

Sermon: Year B, I Christmas

Texts: Isaiah 61:10-62:3

Galatians 3:23-25, 4:4-7

John 1:1-18

On Friday the New York Times published an Op-Ed piece by Charles Blow, which they, no doubt, figured was quite in keeping with the holiday spirit. It was entitled, “Heaven for the Godless?”, and it was one of the most forwarded pieces from the Times web site that day. In this short editorial, Mr. Blow relayed the results of two recent polls done by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life. In the first, completed last June, “seventy percent of Americans said that they believed that religions other than theirs could lead to eternal life.” The assumption of the article was that these results were both surprising and astonishing. In evangelical circles, they were met by statements of shock and awe. And, reportedly, conservative church leaders soon opined that the respondents must have misunderstood the question. For, to quote the Gospel of John, as Mr. Blow did, it was Jesus himself who declared that he and he alone is “the way, the truth, and the life.” No one comes to the Father except through him – and evangelical Christians would know this.

Prodded by conservative church leaders to repeat the poll, the Pew Forum complied. This time, however, they asked people to identify, as well, which specific religions, other than their own, they thought could lead people to heaven. When the data was compiled in August, the results were even more stunning. This time, sixty-five percent said, again, that they believed that other religions could lead to eternal life. But, when asked, many then added that they thought any religion would do, or, even more radically, that religious belief wasn’t necessary at all. A significant portion thought that atheists stood an equal chance of entrance into the kingdom. For what really matters, according to those questioned, is not what you believe but whether you’ve been a good person. Put the stocking on the mantle. Could there be any more timely conclusion than this?

Interestingly, the story was told in tones of high rhetoric, as though these polls somehow announced the end of Christianity as we know it. Here in black and white was the public rejection of many of the doctrinal claims made within the Bible itself. The implication was obvious. Religion has been demoted from truth to opinion, from the Word of God revealed to humankind to merely the stories human beings tell about the gods they imagine, and in this increasingly democratic world, every perspective is awarded equal standing. Mr. Blow attributed these results, in fairly congratulatory manner, to our expanded enlightenment and our fundamental commitments to multi-cultural understanding. In his final line, quoting loosely from a popular Santa song, he suggested that smarter Christians are consciously choosing to ignore some of what our Scriptures say, choosing instead, and more importantly, to be good “for goodness’ sake.” This, it seems, is our great wisdom, forged from centuries of struggle and advance.

I read these kind of pieces with a mixture of amusement and deep frustration. Amusement because, at one level, I don’t understand all the froth. I feel like a parent watching two toddlers fight over a toy, knowing that tantrums come and go with amazing immediacy – because there’s nothing really at issue behind them except sheer, momentary desire. I don’t understand all the

wringing of hands because the Christianity they talk about bears very little resemblance at all to what I believe with all my heart and soul and strength and mind; nor do I warm to any of the cheery pronouncements of a new and wonderful humanism, because the cold objectivity of history continually proves that our breezy confidence in ourselves is rarely ever more than a thin veneer of wishful thinking or the flat out denial of the present sufferings of millions of others. It could be duly noted that our Scriptures have something unambiguous to say about goodness and attributing this quality to anyone. Jesus, when he was addressed by one of the Pharisees as “Good Teacher,” responded with this very direct retort: “Why do you call me good?” he said. “No one is good except the Father.” That’s a Biblical line that has somehow been buried deep beneath an avalanche of human yearning – both sacred and secular – to imagine that we are better than we are. It would do us well to measure up all our esteem against this standard.

My frustration comes with the sad recognition that certain aspects of the faith we’ve inherited seems hopelessly entrenched in misunderstanding, no matter what is said or preached or professed. We seem doomed to repeatedly retreating to the conviction that religion is primarily a tribal artifact, a possession, something that is mine or yours or someone else’s. Thus, traditionally, someone is right, and that makes someone else wrong, and this gives us reason for accusation and conflict and, ultimately, the convenience of condemnation. Or, now, alternatively, in our blithe post-modern pride we declare that right and wrong have become illegitimate categories. We are free to believe whatever we’d like, so long as it doesn’t get in anyone else’s way. Which, if you think this through, is an unprecedented privileging of ourselves. The stories we tell are exclusively our own. All explanation is ours. So, collectively, we are the masters of the universe.

What is missed on both counts here is God’s own integrity and authority. The root issue in Christianity is not what we believe or whether we have faith or if we accept Jesus as our Lord and Savior. These are all, at best, secondary matters. Nor is god merely a useful, if varied, tool for our own task of social betterment. It may sound simple, but the hardest thing for us to truly concede is simply this: God is God, who is completely independent from us and from all creation. And the fundamental testimony of Christianity isn’t about our decisions or our constructions of the world or our own discernments about right and wrong or good and evil. Nor is it the way by which we can claim to be superior to others. What Christianity is, is God’s most intimate testimony about God’s own being and the nature of the covenant drawn between God and creation. The faith that takes precedence is God’s, not ours. God is faithful. God is true. God is beautiful, and the greatest depth of these essential traits, which compose love, has been shown to us in Jesus. He is the very face of God, whose entire message is grace and redemption. Salvation is given us, not according to whether we believe, but because his impossible generosity is the unwavering intention of God towards us. This is God’s decision.

Jesus is not just a story. Jesus is not just an example – just one more way by which we try to encourage goodness among ourselves. Jesus is – in the most literal rendering possible – precisely “the way, the truth, and the life.” And no one comes to the Father except through him because he is the judgment of God for all the world, without exception. Jesus is the one, singular universal. And if we understand this, then Christianity can never, by rights, divide any of us. Jesus is not mine or yours or someone else’s. Jesus, as Paul declared, is the second Adam. He is, as such, the one whose nature all of us share. He is God’s redeeming of all creation. And as Christians, then,

our first word in return must be that there are now no outsiders... not even according to the division that we most fervently prosecute, that between good and evil. What we profess is definite and not negotiable – because it didn't originate with us. In Jesus, God has acted, exceptionally, and therefore, in him all peoples are gathered into fellowship.

Allow me to speak loosely, if only to jar loose stubborn forms of thought. There is no religion that saves us. Salvation has been accomplished by God in Jesus. And likewise, no amount of humanism will save us either. We should never forget that goodness was the fruit that led to our expulsion from the garden in the first place. For as much as we laud it, goodness divides us as severely as anything else.

One of the things we seem to have lost in our age is a sense of majesty. It seems to run counter to our desire to make everything level, equal, fair, and common. But what we have heard this morning from John's Gospel is magisterial. It deserves to be privileged, to be read with the kind of humility that allows us to admit that what is being revealed is greater than one man's opinion or a random moment of deep inspiration. For what is being revealed is the beginning and end of all creation, the source of all things and the destiny of all people, made visible in Jesus. These are not just John's words. They are God's revelation of life itself, which makes death impotent.

If we understand this short prologue, it makes the questions and the answers of the Pew Forum polls seem absurdly paltry – along with all our little religious controversies. We should be able to spread less religious heat, then, and, in Jesus' name, by love alone, offer more light.

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