

Sermon: Year A, III Lent

Texts: Exodus 17:1-7

Romans 5:1-11

John 4:5-42

If you've ever had to endure watching the British sport of cricket, you may have found it as dismaying as I do. I know there must be some order to the game. There are identifiable teams that wear smart uniforms. Players have discernable positions. There is pitching and hitting and running. But the rest is all utterly incomprehensible to me, a slow, numbing fog of plays and actions. Even though I can make no sense of what happens, however, I presume that the action on the field is determined by what must be a set of highly defined and complex rules. Matches eventually end with what appears to be a conclusion. One team wins and often seems appropriately excited by that. The other, as logic would have it, loses, and may show, then, some degree of dejection as well. But not knowing what constitutes the game, it's hard for me to get very interested in it. A highlight or two might be compelling, some display of athletic prowess. But the prospect of watching an entire match is – how shall I say – less than enthralling.

Listening to the Gospel reading this morning may have struck you as an experience much like watching cricket, and just as dismaying and dull, too. It's a long passage, with a fair cast of players: Jesus and his disciples, the disconcerting presence of a woman, Samaritans, Jews, and the ubiquitous crowds. They all interact, but the text doesn't make clear, at any given point, what is really at issue between them all. John condenses an enormous amount of complex history, bigotry, and deeply rooted prejudice into a series of cryptic conversations and symbolic allusions – most of which naturally mean little to us. An unsurprising conclusion is reached (at least as far as we're concerned): some believe that Jesus is, indeed, the long-awaited Messiah. But from our distance in time, in mindset, and in sheer ignorance of the very dynamic and cagey game that was actually being played, it's hard to get very excited about the story. A few lines might be worth remembering, but as a whole it falls pretty flat. Once it was read, your attention may have quickly turned to much more captivating things, like pending grocery lists and unfinished household projects planned for this afternoon. Which would be a great loss, because the passage truly deserves our lengthy contemplation. It's a magisterial expression of the Gospel of God at work, if only we have the eyes to see how radical it is, if only we have eyes to see the complex beauty of what actually transpired.

Toward realizing this possibility, the reading from Paul's epistle provides us a key rule by which we can better understand John's story. In it, he describes the principal two-fold action of God on our behalf: the first, much proclaimed by the church, is our retrieval from sin, the second, largely ignored by the church, is a corresponding exaltation in freedom and in joy. Both actions take the form expressed by one Greek word: *pollo*. It means "much more" or, more exuberantly, "how much more surely." Paul uses this word more often than hope, more than faith, more often than even love. In this single word the very heart of Christianity is revealed, and Paul emphatically repeats it in series, with increasing intensity and breadth, to show us the irresistible and overwhelming nature of God's salvation. "Pollo," he wrote, detailing just how far back, into the darkness of our sin, God was willing to reach in order to pull us up. "Pollo," he exclaimed, declaring with utter succinctness that nothing exceeds the length or depth of God's grasp. When

we had reached dead bottom, he noted, even there, “pollo,” much further, God’s hand slipped beneath us in order to raise us up.

But this is not all. Salvation is not limited to our past, to what lies only behind us, rectified in forgiveness or reconciliation. Paul immediately insists again, with greater emphasis, “Pollo.” Now, even more, all the more, more ecstatically, salvation refers to our present life, to the way we may choose to move, step by step, into our future. What lies possible before us in Christ, he says, is completely characterized by this crescendo rolling forward: salvation does not refer merely to our deliverance from sin and judgment. It becomes the very manner of our interactions, the way we approach all others, seeing them, first and always, as those to whom God has turned with good favor, and so, we may always do the same.

This two-fold action begins with absolute empathy. No one is excluded. No one exists outside the realm of God’s re-gathering. Pollo. Much more persistent than all rebellion is God’s redemption. But the culmination of this salvation can be achieved only by showing very particular love, which means dealing with one another, with every individual, with an honor specific to each. Too easily love falls to bland expressions of blanket acceptance, a lofty but empty universal attitude. And, just as easily, too, it becomes merely synonymous with simple attraction or affection, which is frail and selective. But, “pollo” said Paul, love is always much more distinct and much more demanding. It never occurs in general. In every circumstance, it is unique and new and surprising and disclosing. It opens life, and thus, it opens, with challenging specificity, our lives. Love is our difficult and wonderful commitment to engage ourselves with one another, without bottom and, “pollo,” without closure.

With this in mind, the story from John becomes more accessible. It is an account of Jesus’ own specific engagement of his Gospel. It is his constant expression of God’s divine honor – specific, surprising, redeeming, reconciling, and turned to freedom and embrace. Absolute empathy is matched by particular love, in inclusion and in differentiation. There is room for all and, all the more, for each, quite in opposition to the common presumptions and prejudices of the time, which closed off love in multiple levels of disdain, dismissal, and rejection. But masterfully, in each interaction, these entrenched judgments are disrupted by Jesus’ disarming presence and the grace he extends, without exception and yet with marvelous attentiveness to distinction. All the characters remain exactly who they are: disciples, a woman, Samaritans, Jews, human beings created by God. But all of their interrelations have been transformed, from conflict and struggle between one another to peace and a distinct place for each within God’s embrace. Jesus takes nothing away from anyone, but, with remarkable concreteness, he repeatedly invites them into this word and this reality: pollo, much more.

In this story, John offers us a vision of salvation, not just as a remedy for past evils or as a vague hope of a future heaven, but salvation at work within the defined context of our richly complex lives. You might say he takes Paul’s eloquent words and roots them in policy and action and real solutions. Which is invaluable for us. For although the text doesn’t inform us how to deal with the specific tensions, the injustices, and the deep prejudices of our own times, it shows us, nonetheless, the intricate practice of love’s application and the viability of seeking salvation now, in interactions that are as intimate as meeting face to face, thirsty and hungry and wary of others. Various closed by our fears, suspicions, and our own disdain, we are yet always

vulnerable to the one great liberating movement that is God's own infinite passion. Pollo. Messiah comes announcing this word, high and low, near and far, with honor and with grace and with the distinction that applies uniquely to each of us. This is God's Good News, which we can avidly put in play.

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