

Sermon: Last Sunday after the Epiphany

The Rev. Mike Wernick

February 15, 2015

Year B
2 Kings 2:1-12
Psalm 50:1-6
2 Corinthians 4:3-6
Mark 9:2-9

On Friday evening... the St. Olaf Choir gave a concert at Calvin College... I wanted to go... I've heard so many exceptional things about them... and I thought it would be nice to meet Anton Armstrong... who some of you *don't* know... led the music program at Ascension Lutheran Church many years ago...

But I chose to attend an event sponsored by the Kaufman Institute and the Salaam Project... because this week's shootings in Chapel Hill... of three young Muslims... 23 year-old Deah Shaddy Barakat... his 21 year-old wife Yusor Abu-Salha... and her 19 year-old sister Razan Abu-Salha... highlighted for me... our nation's religious intolerance... and the suspect in these shootings may not have hated Muslims *per se*... but he was known to be anti-religious... he seems to have just hated religion... The Kaufman Institute is located at Grand Valley State University... their mission is to promote interfaith understanding and mutual respect... the Salaam Project is an effort of the Christian Reformed Church... and seeks to promote understanding about Islam... and the event itself was a Muslim / Christian dialogue on peacemaking... three Imams and two Pastors responded to previously submitted questions about how their faiths' leaders and traditions promoted peacemaking... and their responses included references from the Jewish scriptures... the Christian scriptures... and the Qur'an...

I went as the diocesan Ecumenical Officer ... I went because I thought it was important to demonstrate to the community that this was something *worth* supporting... and I hoped to hear something that reflected... in some way... what our Episcopal Presiding Bishop has proposed... that for us Christians... Jesus is our doorway to God... but for

us humans to think that God can't possibly act in any other way... is for us to put God in a very small box...

In their answers... there were common themes of forgiveness... and there were striking parallels between what Jesus said... and what Mohammed said... that God had said... this part was not a surprise... but I came away somewhat disappointed... because in one of his answers... maybe empowered by their collegiality... one of the pastors said... that in spite of his friendships with these Muslims... he might still try to proselytize them... hoping to convince them... of that which means so much to him...

Maybe I misunderstood... maybe he said this less for the audience's benefit... and more for some on the panel... you know... sometimes in a group you can say something like an inside joke... that's more for one person's benefit even though others hear it too... maybe it was something like that... but I felt almost sick to my stomach... that at an event designed to foster peacemaking... someone might even joke about the integrity of another's faith... it brought back childhood memories of televangelists... reminded me of Jerry Falwell saying: *If you're not a born-again Christian, you're a failure as a human being*... and reminded me that several months ago... Oklahoma Rep. John Bennett told a town hall audience that the Islamic faith is a cancer in our nation that needs to be cut out...

When I became a Christian... it wasn't because I believed that Christianity was right and other religions were wrong... in the letter I wrote to my parents... I said: *I have not given up or rejected any part of my previous spiritual or religious experience... because all of that experience is part of me, and to reject any of it would be to reject a part of myself... my goal is wholeness — not fragmentation*...

When I became a Christian... it was because of how I experienced God in Christ... it was because... in the radical grace and love for us... God became human... to bridge the gap between the human and the divine... and I realized... that what I'd learn to call

works righteousness... wasn't part of the equation that kept God interested in me... and kept drawing me into God...

And sometimes... when we're drawn into God... things can seem to happen way too fast... sometimes we need to catch our breath... especially when they're out of our control... we need time to get our head around things... to process them... and what they mean for us and our relationships...

When my mom and dad... both... had their own injuries and illnesses this past summer and fall... there were moments... here and there... when I needed to catch my breath... process things... imagine this or that outcome... get in touch with what I thought and how I felt... or how I'd feel... prepare myself... as well as I could... for whatever would happen... for what might come... and figure out where God was in this for them and for me...

The sermons we heard on the 1st and the 8th... both shared just how very much had happened in Mark's Gospel... in such a short amount of time... in the entire Gospel... Mark uses the word *immediately*... twenty-seven times... they're on the move... no time to stop... and the disciples were probably overwhelmed too by what they experienced in Jesus... and by what he said and did...

At the end of Chapter 8... just before today's reading... Jesus calls the crowd and his disciples and tells them that they need to deny themselves and take up their crosses... that they need to lose their lives in order to save them... and that if they're ashamed of him and what he teaches... then he'll be ashamed of them when he comes into his glory...

And six days later... Jesus takes his inner circle up the mountain... with everything happening at breakneck speed... six days later is quite a break... but maybe they needed six days... to let all of it sink in... to figure things out... We don't know for certain

which mountain this was... some scholars think it was Mt. Tabor... but when they got there... pretty much right away... Jesus was transfigured... which means *transformed into something more beautiful or elevated*...

Fr. John Shea writes: clothing is the outer expression of a person's inner identity... it's how their identity becomes visible to others... *dazzling white clothes*... symbolize that Jesus is completely integrated... the white light at his center... transfigures his entire being... and we are to understand that this whiteness... goes beyond what anything on earth can accomplish... and apparently... Peter... James... and John don't overhear what Jesus... Moses... and Elijah are talking about... it's enough for them to know that the Jewish tradition is honored... and is a part of this...

We're all aware of Christian leaders... of various stripes... who give Christianity a bad name... but do we believe that the Christian Way we've chosen... is better than anything else that's available... that it's right while others are wrong... or do we simply understand it as the best one for us... do we reject whole-cloth... statements like those made by Rep. Bennett... or do we believe... in some way... that God favors us over every non-Christian who ever lived...

Some of you may have known about the Chautauqua Institute (in western NY) before I did... but I have applied to attend one of this summer's weekly programs for clergy in their first five years of ministry... and it is for Christian... Muslim... and Jewish clergy... I will not go intending to proselytize... I will not go patronizing others but believing I know better... I will go... doing all I can... to respect the dignity of every human being... and if I can... I will affirm the implicit integrity of others' faith journeys... remembering that all of us are all called from glory to glory... and if all religions... at least these three Abrahamic faiths... all call us to be more than what we are... to be transformed... then why are there any questions about which way... is more transforming than any other...

On the first Sunday after the Epiphany... after Jesus was baptized by John... only Jesus heard the voice from heaven... but today... on the last Sunday... God's voice is heard by Peter... James... and John... and it tells them who Jesus is... and what to do... *Listen to him... Listen to him...* God's revelation becomes more audible...

When we listen to Jesus... we are called to follow him... are taught by him... and are formed by him... when we follow Jesus... we too will be transformed into something more than what we are... because when we follow Jesus... our being... and the clothing of our behavior will change too...

As Protestants... we reject the idea of *works righteousness*... but some people use this rejection as a reason to avoid those practices which form us... we all believe there's nothing we can do to *earn* our salvation... but we sometimes think that because Jesus *secured* our salvation... and did all the heavy lifting... as it were... there's no good reason for us to do any...

In three days... we begin our Lenten journey... we will follow Jesus through the pain and death of Good Friday and into the new life of Easter... his journey becomes our journey... his glory becomes our glory... and so I pray that you will all hear God's voice... know who Jesus is... and follow him... so that your faith may deepen... and you... like the disciples... will know what to do... Holy God... make it so...

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