



making God's love visible in downtown Memphis

Parables

Proper 19, Year C

Sunday, September 15, 2019

The Rev. Amber Carswell

Every week, right after our opening prayers, the kids 3rd grade and under get up and exit the service for children's chapel, and one of us follows the cross out with them. Children's chapel here consists of a couple songs, we set up an altar, take an offering — everything on a little kid's scale. The reading and the sermon, given by the priest, should also be on a little kid's scale. Now, some of these stories provided to us in our lectionary work out better than others for the 5-year-old student. The Old Testament is gold for source material — chariots of fire, parting the sea, Noah's ark — everyone is ready to play the giraffes, or God, or the Egyptians in pursuit.

But looking at today, the Old Testament — well, Jeremiah and his “stupid children” line may not fit the audience, so it’s gotta be the Gospel. Imagine, everyone there counting the 10 coins because we’ve nearly all learned to count to 10 and are very proud of it. We have 99 sheep who can baah and bleat, while one wanders around lost-looking until the shepherd finds it and brings it back to the fold... and then, if you are the priest, you want to tie up the lesson nicely, right? Give them a moral of the story to take home.

So children... God is like an absentminded woman who loses things but then cleans her house and finds it, and she’s a little eccentric, and wakes the whole neighborhood in the middle of the night because she thinks they’ll care that she found a coin in the corner. God is like a shepherd; not a very good one, loses one of his sheep, and in order to find it -- he abandons 99 sheep... to find one. Because there’s no way that could turn out disastrously.

At this point, the kids are over it, but you with your discerning hearts and developed attention spans should be perking up. What do you mean, he abandoned the 99 sheep for one? That seems unwise. It’s pretty clear that this is not an effective sheep-maximizing strategy. Have you met sheep? What do you mean, she wants to throw a party in the middle of the night for finding a lost coin? I mean, I’ve never been invited to that party. I’ve never even heard of that of party.

And even if you want to have a nice message about God putting aside everything to find you, if you want to interpret yourself as the coin or the sheep, it seems pretty clear that the objects in question that are lost couldn’t be held responsible for their lost-ness. A sheep has little agency, and still less, a coin. What are we saying about God here? And are you never the seeking shepherd or the absentminded woman? And is it really responsible to read ourselves into the story, given that Jesus likely meant this as a story of God and Israel (but maybe meant it as God and Jesus, or just maybe God and the Gentiles.)

You get the idea. Every story Jesus tells is like this. There’s something strange to them — we’ve heard them so much, and been given a simple moral to the story so often, that we lose this subtle shock of what Jesus is saying.

I’ve been thinking about this as I’ve sat in our Flannery O’Connor class on Wednesday nights. She is a genius story-teller, and you can observe this by the fact that, a) 30 people want to show up here on a

Wednesday night and talk about this story they just experienced and b) 30 people are pretty certain that everyone else in the room has misunderstood the story in some way. I don't mean this in a bad way at all. 30 people entering into a narrative and coming out with differing ideas about its meaning is the mark of a great story. It has become alive in itself, beyond the author's intent, and able to take the reader's individual stories up with it in its life. O'Connor resisted strict interpretation: when someone asked her to explain a story, she advised them to simply enjoy it.

Jesus was the same way, scholars think. Sometimes, we read in the gospels where the disciples ask Jesus to explain what he meant by a certain parable, and so he does. We think that these clarifications were added on later by editors who heard us crying out for clear morals to these stories about seeds and sowers, barns and owners, batty old women, and unsuitable shepherds. Subtlety and mystery have never been great selling points. It is hard to establish a community unified around mystery.

We've seen this clearly in our age. The Trump era will be remembered, I think, for the people's cry to "Give it to me straight," and being delivered unto their desires until, like the Israelites begging for quail in the wilderness, it came out of our nostrils. There is nothing subtle in our political circuses, only flashy lights and grandiosity. There are talking points, party lines, every activist organization sends me emails that begin with the clarion call of "Let me be clear." The ancient Job conceded to the whirlwind, "Your wisdom is too great for me, beyond my understanding," but the modern Job rejects any narrative larger than his own understanding. What to say of a community like ours, in a time like ours, gathered around the celebration of a holy mystery?

Writer Meghan O'Gieblyn was raised as a fundamentalist Christian. She became an atheist — she writes of what she expected to find in a world made perfectly rational. She writes, "I imagined myself exiting a primitive cave and striding onto terra firma, embracing a world where there would be no more shadows, no more distant echoes, only the blinding and unambiguous light of science and reason. But as it turns out, the material world is every bit as elusive as the superstitions I left behind. The laws of physics are slippery, and resistant to grand unifying theories. The outcomes of quantum experiments change depending on our observation of them. Particles solidify when we probe them, but become waves when we turn our backs. As the physicist Paul Davies once put it, 'Nature seems to play tricks on us.' Some scientists have now begun to take seriously the proposition that we exist within a multiverse, that we are forever separated from the truth of our existence by an impenetrable quantum veil. What to make of this sly and nonsensical universe?"

It would undo the point of a sermon about mystery to give you a clear answer about mystery. But I want to suggest that the greatest things in life are that which cannot be flattened, that wither under scrutiny. The new parents who can tell you how tired they are, but struggle with the words to explain this love and this fear that they never anticipated. You fall for someone, and an ordinary occasion like brushing up against her suddenly holds a universe of meaning and question. These things are the golden memory of your grandparent's kitchen, the elation when you first translated the scribbles on a page into language, and maybe only once or twice in your life, when you caught a glimpse of the ineffable — a late night when you were the last awake around the campfire, the vision at the graveside, or maybe when you wandered into a cavernous church and felt like you were kneeling to something greater than the consuming mystery of your own soul.

It might feel a bit like being lost, and suddenly a great Something comes sweeping in to your dark corner — it might feel like being found, out of nowhere finding yourself carried on the shoulders of a Presence who knows you and was searching everywhere for you.

A friend told me the other day, "You know, kids are better at handling complexity than you give them credit for. Maybe the stories are best without you making it easy for them."