Sermon on Proper 23 Year B 2021

In the following example I’ve changed details for the sake of privacy. It was near the end of the day, nobody else was in the office and the doorbell rang. It was Frank and he asked if I “had a minute” in that voice that suggested, “would you please put on the kettle?”

I said, “sure come on in.” As he sat down he said “I’m not here for me, I’m here because I’m really concerned about Larry, he’s just retired and has now been diagnosed with lung cancer. It doesn’t seem fair, he’s worked so hard and now just after starting his well deserved retirement he’s so sick and might not make it.”

At that moment I had a choice, would I chat with Frank about Larry or would I chat with Frank about Frank because I could hear the subtext. He was expressing concern for his friend which was real enough but I heard Frank expressing this:

“I’ve worked hard my whole life, I’ve made sacrifices to further my career and make the money I’ve made; were those sacrifices in vain? Watching what is happening to my friend Larry, I’m starting to wonder if I’ve made the right choices, what should I do now?”

I’m not a great counsellor but I recognized that as I was attempting to listen, this was a deeply spiritual moment for Frank; a moment of reckoning and stock-taking.

These are profound moments, moments that highlight the importance of community and forming spiritual friendships in which we can be truly honest, even if, like Frank, we’re not quite ready to say it bluntly.

I was reading the lectionary texts this week in light of my own need for pastoral companionship and my experiences being a pastoral counsellor for others when I thought of that great line from the Pulitzer Prize winning novel *Gilead* by the great American writer Marilynne Robinson, a line I keep coming back to.

At one point the main character, Presbyterian pastor named John Ames says, “we are artists of our behaviour.”

I’ve actually never read a line that more closely captures the dynamic freedom that is at the heart of being a human being. In all our thoughts and actions, in all our interactions with other people we’re not simply “following rules or orders” or “believing the right things.”

There isn’t simply a binary of “right” and “wrong” but a canvas, life, that can be painted on with a full palette of decisions; or, to change the metaphor, a stage, life, in which we creatively “act out” our days in light of knowledge, faith, opportunities and challenges.

This profound freedom that is pregnant in the word “artist” suggests that life is a kind of adventure of crafting our behaviour and that God does not sternly watch over us but is with us in delight, concern and compassion as we create meaning in partnership with God.

God delights in our experiments, in our daring, in our sacrifices for family and friends and when we discover, in spiritual moments, like the one Frank and I shared, that things happen or develop in ways we hadn’t anticipated.

I thought about “artists of our behaviour” when I read the verses from Proverbs with their message that “God is the creator of both the rich and poor.”

The implication is that God is involved with both; I am clearly rich given my social location and the fact that 9/10ths of the world does not have access to what I have access to. God is involved with the poor; am I? If not, why not?

In my palette of decisions how am I creatively, artistically using my talents, time and treasure to make a difference?

As an artist, I want to learn how to more creatively work with and truly partner with the poor for God is involved with them.

When I read the line “we shouldn’t despoil the poor with our selfishness” I wonder how I should vote in the coming election? We’ve allowed the market to drive so many out of house and home; we’ve created a scenario where many young people can’t afford to live in the cities and towns their own parents live in.

Some people throw up their hands and say “it’s just the markets, what can you do?” but it’s not, there is no “market” it’s just people making decisions according to values that are on a continuum between selfishness and unselfishness.

It’s natural to doubt that comment considering how thoroughly everything in the world bows to the god economy, it seems like the one immovable reality.

So if you doubt it, please refer to the new book by one of the world’s preeminent bankers and economists, Mark Carney ***Building a Better World For All***; you can access the content online for free with his recent Reith Lectures.

Without naming the Christian conception of God he shows how it would easily be possible to build a world in which we take seriously that God has made both the rich and the poor.

I know of Anglicans in places like White Rock that have made decisions like selling their houses to families far under market value because they wanted a family to move in and not just maximize their profits! Wow!

I have to say, that is someone, usually an elderly person becoming a beautiful artist of their behaviour!

Let’s follow the theme into our next two readings. At first blush whoever mashed up the reading from James with the reading from our gospel has a wicked sense of humour; I’m not the first preacher on Pentecost 15, Year B of our lectionary cycle to notice this!

Our James reading begins with the assertion that it is really not possible to say that you believe in Christ if you show favouritism; in the case he cites, favoritism towards the well to-do vs. the rattily dressed, smelly, poor person who comes to church.

But in our Gospel reading Jesus seems to engage in favouritism! He initially refuses to heal the daughter of a Syrophoenician woman simply because she’s not of Israel!

Aren’t these precisely the types of people that Jesus would normally heal? The girl is clearly suffering, the mother has obviously made a great effort to seek Jesus out; she’s most likely living on her own because otherwise, in that society, the father would have sought him out. This means she’s probably without means and therefore one of the many marginal poor.

Of course, Jesus does, eventually heal the girl, but we’re left with this unease, why would Jesus have initially refused her based on an ethnic principle, the very thing we’re hyper aware about in our culture.

We can make sense of these two scriptures if we remember that James is talking about a situation that is unfolding after the fact, after this Jesus of our gospel reading has become the resurrected, cosmic Christ, after which the implications of his earthly ministry and it’s implications for the whole earth are beginning to be wrestled with. In that context we come to see afresh what it means that God created both the rich and the poor.

What is so brilliant about the gospel story is that it shows a slice of how this “becoming an artist of our behaviour” works out for the fully human Jesus. Becoming an artist isn’t a punctiliar event but truly a “*becoming,”* a process, an unfolding of choices, setbacks, learning and change of mind.

That the early church recognized that this was happening even in Jesus is so encouraging to us. What we see in this story is that we develop within the context of what God has set in place, our time, our bodies, our genders, in Jesus’ case, the knowledge that God has elected Israel for a special purpose and that the Messiah would be Israel’s Messiah.

When Jesus reminds her of this fact, the woman agrees, and, brilliantly, without mentioning his name, brings it back to Abraham who was told that what was being promised to him was so that all the nations of the earth would be blessed! God will truly elect Israel…for the sake of all!

She gets it, she is one of the most brilliant theological artists in the New Testament, a non-Jew, in distress, using the passion of her mother’s heart and concern to get to the very heart of “God is the maker of both the rich and poor.” You’ve got the goods, she says to Jesus, now let me and my daughter share in it.

She doesn’t argue with the election of the Israelites. She doesn’t seek to overcome the fact that she is a Gentile, as we are, she simply accepts God’s reality, seeing in what many would see as a theology of favouritism, a bigger, more inclusive God. And through her faith and God’s presence in Jesus, her daughter lives.

I am as grateful for this story as I am for any in the New Testament; it doesn’t just proclaim an abstract truth but how through dialogue we can grow in our faith.

Back to the dialogue with which I started. If I told you, that in my original story, that “Frank” was a Bishop in our Church, would you be shocked?

I had gone to see him and he opened to me; “Larry” was his brother. Given what happened to his brother, he decided to retire a two years earlier than he had planned.

He devoted his retirement to his wife and his children whom he admitted had “got the short end of the stick” in his service of the Church. He still served the church but now from a place of more balance.

The good new of the Gospel is that we have a Friend, a Mentor, a Presence; one who shows no favouritism, one who is more interested in us becoming an artist of our behaviour than we are.

This Friend is the true subtext in all our conversations, the One who helps us hear each other and so come to new realizations and growth.