

A World-Changing Divorce

*Sermon preached by the Rev. F. M. "Buddy" Stallings, Priest-in-Charge,
at the eleven o'clock service, March 18, 2012.*

The Fourth Sunday in Lent.

Based on John 3:14-21.

Today is "*Laetare* Sunday." Only church geeks find that a catchy opening—because only they know what it is. The Mass begins, "*Laetare, Jerusalem,*" "Rejoice, O Ye Jerusalem." It is the mid-point of Lent, and today the church gives us a break from the austerity of the season. The practical meaning of this is that for those of you who have given up things for Lent, this is your day! Let chocolate rain down like the manna it is! Also known as Rose Sunday, Mothering Sunday, or Refreshment Sunday, today is the day to relax and rejoice.

Somebody forgot to tell the lectionary people, the people who choose the scripture for each Sunday, that this is a day for a little lighter touch. Listen again to John 3:16 and following:

For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God.

These words are only refreshing—they only bring relief—if we are willing to claim as unquestioned truth that we are right and everyone else is wrong. Beloved by Tebow—whom I love for the material he has given me, and many before him and no doubt many to come—this passage is crystal clear: Those who believe are in; those who do not believe are out. It is a fine day in the neighborhood if it happens to be the right neighborhood. If you are Jewish, Buddhist, Hindu, Muslim, or just not able to buy any of it, you are unlikely to find this *Laetare* day passage terribly refreshing. Condemnation so rarely is.

I want to be clear about something. Over the centuries many faithful people have read and believed this verse without benefit of contextualization and have given their lives to evangelizing in good faith, often at great expense and sometimes genuine danger to themselves. Missionaries have gone around the world in its wake, believing that its message is of life-and-death importance, that the mortal souls of others around the world depend on their action. A happy byproduct of this is that they have done many marvelous humanitarian acts, but that does not change the fact that all they did truly and faithfully was done to bring others to Christ.

The context of the gospel of John, this beautiful, lyrical and maddening gospel, has been addressed from this pulpit many, many times. Recently I read someone, and I don't remember who it was, who claimed that the time in which the gospels were written could be likened to living through a long, slow divorce. Mark, the earliest gospel, was composed while the marriage between the Jews who were faithful to traditional Judaism and the Jews who were following Jesus was still intact, with just some small signs of trouble. When Matthew and Luke were written a decade and a half later, the strife was greater but not full blown. By the time John was written around the end of the first century, the divorce was nasty; no prisoners were taken because each side knew it was right and the other was wrong. Those, then, who believed in Jesus were completely right, and those who did not were condemned. And at that moment Christian triumphalism was born: our way or the highway to hell.

Someone recently said to me, "You priests at St. Bart's" (always a scary start to a sentence) "are tolerant of everybody in the world except the fundamentalists with whom you deeply disagree." I wanted to quip, "Oh, no, there are other people of whom we are also intolerant," but I thought better of it, wisely keeping my mouth closed for once because he was not far off. But as God is my witness, I declare that my adamant aversion to religious certainty exists not because I am used to or even particularly desirous of being so right; it exists because I believe the kind of absolutism displayed in a literal reading of John 3:16 has done more damage in the world than good, that it still plays a role in tearing the globe apart,

and that it (not John 3:16 specifically but the kind of thinking it engenders) is really harming our country right now.

On Friday a jury found Dharun Ravi guilty of hate crimes involving spying on and harassing his Rutgers roommate, Tyler Clementi. You know the story well: Tyler, a young gay man, committed suicide in the wake of embarrassment and exposure on Twitter. When the news of the verdict popped up on my phone, I didn't feel a great rush of righteous satisfaction in the ruling; I didn't feel without equivocation that justice had been done. I just felt deep, deep sadness. One life lost; another, if not ruined forever, marked and profoundly damaged. And though I think the kind of cyber bullying done by Ravi is a scourge upon this society and that what he did was egregious, somewhat surprisingly I hope and pray that the judge in sentencing is lenient.

I know nothing about Ravi's religion or lack of it; but I know that the religious environment derived from the "us versus them" clarity of John 3:16 played a role in creating the world as we know it. His is the particular sin but ours is the collective. And it is not good. The dehumanization of difference that allows us to so casually categorize all who are different as "profoundly other," making them bear the brunt of our rejection of "other," is damaging to our souls. The continuum from simply ignoring racist, sexist or homophobic jokes to accepting as collateral damage great acts of destruction on innocent people is not as wide as it seems and is not godly in anybody's religion. Though I only speak for us, and really only just for me, we have got to argue for the mystery and generosity of the gray zone rather than the easiness of black and white.

It is easy to find biblical support for this kind of either/or thinking, but the arc of the gospels clearly reflects Jesus as one who most often said, "Follow me. Come and do this; love this way; feed my people; love the least among you; care for the poor and orphaned" much more so than a teacher who said, "believe this" or "believe that." Despite the very filtered and agenda-specific view of the gospels, Jesus is clearly depicted as one who simply did not countenance the view of another person as existentially "other." The life of Jesus declares that there is no "other"—be it the Samaritan woman, little children at play, a nasty tax collector, or a mortified freshman at Rutgers, embarrassed by a deep truth about himself.

What truly refreshes us this day is not that we are right but that we are loved—loved by a God who loves us again and again into life, a God whose mysterious presence and intense longing for union with us never cease to tug us toward home, toward the divine; a God whose love for us never fails even though we do not always well represent it to others. Yes, that love is refreshment indeed, and not just for the fourth Sunday of Lent, but for life—refreshment that does not remove every obstacle or every disappointment but which tenderly holds us every day, when we know it and when we don't.

Come. Refreshment like none other we ever receive awaits us; the table of God welcomes all.

In the name of God: *Amen.*

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