



CALVARY EPISCOPAL CHURCH

making God's love visible in downtown Memphis

The Second Sunday of Epiphany **January 20, 2019** **The Rev. Scott Walters**

I'm confused about ranch dressing and casseroles. Maybe you are too. It's not that I don't know what they are or what they're for. I'm just not quite clear about whether it's ok to like them or not. Do you know what I mean?

Take ranch salad dressing. When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child, and I thought ranch dressing and Frito pie were delicious. When I became an adult, or somewhere along the way at least, I put an end to childish ways and started ordering balsamic vinaigrette. Which is pretty worthless as a pizza crust dip, I'll have you know. But I'd begun to notice that the foodies I knew never seemed to order ranch and cleared their throats and sat up straighter when I did. Same for casseroles, unless it was cassoulet. Or, I later learned that sophisticated Memphians had been eating something called fish pudding in a church basement for decades. But, come on. A casserole by any other name...

Well, it might sound like I'm pretty clear on the acceptability of liking these foods. But matters of taste are complicated and never seem to stay put. You know good and well that when something has been adequately despised by the tastemakers, it's only a matter of time before one of them will be self assured enough to break ranks. She'll show the world that for all her refinement, she's just as comfortable with street food and ordinary people and will drag a french fry through a dollop of ranch if that's what it takes. And suddenly she's on the cutting edge again.

I suppose the fickleness of what passes for good taste is one reason we don't assign much spiritual value to mere "likes." Whether the Facebook variety or old fashioned analog ones. We concern ourselves with the higher affections, like love.

But I wonder if something's lost when we downplay the power of what we like, and by extension, the experience of being liked, in our Christian lives. In fact, "love" can become so spiritualized, and we can become so insistent upon the idea that, whatever love is, it is not "just a feeling," that Christian love can become detached from the realm of the emotions in which all our relationships actually live and move and have their being.

Show me a relationship in which loving has nothing to do with liking, and I'll show you a couple of strangers who just happen to live in close proximity to each other.

Maybe the things we like are actually the essential stuff of meaningful interactions with other people and the world around us. And maybe they matter, at least in part, because as much as every single human being needs to be loved, it may be impossible to know we are loved if we don't believe we are liked.

"You shall no more be termed Forsaken," said Isaiah to his people. "And your land shall no more be termed Desolate; but you shall be called My Delight Is in Her, and your land Married; for the Lord delights in you, and your land shall be married. For as a young man marries a young woman, so shall your builder marry you, and as the bridegroom rejoices over the bride, so shall your God rejoice over you."

Isaiah says, "Children of Israel, it's not that God loves you with a perfect, divine, and otherworldly love. God delights in you. You make God rejoice. God is like half of a giddy newlywed couple. God likes you."

Yes, these are all analogies that Isaiah took from ordinary human living to describe what had been revealed to him about God's relationship to the Hebrew people. But these are the ones he used. Delight. Rejoicing. Being liked.

This wouldn't have been trivial stuff. Not for Israel back in the day. You see, when this section of Isaiah was probably written, the Hebrews had finally stumbled back home from exile in Babylon. They were happy to be free and back in their homeland, I'm sure. But the prevailing world view of their day is that if your life is full of failure and chaos and pain, that's probably on you. People mostly get what they deserve. If you lose your so called Promised Land a few generations after you finally arrive, it's because you've been unfaithful, stiff necked, sinful. It's because God is annoyed with you.

I say that was the prevailing view. That's not the same as saying it's the only view in the Hebrew scriptures. Yes, there are plenty of moments when Israel is said to be punished for not holding up their end of the covenant. But there are also so many tears in what can seem like an Old Testament system of karma.

The book of Job is surely the deepest tear. It is forty two chapters of poetry that insists, in the end, that no one but the One who laid the foundation of the earth and shut the sea with doors when it burst from the womb of the cosmos... no one else knows why human beings suffer. Job was honorable and innocent, we're told. And still he suffered like few ever did.

There are plenty of ruptures in the view that good things come to the good and bad things to the bad. But as Israel limped home from exile, they probably did so as a chastened people. The freedom to return to a land that had probably grown foreign to them over the decades and figure out how to scrape out an existence there probably didn't feel much like freedom at times. Some days it probably didn't feel like they were exactly the apple of God's eye. A sty was more like it.

Such are the people to whom Isaiah says not, “Well, I hope you learned your lesson.” But rather, “God delights in you, friends. You. Just as you are. Just the sight of you makes God’s heart happy.”

Do you recognize it? The redeeming power of being liked?

In recent years I’ve been helped by the writing of a theologian named James Alison. He’s an English Catholic priest with big ears and an endearing smile. He’s also an important interpreter of the French thinker René Girard. In particular, Girard’s study of the phenomenon of scapegoating in human cultures.

James Alison is not only an English Catholic priest, but a fairly traditional and conservative one, by his own description. He’s also gay.

And some years ago he found himself, even as a vowed celibate, as the object of some fairly vicious homophobic hatred within his church. He didn’t say what sins he thought these others might have been scapegoating him for. But he was spiritually very much at sea, wondering whether his vocation was valid and whether he had a place in the Christian tradition he loved.

At the height of his distress, he went on a guided Ignatian retreat in Chile. One afternoon he needed a break and took a walk to a park where the gay men of Santiago were known to meet up. He sat and watched them come and go for a while.

But soon, his conscience flared up and he thought this probably wasn’t the most helpful way to spend an afternoon while on a spiritual retreat. So he returned to the monastery, and prayed for several hours in the presence of the blessed sacrament. Which is what many a traditional Catholic priest would do under the circumstances.

He was feeling very sinful and contrite, when out of nowhere, he insists, he was overwhelmed with a clear sense that God liked the men he’d seen in the park that day. Not that God possessed a divine love encompassed even these. But that God delighted in them. Just as they were. These particular people made God happy.

I think James Alison might say that the experience of being liked saved his life that day. At least his life as a Catholic priest, which he remains to this day.

Why tell you this? I have no proof anything James Alison experienced that day was true in the least. I don’t share his piety. Praying before the blessed sacrament makes no sense to my Protestant soul. But I do know about the power of being liked. I do know about what gets liberated in me when I can believe I’m simply liked by another, and what shuts down in me when I’m afraid I’m not.

Friends, I think this truth was revealed to the prophet Isaiah too. Love, especially when it’s cast in theological terms, can so quickly become a cold concept up in our heads. Isaiah

realized that his broken down people were not loved, in principle, by God. They were delighted in, liked, just as they were, by God.

Maybe we first need to admit that our likes have a lot to do with who we are. And also admit that we need, not only to be loved in some grand, eternal way, but to be one of the simple, ordinary things in this world somebody else delights in. And that that somebody might even be God.

Because if I could even begin to believe that the One who holds this whole miraculous universe in existence may actually kind of like us... Well, maybe my name would no longer be Forsaken. Maybe your name would no longer be Desolate. Maybe we would awaken a little more fully to the fact that, if our truest identities were known, if we could see ourselves as God sees us, we would know that the name by which God calls us is, "My Delight Is in You."

Imagine what healing would get loosed in this world by a people who believed they were liked like that.