

Sermon: "... or are you envious ...?"

I've been busily preparing for the next Gathering of Baptists, which—I'll remind you again—takes place here on October 24 (and I urge you to consider coming ... a grand bunch of people are invited; important thinking is to be shared!). One of the six sessions addressing *input from historically marginalized populations (that the church really must hear in order "to faithfully evolve"!)* turns to the sciences and social sciences, whence comes insight that saddens me, [input] concerning a devastating historical distortion of Christianity ... a distortion chosen by Christianity itself.

The location of the misrepresentation is in the period known as the Enlightenment, the intellectual movement of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, whose blossoming in philosophy and science was based on confidence in – and development of – human observation and reasoning. Things which, up to then, were mystical and unfathomable, either became understood or were set on a path towards becoming so. It was not that the universe lost all its mystery, but it did fundamentally lose its magic.

Except for in the Church, or—at least—the mainstream of its people, its thinking and believing.

There *were* scholars, *then and ever since*, who worked to apply all that the Enlightenment brings to our faith; but they and their work were largely resisted, even demonized. (A modern and personal report: When I announced to our Ottawa congregation that I was going to study at McMaster Divinity College back in 1977, a pillar of the congregation asked to meet with me and proceeded to pray over me that my way of belief would not be corrupted by critical academic exposure!) What the Church, as a whole, did with the Enlightenment was dig in its heels and prefer to stick with its magic.

So, "Faith" and "Belief"—which up to the 17th century were about relationship to the Creator, Provider, Saviour God, in the Way of Jesus

Christ—became instead a brain distorting exercise of saying “Yes” to a long list of magical propositions: six-day creation; Red Sea and Jordan River parted; virgin birth; walking on water; three-or-four-day dead bodies raised ... I won’t keep parading them out to you here because (a) it would take most of the rest of my sermon time, and (b) you know them, from long exposure, anyway.

Having taken the anti-Enlightenment path, the Church solidified it with theology (thinking about God), Christology (thinking about Jesus) and ecclesiology (thinking about the Church) that identified two camps of humanity with a solid dividing line between them: on the inside, those who affirm all the magic and whose worship both celebrates God-the-Magician and seeks more of the same *in the name of Jesus*; and on the outside, any and all who cannot check off all the boxes on “orthodoxy’s” MAGICAL BELIEF entrance test.

How sad is it(?), that Jesus’ living, and teaching, and calling to follow in God’s Way of mercy, forgiveness, healing, justice, hope and love, got converted by the Church into a mind game: “Say ‘*Jesus – born of a virgin; performer of the otherwise unimaginable; ascended and returning on a cloud – [say ‘He] is my saviour!*’ and you are going to heaven; otherwise, go to hell.” [By the way, let me clarify that our leadership and preaching team at MacNeill are united in using scholarship and critical thinking—Enlightenment era thinking and onward—towards a presentation of grounded Christian believing, acting and relating in the world. As is the case in many other churches, as well. Just not in most.]

The majority response of the Church to the Enlightenment wasn’t a new phenomenon, however. Humanity’s predilection to put self *and those like self* on an ‘inside’, and others—“undeserving others”!—on the ‘outside’, is there in every age of humankind. Across the *biblical* reports of this is a felt certainty that **God** is – yes! – **on** the insiders’ side, and – just as importantly – **against** (vehemently against!) the outsiders. In the Old Testament, the people of Israel who know-and-follow the

Commandments, who remember and follow the many laws derived from the Commandments, who show up to offer sacrifice, and who daily worship following all the traditions, [these] expect to be able to lean into **God** who has covenanted with them, to be with them *especially*, and to do for them *particularly*, because God surely owes them that for all their painstaking efforts.

Jonah, like his fellow countrymen, **felt** this righteousness and goodness in himself and looked with scorn on the contemptuous wickedness of Ninevah. Ninevah deserved to burn, to suffer greatly, to be obliterated; just as faithful Israel deserved to be blessed for its chosen-ness and righteousness!

You might remember, at this point, that while this is what a *majority* believed and lived by, the *mature prophets*—those evolved far beyond the likes of Jonah—believed, taught and urged otherwise ... *markedly otherwise*.

As *did Jesus*, for his listeners.

You know how Jesus used parables about other-than-religious spheres of transaction (often agriculture; in today's parable, the market economy and its labour code) to teach God's point of view and God's ways. Today's parable is stunningly brilliant because Jesus manages to catch every listener *then*, and *since*, in our heart of hearts which longs for fairness, which longs for what we do in life to count and be valued. So, "How can someone who works only for $\frac{3}{4}$ of the day, or $\frac{1}{2}$ of the day, or $\frac{1}{4}$ of the day, or just the last hour of the day, possibly be paid like me who has put in a whole day's effort?" [We say this *holding up* our labour, *over years* if not decades of practice, (i) to believe and (ii) to do things right.] But then God's "take", God's intentions for creation lands on everyone with ears to hear Jesus: **Everybody *is in*** – "all in!". (Just as Ninevah was 'all in'.) Hear again the Word of the Lord: "Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?" "Darn tootin', I'm envious," says Jonah, says most human hearts. People, to the extent such envy is true

of me or of you, that is the extent to which we have fallen prey to the 'inside' vs 'outside' thinking that—*biblically*—is not God's thinking at all. God's provision, God's grace, God's forgiveness, God's embrace is *for the world* ... remember?: "God so loved **the world**"! Everything and everybody is fully to have what they need. [By the way, in today's parable, that denarius that each one received was a family's living wage for a day. Without bringing it home, there would be hunger. Bringing it home meant "just enough". Harken back with me to the story of the manna during the Hebrew people's wilderness wandering and remember, *and realize*, that 'sufficient' was meant for everyone regardless of their ability, and 'more than enough' was – in God's economy – as wrong and pointless as it was greedy.]

From God's side—or, if you'd like to frame it otherwise, *in the understanding of today's sciences and social sciences*—PROVISION (the universe's provision) happens full bore all the time and, in this way, is *always sufficient* (*unable* to be turned up) and it is dependably *never turned down*. What humanity does with it, in our cutting up and sharing of the resource pie ... well, that is another matter altogether!

What we—who know Jesus & his Way—are called to do, then (... like Israel, who knew the grace and providence of God, was called to do), is put down any thought of privilege on our part [the idea (i) of being 'more deserving' than others; (ii) of being in line for some greater reward]. In the Old Testament, the more developed prophets consistently instructed Israel that their place in God's design was—on account of knowing God—to see and offer themselves as a gift to the rest of the world, to lead the nations in waking up *to life* (to thinking and believing and behaving and relating) *as God intended*. Jesus' call to us who follow in his Way is the same. It is not that we are more deserving; it is that we have already been awakened (blessedly so!) and so can be a "light" to those in darkness, in nightmare, in lostness, in unknowing. We are to live *in* (and *out of*) the mercy, forgiveness, healing, justice, hope and love that God holds toward all people and all creation; to speak it in our words, and model it by our deeds; and thereby to invite others to

this same Way (... for their sakes, the sooner the better!). We are (in this Way) to urge the world finally to follow its Creator's design.

In closing, hear another voice and "framing" on the matter. This is from the daily meditations of Fr. Richard Rohr.:

[A]ny future church needs to be ... more concerned with fulfilling its mission statement than with endlessly reciting its heavenly vision and philosophy statement ...every Sunday. ... Centuries of emphasis on art and architecture, songs, liturgy, and prescribed roles have their place, but their overemphasis has made us a very top-heavy, decorative church that is largely, and constantly, concerned with its own in-house salvation.

To recover the early church's emphasis on faith as a loving and communal way of life, we ... must ... validate Paul's original teaching on "many gifts and many ministries" (1 Corinthians 12:4–11) that together "make a unity in the work of service" (Ephesians 4:12–13). We need Christian people who are trained in, validated for, and encouraged to make home and hospital visits; do hospice work and jail ministry; support immigrants and refugees; help with soup kitchens; counsel couples before, during, and after marriage; teach classes in parenting; offer ministries of emotional, sexual, and relational healing; help with financial counseling; build low-cost housing; take care of the elderly; run thrift centers—all of which put Christian people in immediate touch with other people. ... [H]ealing was most of the work Jesus appeared to do. It is almost too obvious. Either we see Christ in everyone, ... [and] are Christ to everyone, or we cannot be Christ to anyone.

End of quote.

Jesus lead us, Holy Spirit enable us, God use us to be Christ to everyone. Amen.