

July 3, 2011

Proper 9, Year A, Revised Common Lectionary (Track II)

Third Sunday after Pentecost

Zechariah 9:9-12

Psalms 145:8-15

Romans 7:15-25a

Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30

On this Independence Day weekend, a story about the very first time I remember participating in the political process.

It was the campaign season of 1988. And what a campaign it was: the fateful pledge articulated by George Bush—the first George Bush, that is—“Read my lips: no new taxes.” The photo op of Democratic candidate Michael Dukakis sitting in a tank, looking less like a military hero than a dorky governor of Massachusetts. The attack ads featuring a murderous Willie Horton. Now none of these newsworthy media moments had actually managed to percolate into my friends’ and my embryonic political consciousness. The other first grade boys and I, on the playground of our school in Amarillo, Texas, were blissfully unaware of most of what was happening on the wider national scene. The only information that had managed to penetrate our world of Thundercats cartoons and Super Mario Brothers were the candidates’ names, and who our parents planned on voting for.

I mentioned that I lived in Amarillo, Texas. Maybe you’ve seen the political maps the networks make during election night coverage where every county in the nation is colored red, blue, or some shade of purple in between. Well, on those maps, Potter County, Texas, is pretty much on the exact opposite end of the spectrum from King County, Washington. My city was Bush Country. And so during that fall of 1988 our playground games at recess took on a distinct character. Whoever got tagged—instead of having to be *it*—had to be *Dukakis*.

Now this was a bit of a disconcerting development for me. Because as it happens, both my parents were Northern Democrats. And as a loyal six-year-old, I knew with unquestioning conviction that my parents were right and everyone else’s were wrong. So when I inevitably got tagged and the cries went up, “Stephen’s Dukakis! Run!”—I decided to stage an act of civil disobedience. Or at least, this is the way I remember it. “Fine with me,” I announced breezily. “I guess I just won’t tag anybody. I *like* Dukakis.”

My political protest lasted about thirty seconds as it soon became clear that my lack of participation was ruining the game, and with it my popularity among the young gentlemen of the first grade. This was Republican Tag, not Democrat Tag. So to avoid further ostracism, I eventually relented. Because—as you may have experienced in your own life—kids can be very exclusive when the game is *not played right*.

In the passage we heard from Matthew’s gospel today, Jesus describes a similar situation. Imagine two groups of kids. One wants to play wedding. The other wants to play funeral. Instead of agreeing on a game that works for everybody, they divide into squabbling camps and start hurling recriminations. “You’re playing the game wrong! We played the flute for you and you didn’t dance!” “Oh yeah? *You’re* playing the game wrong. We pretended to be funeral mourners and you didn’t weep!” “Oh yeah? Your game is stupid anyway!”

How familiar is this scenario to us? It rings true to anyone who has ever been a kid. For that matter, it rings true to anyone who has ever been an adult. Think of the world of politics. To spend even a few minutes listening to the scripted speeches of politicians in either party about whether the debt limit should be raised this summer is to enter into an alternate reality in which actually solving problems is far less important than scoring points against the other team. But life in the church can be just as polarized, with words like

"progressive" and "orthodox" and "traditional" and "contemporary" thrown around as labels to deny the validity of other Christians' experience of God. And drill down farther, past the large scale of political or religious life. When was the last time you experienced an argument in your family life where you got stuck, unable to appreciate any validity in the other person's point of view? There are times when we see even our best beloved as an adversary who has to be proven wrong. Much though we'd like to think of ourselves as fair and reasonable people, we should probably admit that we, too, are part of what Jesus calls "this generation"—a generation of people more able to find fault and to divide into camps than to recognize God's truth at work in one another. Two thousand years haven't changed the fact that our hearts are hard.

John the Baptist lived a harsh and ascetic life in the desert. He preached a stern message: repent of your sins before the Messiah gets here. Some people saw God's truth at work in John. But others laughed him off as a crazy man with a demon.

Jesus came as the Messiah John had been predicting. He ate and drank with prostitutes and tax collectors, changed water into wine, laughed and danced at wedding feasts. Some people saw God's truth at work in Jesus. But others drew back in disapproval of his freewheeling behavior.

John versus Jesus. Asceticism versus celebration. The law of God versus the good news of God. We seem to have a deep need to define ourselves, not by who or what we are, but by who or what we aren't. The way to be a liberal Christian is not to be a fundamentalist; the way to be a Republican is not to be a Democrat. And that means that we don't know what to make of it when a God comes along who is both/and. In the vast richness of God, there is no contradiction—only glorious abundance of everything that is good. The wildness and fierceness of God is the other side of the tenderness and compassion of God. God's holiness is in harmony with God's mercy. The reading we heard this morning from the prophet Zechariah speaks of a Messiah, a king who is to come, and describes this figure as both triumphant and humble. He shall rule "from sea to sea"—apt phrase for us too, on this Independence Day weekend—but he rides into Jerusalem not at the helm of a war chariot but on the back of a simple donkey, as if President Obama had showed up for his inauguration at the wheel of an old Corolla. Over and over again, scripture tells us that true power is shown in servanthood, and true glory is shown in compassion. It's this very passage that Jesus will choose to enact at the start of the climactic week of his life. On Palm Sunday—and then through all of Holy Week and Easter—Jesus acts out in his own body the deepest truth about who God is: a God whose power and might are synonymous with humility and service.

Have you ever asked a friend a simple, either/or question, and had them respond by just saying, "Yes?" "Do you want cake or pie?" "Yes." I have to admit this gets on my nerves. My inner monologue starts getting shrill: "Quit being cute, it's a simple either/or question! If you want both, just say so!"

But when it comes to the truth about God, there's a deep wisdom in being able to simply say, "Yes." Is Jesus a Protestant or a Catholic? A conservative or a liberal? Orthodox or progressive? Yes, yes, yes to it all! The God who is beyond all our divisive camps is also the source of all the partial truths we proclaim so loudly. And in God's perfection, everything that is true and good is held together in one harmonious whole. As the apostle Paul wrote to the early Christians in Galatia: "there is no longer any such thing as Jew or Greek, slave or free, male and female: for all of you are one in Christ Jesus."

That is good news for a nation, and a world, stuck in conflict. It is news that we, as the church, are called to live.

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