

Homily for the Fifth Sunday of Easter, 2019

He Will Wipe Every Tear from their Eyes

There's a cartoon of a man dressed in rags, sitting in a heap of ashes, with a dead camel and a collapsed house behind him. Standing over him, next to the limousine in which this person has clearly arrived, is a figure in clergy robes saying to the poor fellow, "It's God's will, Job."

That cartoon is both funny and infuriating because we hear things like this too often in religious circles – and we can hear the promise in Revelation today: "He will wipe every tear from their eyes" with the same eyeroll. And yet we hope and believe that that promise – and even the phrase, "It's God's will" are somehow true. The risk is that we may misunderstand that hope badly, and so deceive ourselves. (You know the story of the Pollyanna little girl whose parents decided to bring her back to reality by giving her a huge box of horse manure for Christmas: Her reaction was, "Thanks, mom and dad! I know there's a pony in here somewhere!) Hearing John's promise in the wrong way puts us at risk of being that little Pollyanna.

Think about this with me; I admit it's territory we rarely explore, because it has to do with our spiritual psychology – how we human beings are made. And we're not often-enough helped to understand it, either by the church or by the culture. So:

Think of us all has having three levels on which we can function: The first, and often the most evident and most insistent, is the level of emotion or feelings. We share this with other animals, it's hard-wired into us; and unless and until we mature it's the only thing we're aware of and it drives us. Tragically, our culture teaches us to value this most basic level of our humanity as the most "genuine," instead of understanding it as a part, but only a superficial, limited, and very often misleading and deceptive part, of who we are.

The second level is reality-based thinking, planning, and decision making; in psychological terms, the ego-level. Helping a child to grow means helping her or him to distinguish between feelings and facts, and to act on facts, not feelings. Our culture doesn't teach us to do this very well, and so we face a doubly-uphill battle: both culture around us, and the press of emotion within, want to focus us on the first level and not on this second, without which we can't begin to be effective disciples (or human beings).

And our spiritual psychology tells us there's still a third level: the "image of God" within us, destined for eternal life, known and loved at each moment by God and – often without our conscious awareness – loving God back. Spiritual writers sometimes call this level the "self."

So: Instinct/emotion // rationality/ego // God's image/self. How does this help us to understand that cartoon, these readings, and (most of all) our daily discipleship?

It all has to do with keeping the levels separate and not mixing them up. We need to be able to know and to choose which level we're operating at, when called to do so.

In the cartoon the religious figure is speaking from the third level: everything that happens is, on this level, in fact "God's will": If God did not somehow will something, it would not exist. (As a monk once said, again speaking at this level, "Why should I want for myself anything other than what God wants for me?) But poor Job can't connect on that level: He's overwhelmed by the grief and by the actual disaster he's experiencing (levels one and two). It's just wrong to expect more of him at this point, so sympathy and practical help are what's called for. (A lot of well-meaning but cruel things said at times of tragedy make exactly this mistake. In some abstract sense they're true, but they're not appropriate to the situation. I'll come back to that.)

Let's turn to the readings: Note that (in the passage we heard last week from Revelation) John says of the group that hears this message: "These are the ones who have survived the time of great distress; they have washed their robes and made them white in the Blood of the Lamb." He's referring to those in his churches who have remained faithful during the ongoing persecutions. That theme of having done some difficult things to remain faithful is picked up today when Paul and Barnabas tell the church at Antioch to persevere in the faith, saying "It is necessary to undergo many hardships to enter the Kingdom of God." Why?

Their point is that what is most deeply true, the "third level" of living as God's image, simply cannot be experienced to be true without doing hard work, every day. People can hear about it, and talk about it, but they haven't discovered it for themselves, without that work. It's not that we earn the promise as a reward: rather, we learn to understand the promise rightly through our work because the work reveals to us what the promise gives words to. We must learn, through daily effort (notably the effort to "love one another" that Jesus commands in the

Gospel) to notice but not be ruled by our feelings; to see ourselves, others, and the reality in front of us in a clear-eyed way; and only having done that work will we discover the reality and the true meaning of, “He will wipe every tear from their eyes.”

Mixing up the levels means that we can misinterpret our feelings for God’s will – and who knows how many lives have gone off the rails in small ways and large because people do that, from following cult leaders to doubling-down on unwise romantic infatuations. And, again mixing up levels, we can think that a truth on the third level, the level of the Spirit of God, will be convincing or even helpful to a person who is, rightly or wrongly, in the grip of one of the other levels. Take a simple example:

Genuine help to a suffering person – truly loving another person – begins in self-awareness: Am I repeating a religious truism at a wake service both because I hope it’s true and genuinely want to help, but also because I feel awkward and saying it gives me a sense of being helpful? Would not genuine love be more silent and attentive to what the person suffering the loss is experiencing, and responsive to that? That’s connecting properly, first level to first level.

Loving another person sometimes requires, on the second level, understanding accurately what is in front of me and offering, in addition to first-level sympathy and attention, practical help. Remember the advice of Saint James: If a brother or sister is homeless and hungry, and you say, “‘Stay warm and well-fed,’ what good is that?” Practical help is second-level to second-level – again, a match and probably truly helpful.

Barnabas, Paul, and Jesus all remind us that it is the work of daily discipleship – loving our neighbor, undergoing many hardships to enter the Kingdom – that prepares us to experience confidently, and not simply as a sop to our feelings, the promise in John. That so many nonbelievers find the promise unconvincing – “pie in the sky when you die,” as the phrase goes – is a sign that too many Christians have not yet done the work on ourselves and for others that would give us the right to say with well-founded confidence and with understanding what is true on the third level, and to know when and how to connect to that in others. If the visiting clergyman had first sat in the dirt with Job, then helped him to rebuild his house and to buy a new camel, and had done similar things for others over a lifetime, only then might he have understood what he was saying, and have had the right to remind Job of John’s words.