

Epiphany 4C, Luke 4.21-30

February 3, 2019

The Rev. Scott Walters

Since I told a joke in a sermon back in Advent that some of you still haven't gotten... It was the one about the Buddhist monk at the hot dog stand... Make me one with everything? Remember that one?

Well, since so many of you didn't get that joke, I thought it was only fair to admit that I once didn't get a joke for more than three years. I think I heard it first in junior high, as it was scatological in nature. Not that I stopped appreciating scatological humor...well...ever. There was just a lot of additional pressure to enjoy it in the seventh grade. So, when Brian Wilt told the joke, I laughed right along with everybody else. Pretty convincingly, I'd like to think.

But it wasn't until several years later, after we'd studied genetics in Mr. Nation's class, that the punch line suddenly made sense. And I had an epiphany. A flash of insight. There was no shaft of light in the haymow. But I finally got the joke. "Oh, right. It's a hereditary disease because it runs in your jeans." Genes and jeans. Two spellings. Hilarious.

I'm just sorry Amber didn't add my bad joke epiphany to the others in her sermon on the subject last Sunday.

I guess I got lucky, though. In those three years of my secret incomprehension, no one ever pushed me to explain why the joke was funny. And what would people think of me if they found out what I did not know?

I have a friend who says, "You know, all I really care about is my husband, my dog, and what everybody else thinks of me." Now, this is a joke that I get completely. This is a burden I understand. Do you?

"Teach us to care and not to care," T.S. Eliot once prayed in a poem. "Teach us to sit still."

Learning what to care about and what not to care about still strikes me as the spiritual work of a lifetime. Moments of insecurity — silly ones or profound ones — remind us that we do care about what other people think. And we should, to an extent. If you don't care at all, you're a sociopath. Which is not a mark of spiritual enlightenment.

But we also have to find ways to wriggle free of the expectations and opinions of other people, don't we? We can't only be what other people think of us, even people who love us. We're not quite a self if we are.

"Teach us to care and not to care," is what I find myself asking Jesus today. "Teach us to sit still."

Jesus begins his ministry in Luke with an important series of experiences. It begins with his baptism in the Jordan and that message from the heavens: “You are my Son, the Beloved, in whom I am well pleased.”

But as soon as Jesus hears he is loved without qualification by God, as soon as his true identity is established, he is led into the wilderness where that identity is put to the test.

The temptations are matters for other sermons. But it’s worth noting here that Jesus is tempted to prove himself in terms of influence over the natural world, by turning stones into bread. He is tempted to prove his identity in terms of power and influence over other people, as a ruler of the kingdoms of the earth. And in the third temptation, if you think about it, he is asked to prove who he is by exerting a kind of influence over God. Throw yourself off the temple and get God to send angels to catch you, he’s told. Prove yourself in your answered prayers.

Jesus resists these temptations in the wilderness. But I wonder if there was a fourth temptation in going home.

Because your hometown is where you first learned how to respond to the world, isn’t it? Or rather, your hometown is where the world first responded to you. And we begin to learn who we are in these responses. Report cards and state fair ribbons and demerits and traffic fines. Raises and pink slips and trophies and rounds of applause or scowls and boos. The hometown is where we first get the feedback we spend the rest of our days trying to get right.

How well do you do at producing bread for your family, or at acquiring power and influence in your realm of control? How responsive, some might even ask, is God to your prayers? Do you tend to get caught when you fall, or do you just hit the ground with a thud? Answer these questions and we will tell you who you are.

So, when Jesus gets home, he knows what everyone is thinking. There’s a saying back in Nazareth, you see: “Doctor, cure yourself.” Which means, “Well, you may have gone off to med school in Capernaum and gotten a fancy diploma to hang on the wall. But we knew you back when. We know your people. Show us your own healed and happy life, and maybe then we’ll believe the healing stories we’ve heard.”

But Jesus resists the temptation now a fourth time to have his identity defined on the world’s terms. He won’t play along. And it angers the hometown folk, so they lead him to the edge of a cliff to teach him a lesson. But he walks through the middle of the crowd untouched. He slips from their grasp, just as he slips through their expectations and their standards for what makes up a respectable self. He’s been declared God’s beloved, and he won’t settle for any other measure of self worth.

The story is relevant to us because what Jesus slips through is precisely what you and I get caught in, from the earliest moments of our lives. We accept the hometown terms for what matters. And we begin constructing selves we think will make the hometown people proud.

What’s so wrong with a self like that? What’s wrong is that any self we construct to prove that we matter is false.

Thomas Merton said it like this: “Every one of us is shadowed by an illusory person: a false self. This is the man I want myself to be but who cannot exist, because God does not know anything about him. And to be unknown of God is altogether too much privacy.”

This is an astonishing thought. That the self the world consistently asks me to prove and project, is unreal. It's an illusion. In fact, God does not even know the false self I project, because God knows only what is real. God knows only God's beloved.

Merton goes on: "All sin starts from the assumption that my false self, the self that exists only in my own egocentric desires, is the fundamental reality of life to which everything else in the universe is ordered. Thus I use up my life in the desire for pleasures and the thirst for experiences, for power, honor, knowledge and love, to clothe this false self and construct its nothingness into something objectively real. And I wind experiences around myself and cover myself with pleasures and glory like bandages in order to make myself perceptible to myself and to the world, as if I were an invisible body that could only become visible when something visible covered its surface."

Do you recognize this process? I wish I didn't, but I do. All of us do, I think, if we're honest. Sin begins in this process of wrapping ourselves in what the world affirms rather than resting in our belovedness by God.

But Jesus shows us we can learn to slip free of all that. We can learn to trust our belovedness a little more. And, in doing so, he can teach us to care, and not to care. He will teach us to sit still.

You see, Jesus did care. He cared deeply for the world. He just didn't much care what the world thought of him. He cared about our brokenness and our estrangement from one another and wanted to heal it. He cared so deeply that he would rather lose his life if saving it meant putting forth the false self the world kept clambering for.

And Jesus insists that you and I can learn to do the same. Not perfectly. I'm afraid I'll never be entirely free of the need to impress you. I'll never be entirely free of the need to show you my importance in terms of bread and influence and a spiritual life that gets visible results.

But I do believe we can slip a little more from this world's grasp over time. I believe we can slip from it at this table. Because in this eucharist, this thanksgiving for the defining belovedness at the heart of our lives, we can begin to let go of the hometown's expectations, and remind one another that our truest selves are not the ones we have to prove.

In the end, we may find that our insecurities are gifts. The joke we don't get, the affirmation we can't quite attract, the failure we can't fake our way out of... These may be the openings in our bandages we need to remember that we do have a self worth giving away to the world. Openings, not into emptiness, but belovedness. Openings, perhaps, into a prayer of our own that Jesus teach us to care and not to care. That he teach us to sit still in his love.