

Christ the King Sunday

November 26, 2017

Stewarttide

God is good all the time. All the time, God is good. Amen.

By the time we share this sermon, we are all sitting in our pews, still gluttoned from our respective Thanksgiving feasts, trying to shake off the aftereffects of tryptophan poisoning. But as I write it, we are teetering on the edge of that most stressful time of the year, the dawn of, not the age of aquarius but the age of perfectionist. Stewarttide, with the liturgical color hand-dyed and handmade, the season when we are driven to channel our inner Martha Stewart and create the most perfect thanksgiving, the most perfect Christmas that ever was. Everything has to be, HAS to be flawless. It is expected of us. On this we shall be judged.

And in our constant quest to be perfect, have I mentioned Facebook? I freely confess that I hate seeing pictures of myself. On Facebook (or Snapchat or Instagram or any social media platform you choose) we don't want people to see us as we really are. We want them to see us as we imagine ourselves to be, attractive, altruistic, more worthy of their friendship. Flawless.

It's reassuring to know that I am not alone in this feeling and that even people for whom I hold a great deal of admiration bordering on idolatry, like Nadia Bolz-Weber, feel the same way. Just recently she wrote "Three days ago, someone who up until then I thought was my friend tagged a super unflattering photo of me on Facebook, in which, for some reason I looked both dim-witted and morbidly obese. And it bothered me all day because everyone knows that Facebook is the place where we can all be pathologically attractive and happy and funny and have lives that are portrayed as nothing but the highlight reel.

I was so bummed out about this horrible photo that I wondered what it would be like if somewhere in an alternate dimension we all had alternate social media profiles- profiles that were comprised solely of the bad pictures we've deleted off our phones. The ones where one eye is closed and our butts look big. And all the status updates in this alternate Facebook were things like 'I spent last night alone while sobbing gently into my Star Wars pillow.' Or 'I just manipulated my spouse to get my own way.' I know one thing: I'd be a whole lot more motivated to spend time reading other people's status updates."

Now, I'm not saying that this bummed out response by Nadia doesn't fit me to a t, but I also often wonder why does it matter so much to so many of us that we present at least the illusion of perfection. I mean, who are we trying to fool? Our friends? Ourselves? God? And honestly, scripture readings like we hear this week, although marginally less harsh than last week's trifecta of darkness, wailing and gnashing of teeth, do not help the situation. There is an industrial farm's worth of separating the sheep from the goats going on and a lot of pressure to be on the right side of judgment. Put me on Team Sheep, coach!

What disturbs me about my tendency for self-criticism and my need to present at least a façade of perfection, aside from the fact that I know that I'm not fooling any of you, is how easily I can allow that judging to become my role, weighing the worth of others. I think it's very easy for all of us to become the sheep/goat separators, deciding who is perfect enough, even deciding those whom God must love. Or not, if they are too different from ourselves.

The thing is, I keep forgetting that it's not my job. Not my job to separate the fat sheep from the lean ones, or the sheep from the goats. To be the arbiter of perfection whether it's someone else's or my own, although I will continue to keep a dissatisfied eye on Facebook, I'm not gonna lie. Someone else is going to be doing the judging when the son of man comes in his glory and sits on his throne surrounded by angels. And what I need to remember is that whether I wind up on Team Sheep or Team Goat will not depend on whether my place settings match or my perfect Christmas tree has no burned out lightbulbs.

We even are given guidelines, simple ones that we insist on ignoring even when God keeps on repeating God's self over and over again. Treat each other with kindness. Treat yourself with compassion. Love one another. Period. If you see someone who is hungry, feed them. If you see someone without a winter coat, clothe them. If you see someone huddled over a steam grate, find them safe shelter. This is not rocket science. Look every stranger in the eye with respect and see Christ there. Simple? Yes. Easy? No. All of that kindness, compassion, unquestioning love, it's hard. It's messy. It's imperfect. As are we, regardless of how much we would wish otherwise.

At this point in Matthew's gospel, Passover is only a few days away and I imagine that Jesus is trying hard to get his point across before he runs out of time. I also imagine he is getting pretty exasperated that he also has to keep repeating himself and coming up with new parables. Sometimes, in this cranky political climate I worry that we are running out of time too. I worry that we are so concerned with how things look, with the perception, the spin, the optics that we forget why we are here. As I said, it's not my job to be the judge, to be the sheep wrangler. But it IS my job to do whatever I can to see that no one is hungry, cold or alone.

Methodist preacher and professor Alyce McKenzie thinks that the lesson in Matthew's gospel reading is that we need a different way of seeing, a seeing that's followed by action, to help us remember that Jesus comes incognito, that, as she says, "the kingdom of heaven shows up when we least expect it. The presence of Jesus is hidden in the sick, the hungry, the thirsty, the naked and the imprisoned...As, in the parable of the Good Samaritan the one who both saw and acted with compassion was the neighbor to the man in the ditch, so here it is the group that both saw and met the needs of the suffering that is blessed." Who got assigned to Team Sheep.

This festive season has the potential to bring out the best in people. The malls are surrounded by bell ringers from the Salvation Army. Toys for Tots have drop-off boxes everywhere. Our churches and our children's schools are filled with opportunities to share gift cards, mittens, winter coats and turkeys for our less fortunate brothers and sisters. That's great. Support them. And give your Salvation Army bellringer a cup of hot chocolate too, they'd be very grateful.

During Stewarttide it is easy to both see and act. It's during the rest of the year, when the constant reminder of the needs of others is gone and the training wheels are off, that I struggle to live, well, sheepishly. That I get caught up in the cult of perfection and forget that the imperfect being in front of me is worthy of my love and care. The blessing is to remember that they, and God, are able to look beyond my unedited, unphotoshopped imperfections and find me worthy of theirs.

As Nadia reminds us, "we may wish to curate a version of ourselves that we feel is worthy to be shared, but God says 'yes, I'll take those shiny good things but I'd also like to use whatever it is you're hiding behind your back right now.' See, we are an either-or people with a both-and God for whom nothing will be lost and all will be redeemed."

So treat each other with kindness. Treat yourself with compassion. Love one another. And remember that seeing needs to be followed by action. All year round.

Amen.