

Pentecost XVIII – Proper 20B Track 2

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St. Martin in the Fields, Philadelphia

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Who here remembers the old 1940 Episcopal hymnal? Those of us who were around the Episcopal Church then, might recall this punchy hymn:

*Once to every [soul] and nation
Comes the moment to decide,
In the strife of truth with falsehood,
For the good or evil side;
Some great cause, God's new Messiah,
Offering each the bloom or blight,
And the choice goes by forever
Twixt that darkness and that light.*

That hymn text was written in 1845 by James Russell Lowell, a New England abolitionist poet who believed that poetry had a role to play in movements for social justice. It was originally intended as a protest against the Mexican-American war, which would have expanded slave territories in the U.S. It was later set to a tune that conveyed serious purpose and a call to action.

I don't know if there is really just *one* moment, THE decisive moment for either an individual person or a nation, but I certainly believe that we are in one of those moments today – not only because we are fast approaching a consequential election on November 5, but because the super-heated rhetoric in our nation has created a toxic divide that pits good people against one another. The reading from the Book of James we just heard testifies that such conflicts are not new – they certainly troubled early Christian communities, as both James and also Paul in his epistles wrestled to resolve. As I wrote in my Field Notes in this week's newsletter, you'll never hear me telling you from the pulpit who to vote for! But what is appropriate for our time together in worship is to consider ways to discern what direction each of us will take, in all the times we are faced with a morally important decision.

The rather lengthy passage we read from the Wisdom of Solomon describes in quite dramatic prophetic terms how those who “*reasoned unsoundly*” could even escalate a conflict to the point of

hatred for “the righteous man,” and to murder – which is echoed in Jesus’ prediction to his disciples about his own imminent death.

What, then, can we glean about reasoning *soundly*?

James gives us a starting point, which really has to do with reflecting on our *motivations*. Bitter envy, selfish ambition, boastfulness and being false to the truth – “Such ‘wisdom’ (he might put that in air quotes) does not come down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, devilish. It will cause disorder and wickedness of every kind!” And conflicts and disputes, he adds, “come from your cravings that are at war within you.” The remedy? “Show by your good life that your works are done with gentleness born of (we might say true) wisdom. And we can discern the nature of our own and others’ actions accordingly – if the motives are pure (well, maybe to the extent that any of our motives can be perfectly pure!), “then,” James says, “peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy. And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace for those who make peace.”

I would venture to say that none of us is that perfectly pure, but when we’re on the right track, following the promptings of the Holy Spirit as best we can – trying to *pay attention* to the ways in which the Spirit is leading and guiding us in mercy and truth – then we will make better decisions and choices than when we are not paying attention. The Spirit is all around us all the time, but in our busy day-to-day lives and our worries and preoccupations, it’s very easy to forget to listen for what the Spirit might be whispering to us. Our daily tasks and anxieties can block her out. So taking time for stillness, for prayer, for meditation is a practice we all can do more of (and I include myself in that!)

As I was thinking about the upcoming election, what also popped into my head was a section in St. Ignatius’ “Spiritual Exercises,” which he called “making an election!” He wrote that whenever we are presented with a significant choice in our life, “first we have to set as our aim the wanting to serve God.”¹ [All our] choices are means helping me to live my life in God’s service and so to deepen my love relationship with God...[as God’s grace is] leading me on now in a life of service for God’s [kingdom] and a life of love forever with God.”² And when we are on the right path, Ignatius says, we will “find our continued growth in the way of life we have chosen.”

These sound like very lofty, maybe almost unachievable goals, but Ignatius brings it all down to earth by suggesting three ways in which we might perceive our direction from the Spirit: first, there might be an unmistakable sense of call, a “time of clarity” that keeps coming to us through certain events or

¹ David L. Fleming, SJ, *Draw Me into Your Friendship: The Spiritual Exercises* (1996), 132.

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even perhaps coincidences or an “aha!” moment. That’s the easy way – a kind of personal revelation. But we don’t all receive that all the time – if ever.

A second way is what he calls “discernment of spirits” – when we imagine already having made the decision, how does it feel? Does it feel right? Does it feel like we are aligning ourselves with God’s desire for us and for the world? Or does it feel itchy, out of sorts, distant from what we recognize as sacred? We might also think of St. Paul’s “fruits of the spirit” – does this decision lead in our lives and our world to more love, more joy, more peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control? Or is it more prone to extend the opposite of those things – more selfishness, a lack of joy and peace, unkindness, cynicism, violence and falling into extremes? Now imagine making a different choice. Again, where do we most feel that we are coming into harmony with God’s desires, and most likely to see the fruits of the spirit?

And if that kind of reflection still doesn’t yield a decision, Ignatius gives us a third path of discernment. He says “Sometimes, through no fault of our own, nothing seems to be going on. We are placid, having neither the peace of God’s consolation nor the desolation of feeling God’s absence. It is at this time that we can still think quite clearly and since we can distinguish no movement from God, we would describe this time as one focused on our own reasoning process.”³ Unlike those who in the Wisdom of Solomon “reason unsoundly,” Ignatius says that “the free and peaceful use of our reasoning abilities shows forth the calm logic of this time.” By taking some time to engage in a quiet use of reason – including, Ignatius suggests, imagining what I would advise another person, or what I would perceive at the very moment of our death, or visualizing ourselves standing before Christ and seeking his judgment about my choices – there is a kind of peace that can illuminate our path. Through prayer, meditation, and gentle reason, he says, quote, “I should deepen the attitudes and search out the ways which will better enable me to live the Christ-life in my own surroundings and environment.”⁴

Personal prayer and reflection is super important in Ignatius’ exercises. Without actually entering into such meditation, we may still find Ignatius’ suggestions to be a bit vague. But we can also discern together, as a worshiping community, about Jesus’ teachings in the Gospels, and the overarching message of the whole Bible as one of justice-making, peace, and how to live a life of mercy and love. How do we actually know what it means to “live the Christ-life”? For that, we need to turn to the Bible, and in particular, the Gospels.

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There are plenty of people who identify as “Christians” who nevertheless “reason unsoundly” and even turn toward division and violence in the name of Christ himself. Many of you know from my time with you all last year that I regard the movement called “Christian nationalism” to be an extremist political movement that fuses right-wing politics with a highly selective reading of the Bible that rationalizes preserving white supremacy and a masculinist power elite. The actual policies stemming from this movement are well codified in the Heritage Foundation’s new “Project 2025: A Mandate for Leadership” which would enforce an extreme conservative version of Christianity on all Americans by imposing fundamentalist Christian teachings on all arenas of public and private domestic life.

The leaders of right-wing nationalism – both high-level political and some corporate figures and the most widely known evangelical preachers and evangelists – have joined in a coalition to advance their own power and economic advantage, using religious rhetoric and the apocalyptic language of “spiritual warfare.” And their followers, quoting the Wisdom of Solomon, follow their almost cult-like recruiting tactics and “were led astray.” Now I don’t believe *all* the followers of Christian nationalism are blinded by personal wickedness – I believe they are targeted by leaders who exploit their often legitimate grievances about economic pain. But some others are still convinced by such things as “the lost cause” of the Confederacy in the Civil War, and by conscious or unconscious racism and misogyny, as ways to preserve markers of their own identity which they feel is the loss of an entire way of life that once benefited them but does not make room for the rights of others. I truly believe (“*so tell me what you really think!?*”) that Christian nationalism and white right-wing extremism do represent what James warned against: bitter envy, selfish ambition, boastfulness and falsehoods that distort the truth.

So again, we still need to ask, what does Ignatius exactly mean by living the Christ-life? One thing I’ve observed in my research on Christian nationalist preachers, is that they tend to jump from depictions of a wrathful God in a highly selective reading of the Hebrew Bible, directly to a vengeful Jesus coming in the End of Days. They occasionally also cherry pick from the epistles, with a favorite line from Ephesians 6:12: “For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places,”⁵ heightening the rhetoric of fighting to “take America back for God.”

But let’s read what Jesus actually taught. In today’s Gospel, he predicts his death at the hands of those who opposed his call to reverse the social order and bring peace and prosperity to those who were the “lost and the least,” which of course threatened their power. And then, he brings it home –

⁵ McKay Coppins, “‘Lord, Help Us Make America Great Again’: A Close Reading of Trump-rally Prayers,” *The Atlantic* Sept. 2024, 8, 10.

literally – to an in-house conversation in Capernaum, where he perceives that his disciples, too, are in conflict over their own power. He sees the same impulse in them to “be the greatest” as he has already been teaching against in the oppressive Roman society. Then he takes a little child and sets this child in their midst. Taken by itself, this little passage makes us think of all those Sunday school paintings we’ve seen over the years, soft and pastel, all sweet and sentimental, showing a curly haired cherub-like child and Jesus being all sweetness and light – not to mention how this image often gets conflated with Jesus having a bunch of fluffy lambs at his feet! But this popular Victorian image, which conveys the idea of children’s innocence, belies the true meaning of this Gospel. Children, as historians have taught us, were among the least valued, and most ignored people in the whole hierarchy of people in the ancient world. Until they could be put to work (which happened at a very early age usually – and there was no such thing at all as adolescence!) they were just tended to and tolerated as future workers for the family. Some, no doubt, *were* loved by their parents as many of the healing stories about Jesus demonstrate, but in the wider culture they were basically regarded as little nothings until they had something material to contribute. So of anyone Jesus might have picked to set in the midst of the disciples, this little child (referred to as “it” in the text!) didn’t represent purity and innocence, but rather, the most downtrodden of anyone in the community. No rights, no voice, no impact, no importance. Jesus is telling his disciples – and us, by extension – how to live the Christ-life: by caring for the least among us, the poor, the disenfranchised, the oppressed. Jesus is once again giving us not a message of sentimental sweetness, but a message of justice, and a way to live with peace and equity among all.

So then, this is the persistent, if uncomfortable, answer to the question – how do we live the “Christ-life” that Ignatius urged us to live through our discernment and our choices. To serve God’s kingdom – which is to serve those whom God/Christ/the Spirit is continually urging us to serve: the “little ones” for whom those who would accrue power to themselves do not care. Whom should we follow – those who promote themselves and their own wealth and power, or those who by their efforts are trying to bring about the “Beloved Community” that would show the fruits of the spirit? By doing as Hosea exhorted us in the Hebrew Bible: “to love kindness, to do justice, and to walk humbly with our God.”

“Once to every soul and nation comes the moment to decide.” What are the decisions, the choices, the “elections” you need to make right now? And in THE “election” in November, how will your discernment of Spirit’s call to live the “Christ-life” inform your vote – and your life? Amen.