

Pentecost 19A

Sunday, October 23, 2011

Matthew 21:44-46; Psalm 1

Like Trees Planted By Streams

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

The story we just heard comes near the end of Matthew's telling of Jesus' story. What we just heard was actually the last of three questions meant to put Jesus to a test. The first question had to do with how God's people live and worship faithfully under Imperial control; the second grilled Jesus about and, at the same time mocked, faith in God's promise of resurrection; finally Jesus is interrogated about his legal philosophy. In a way that echoes the test Jesus underwent at the hands of the Devil at the beginning of his ministry, where Satan questioned Jesus' identity and relationship with his heavenly Father by trying to seduce Jesus into ending world hunger, making a dazzling display of supernatural power and bringing peace and order to the world by means of power and domination, these three questions aim to expose Jesus as an ineffective and incompetent messianic fraud. As in his trial in the wilderness, though, Jesus' response focuses on God's desire, purpose and will to be connected to God's people in a relationship of love and Jesus clings tenaciously and faithfully to the Father, even at the expense of his own power, success and reputation simply because he loves the Father, he trusts the Father's love for him. At the end of the day, all the grilling, tempting, testing, tugging and pulling Jesus this way and that only exposes us for who we are – people who love ourselves, our religions, our power, our privilege, our intellect, our culture, our traditions ... anything and everything more than we love God. Plainly and simply we neither know nor love God. And because we don't love God, we cannot even start to love our neighbors.

The old proverb goes, "Do what you love, and you'll never work a day in your life." That's wisdom. I wonder how many of us heeded such sage advice? Of course, we can also think of many compelling reasons to ignore that advice.

In the short story, "The Christian Roommates," John Updike brings together two young men with bright futures as first-year roommates at Harvard. Orson Zeigler is the all-american boy and doctor's son with future all set: "pre-med course here, medical school at either Harvard, Penn, or Yale, and then back to South Dakota" where he would marry his high school sweetheart and live a successful and respectable life. His roommate, Henry Palamountain, is proto-hippie Episcopalian from Oregon. Hub drives Orson nearly insane during the course of the year as the two walk greatly divergent paths but share the same room. One thing that drives Orson particularly crazy is that Hub prays: "Every morning, he gets down on his knees and

throws himself across the bed, his face in the blanket, his arms way out,” Orson complains to a friend. Then Orson says, “I pray too, but I don’t make a show of myself.” Orson’s friend counters by naming Hub a saint, but that’s too much for Orson. Orson goes off, telling his friend that Hub is terrible in chemistry, buys books second hand and is a terrible wrestler. At the end of the story we discover that Hub goes off to seminary and ends up in Madagascar as a “combination missionary, political agitator, and soccer coach.” Orson’s life goes according to plan. He graduates, goes to med school, marries his high school sweetheart and becomes a well respected pillar of his hometown. Updike finishes the story by writing: “His life has gone pretty much the way he planned it, and he is much the kind of man he intended to be when he was eighteen... In one particular only does the man he is differ from the man he assumed he would become. He never prays.”

He never prays. There is a way that we can be all we can be, achieve all that we desire to achieve, grasp all the happiness we could possibly delight in and in that contentment every once in a while find that something touches the scarred over memories of past loves and we realize that we have become a people who never pray, a people who have lost our love for God.

In my years of talking with Dave, he spoke of one regret, just one. He would have liked to have gone to college in the usual way, to have been a student sitting in the quad on sunny afternoon, talking about life, love and all the other things college students talk about. Instead Dave had worked full-time and went to school at night. His father died when he was 18, and he felt a keen sense of responsibility for his bi-polar mother and 10-year-old sister. So, he remained with them and went to work to care and keep them. Now, in his late 70s, he wonders what life might have been like had things been different, but Dave prays. He knows about lives faith, hope, love for God and for his neighbor. He knows about suffering too and underachieving and limitations. Yet, when you press him, Dave will tell that happiness is found in a relationship with God and in loving your neighbor. That’s what Jesus’ says too. And the Psalmist too. Even now, later on in his life, Dave is like a tree planted by a stream of water, and he is blessed, happy.

With this image the psalmist describes those who are rooted, grounded and in love with God: They are like trees planted by streams of water. Their leaves do not wither and they bear fruit. They are a blessing for the whole world, a tree of life. Jesus stands in Jerusalem just days before his crucifixion and he too is a tree planted by streams of water, nourished and sustained in love that flows between him and the heavenly Father, a life sustained by meditation on God’s word and by prayer, and this is Jesus’ crowning achievement: He loves God with all his heart, with all his soul, with all his mind, and he loves his neighbor as himself. In love for God and love for us, Jesus lays down his life, suffers death on the cross. In love, Jesus is raised from the dead and crowned with glory and life that is ours too, as God’s loving gift. The humiliation and utter failure of Jesus’ crucifixion has become for us God’s triumph and greatest achievement, and our only hope in this world and the next.

Think of all the ways by which we judge ourselves and others; think of all our hopes and dreams and expectations for ourselves and those we love; think of all we hope to ever do and achieve, all the acclaim and wealth we could ever wish to accumulate, here beneath Jesus' cross, these count for nothing. The measure and worth of a human being is discovered in the depth of God's love for her and him, for you and for me. God's love makes the world go around. Everything hangs on God's love for us and our love for God and for neighbor. That is good news. Good news for all people, because all are love. We too can love, each and every one of us. We can, all of us, everyone of us, give love, and we can, no matter what our state or condition receive the love of others and through that love feel and know God's presence, mercy and acceptance.

Once again, that's good news. Good news for the overachiever and the underachiever, the winners and the losers, the healthy and the sick. God loves you and wants you, rooted and grounded in that love, to love everybody else. In that love, we find ourselves becoming like trees planted by streams of water. We become part of God's renewing of creation; part of God's gift of life; a witness to the resurrection of Jesus in all we do and say. When we confessed our sin and received God's forgiveness, we asked that God would not only forgive us, but renew and lead us to delight in God's will and walk in God's ways. Our baptism compels us to do the same, to let go of this world and its empty promises and to find our joy and delight in God and God's work.

In this past week, we heard news that Moammar Gaddafi had been killed, and the response that we most heard echoed was that the world was a better, safer place now that he was dead. Maybe so. But how sad. I think I should like to agree with the Psalmist and with Jesus. I think the only think that promises to make the world a better, safer place is that its people love God and love their neighbors as they love themselves. All other human endeavors shrink to insignificance, blow away like chaff in the wind. But the love of God endures. It is the future. May Jesus us fill us with his love. Amen.