

Second Sunday after Trinity

I John 3: 13ff

Luke 14: 16ff

+In the Name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Ghost. Amen+

Richard Ledderer, in his little book Anguished English, surveys the almost limitless ways we Americans have of both using and slaughtering our native tongue. He repeats notes from parents writing unthinkable excuses for a child’s absence during the school day (please excuse Johnnie from class cause he was ill on the 30th, 31st, 32nd, and 33rd of last month), to unrepeatable commentaries on bodily functions. The work includes an entire chapter devoted to the “poet laureate” of lost communication, Yogi Berra, catcher for the New York Yankees, whose ludicrous yet memorable and often poignant phrases dot the American landscape. Asked by a team mate, “Yogi, what time is it?”, he responded, “You mean right now?”. He is credited with having said, “It ain’t over till its over.” And a personal favorite is his gem of wisdom, “If you come to a fork in the road-take it!” In spite of stating the obvious in unconventional ways, there is a certain simple and startling truth in many of these epithets, perhaps especially the last one. The stark reality known deep down inside by each of us is that life is not a continuous stream of easily arrived at truths. We do not get up each morning with the day’s agenda printed out for us to pick up, follow along step by step, until we arrive at the appropriate conclusions and then check them off as achieved. This is especially true of living out our vocations as Christians! Over and again we find ourselves facing forks in the roadway; choices that call for us to decide and judge whether to take this path or another one. Do we act responsibly in this time of infectious challenge with regard to our neighbor, or is exercising personal freedom a higher value to us? And given our human nature the inclination is often to go toward the path of least resistance; to take that one which eases our struggles and lets us off the hook in terms of struggling with right and wrong, good or a lesser good, a tougher way to live verses one that avoids our deepest calling. Such action-decisions fail to take into account the great dignity of the lives we have been baptized to lead. **God calls us to be immersed into His life and not something less.**

In a recent set of classes I was asked to deliver lectures on another of the great world religions, Islam. We talked about historical events, crucial crossroads, and of course the differences between the Christian Faith and this other perspective, which are considerable! The class was surprised to learn that Islam does not carry the same body and type of theological reflection, or the creedal formulations which we assume to be essential to our life. One of the attendees noting this difference asked why it should be so. The answer is that on the whole Christians have tended to ask the question, what must I **believe**? Islam tends to ask, what must I **do**?

The epistle lesson for today from I John lays out a clear and decisive image for those of us who hold to the Christian Faith. In facing the “forks in the road” the author simply states that what we believe has consequences for decisions and the actions that come from them, or those beliefs are hollow. Have you ever encountered T.S. Eliots’ poem, the Hollow Men?

We are the hollow men
We are the stuffed men
Leaning together
Headpiece filled with straw. Alas!
Our dried voices, when
We whisper together
Are quiet and meaningless

As wind in dry grass
or rats' feet over broken glass
In our dry cellar

Shape without form, shade without colour,
Paralysed force, gesture without motion;

In short, what we believe will determine what we will do, and maybe even how we will do it!! There is no suggestion here that our living will be perfect or without considerable questioning, merely that we will seek to be faithful to what is in us, for believing without result is illusory.

Every Sunday we come together and confess, “I believe in God, the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth and of all that is visible and invisible.” What does that imply? Why does it matter? For one, we acknowledge we are in a dependent relationship, from the greatest to the least of us. Second, that all that exists is a gift to be honored, not misused. Third, that we are our brother and sister’s keeper.

It is interesting that in the Synoptic Gospels, Matt, Mark, and Luke, the phrase “The Father” occurs only twice. But in John’s writings it occurs 75 times. I suspect that is no accident. In the sections just before and after this lesson it is emphasized, and here made explicit in the phrase, “we perceive the love God has for us because he has laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren.” **The moment we confess God is Father we are equally saying we are family**, and that has consequences in terms of spending our energies and our lives for one another. John has a word for it: LOVE. Why do you suppose that the very second thing in our liturgy the priest says to the parish is, “you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and soul, and mind; and your neighbor as yourself”? It is because this is what forms who we are as a community. It is who we are and how we will live in the world, even if the world around us lives by another creed. There is a fork in road which marks two kinds of love: one driven by ego and the other by self-giving. They are different.

The truth is that the word love occurs more times in literature, in popular music, and in T.V. programming than any other. We seem consumed by the notion. We love the way we feel when we are “in love”. We adore the idea of being loved. Teenagers spend more time being concerned about their love life than any other concern that catches their energy and attention. But a great portion of our culture and the world around us is more enamored with the **idea** of love than with the **hard work of living it out**. I suspect that has to do with a belief that love is primarily feeling good about others and ourselves. This is the love that places us at the center of relationships where we can be in its limelight. A warning: if our giving of our love requires that it somehow come back to make us the star of the scene, then we need to be on the lookout! We seem to hold the idea that love is something that just comes naturally and must come back to giving something to us. Even old I John recognizes the struggle when he says, “If our hearts condemn us, God is greater than our heart...” He is simply saying that Christian love is more than what appears around us. It is summed up in seeing our neighbor’s need and putting it before our own. What I am suggesting is that love is a choice; a decision to live in this messy world as God’s children and seeking to embody it in every situation, even when there are far easier paths to take. A dear friend of mine has a saying which is absolutely true: “To love deeply is to suffer deeply.” To do so does not come

naturally, but is a choice placed before us when we are God's. And it can alter the lives of those who receive it as well as those who give it. We are not called to be perfect in this, but to constantly grapple with how we make our choices knowing our dependence on the Father, and that is what He asks of us. It is called patient faithfulness.

In the middle of the last century a wonderful novel was penned by Graham Greene. It is entitled The Power and the Glory. Perhaps you have read it. If not, it is the story of an inept priest (no, it is not my biography) in war torn Mexico. He is a never-do-well, drunken, and often incapable man who in spite of his ineptitude becomes an instrument of grace in the lives of all around him. Most of the time he seems to hang on for dear life rather than having a clear, disciplined plan for his ministry, and yet his very incapability seems to speak of the power of Christ being present in his ministry. The novel shows him in comparison to the well-ordered missionaries around him who do all the right things, but their actions seem inauthentic, not a part of their personhood. Rather what shows through in this priest is his "abiding in Christ's love" even with all his rough edges. Those who receive his attempts see that love and find healing just where it seems most unlikely. He is a wounded healer. That is what I John nudges us toward today. May those who encounter us find persons who have chosen a better way. Amen+