinners at his table and flips the tables of oppressors. This is a Jesus who teaches us how we're supposed to live.

But, on the other hand, Matthew's Jesus, without pausing for breath, also says, "Everyone therefore who acknowledges me before others, I also will acknowledge before my Father in heaven; but whoever denies me before others, I also will deny before my Father in heaven." This ultimatum seems to provide a basis for the first half of the Baptismal Covenant, the creed, the public acknowledgment of Jesus. "Do you believe in Jesus Christ the Son of God? I believe in Jesus Christ his only Son our Lord..."

Today the Baptismal Covenant unsettles me by calling attention to all the ways that these two halves are in

conflict. How can the God who counts each hair on the heads of every person also be a God who will throw into hell anyone who publicly denies Christ? The Jesus who issues this ultimatum seems to me less the Jesus of radical hospitality and more the Jesus of the crusades and colonialism and the Klan and the Alt Right. This Jesus seems to me less concerned about striving for justice and peace among all persons and more concerned about chauvinistic loyalty to a particular religion. And we know full well that this isn't an isolated passage. The modes of Christianity that have been and continue to be grounded in loyalty to this Jesus can cite much biblical warrant.

And there is also much biblical warrant for the Jesus we follow, the Jesus of radical hospitality. How can we serve both of these masters? Doesn't the Jesus who demands loyalty get in the way of the Jesus who commands neighborly love? Doesn't loyalty to a religious figure build walls around our ethical vision? Doesn't certainty that we are on the side of God easily authorize us to commit atrocities in his service? Isn't that the way chauvinism *always* goes? Isn't the proof of this in the story of the Church itself?

And what I think I'm really asking is, ought we to be religious at all? Isn't it enough to strive for justice and peace? Isn't that the message from so many of the prophets? Isn't that the message of Jesus himself in so many places? If that is what God truly demands of us, then why do we need the rest? Why do we need the first half of the Baptismal Covenant? Perhaps the most Christian thing we can do is to stop being Christians.

Perhaps it is.

So many of us in this space have fled that Jesus and yet we also end up like Jeremiah in today's first reading: *If I say, "I will not mention him, or speak any more in his name," then within me there is something like a burning fire shut up in my bones..* One of the most important things this parish has been doing for decades is figuring out together how to follow Jesus without the chauvinism.

And that sort of project, as far as I am concerned, is the only excuse for being religious. I find it's not enough simply to try to be ethical because being ethical is *complicated*: we need spaces where we can ask unsettling questions, respectfully debate possible answers, and solicit the voices of those who have been silenced. Ethics

cannot be an individual project; it's inescapably a communal one. Being ethical is also *hard*: we need spaces of encouragement in the face of adversity, even mortal danger, and spaces to be strengthened against the alluring urge to conform to patterns of violence and selfishness that still very much rule this planet. That fire within our bones needs stoking. Being ethical often comes with *failure*: we need spaces to admit we haven't lived as we ought and to recommit ourselves to the wellbeing of all humanity. Being ethical takes a *long time*: we're not going to figure it out on our watch, but we also don't have to start from scratch. We need spaces for immersing ourselves in ancient wisdom and story and for talking with the generations who have come before us. And being ethical is quite literally *super-natural*: It goes above our instincts for survival. The duty to strive for justice and peace for every human being cannot simply be deduced from the world as we find it. It is grounded in our awe for the splendor of creation, in the inscrutable nature of love, in our unaccountable aversion to the sight of suffering, in the mysterious responsibility we feel for injustice anywhere. We need spaces for marveling at these things and giving thanks.

The first half of the Baptismal Covenant and so much of the bible easily becomes a warrant for chauvinism, but it doesn't have to be so. These texts ought not build a wall but they can build a *commons*, like a city park or a town square, a verdant space where we talk and play and lament and pray, and where we try to figure out how we shall live. *Lex orandi, lex credendi*. Before there was the Creed, before there was one jot or tittle of the bible written down, there were already people talking and striving and working and praying together.

When we baptize Irene today, we welcome her into this commons. Both halves of the Baptismal Covenant are not for us a magisterial set of assertions or a pledge of allegiance but a commitment to join a conversation and a community that is millennia old, with a divine charter to make God's love take flesh in and for every human being. And when we renew our own Baptismal Covenant today, let us welcome ourselves back into this commons, too. Let us not let the voices of chauvinistic Christianity drown out our own. The Christ we whisper to one another here, let us shout from the rooftops.