

Easter Sunday

April 7, 2021

OLD SOUTH CHURCH IN BOSTON

“God’s Standards are Quite Low”, an Easter sermon by Nancy S. Taylor, Senior Minister (As we continue to be in the grip of a pandemic, the novel coronavirus, the sermon, like the rest of worship, was prerecorded, edited into the service and uploaded on Easter morning via live-stream.)

PRAYER BEFORE THE SERMON

Gracious God, on this Easter morn, come so near to each of us as to oil the hinges of our heart’s Doors, that they may swing gently and easily to welcome your coming. Amen.

SERMON

We have four gospels, four ancient accounts of Jesus: Matthew’s, Mark’s, Luke’s, and John’s. All four, while they don’t agree on many things, all four (in their canonical form) tell of an empty tomb and of encounters with a risen Christ.

Which is why we are here today. Why Jesus didn’t go the way of countless spiritual leaders whom time has long since forgotten. Why Christianity is the largest religion in the world. Why the stock market ground to a halt on Good Friday. Why Martin Luther King, Jr. and Rosa Parks and John Lewis could muster the courage to wrest justice from an unjust country. Why the preaching of Allan Boesak and Desmond Tutu brought apartheid to its knees. Why Harriet Tubman could summon the strength to ferry just one more person to freedom through the underground railroad... and then another, and another, and on and on. Why Oscar Romero, though murdered, remains to this day, the conscience of El Salvador; his words and witness a living condemnation in Jesus’ name of the country’s cruel neglect of the poorest of the poor. Don’t tell them there is no heaven.

Had Jesus not emerged from the tomb, it’s a sure bet Christianity would have been a forgotten escapade, lost to history. The disciples, defeated and dispirited, would have gone silent about him – really, what was there to say anymore? They would have picked up their nets, hauled their boats out of dry-dock and returned to the sea.

Instead, having encountered a living Jesus, a post-crucifixion Jesus, a walking and talking Jesus, his followers are moved to speech. They cannot contain the news. *We have seen the Lord!* They shout it and preach it and teach it to any who will listen. And there, right there, is the beginning of the church. It is so because the resurrection - the experience of the presence of a risen Christ

– is proof of God’s imprimatur. This is how we know Jesus to be the real deal: child of God, Savior, Liberator, Prince of Peace, and Conqueror of Death. It is the difference between Jesus and a host of genuine spiritual leaders across the millennia.

Resurrection is the difference. The death of death is the difference.

When asked if he believed in the death of death, believed in resurrection, believed in heaven, South Africa’s Archbishop Desmond Tutu responded that he did, indeed believe in heaven.

Having established his Easter belief in the death of death, Tutu was asked, “Who, do you think, will get into heaven?”

Tutu responded with his characteristically mischievous smile: Well, he said, “God’s standards are quite low.”

Tutu recalled the thief hanging on the cross near Jesus. A thief who had broken the commandment not to steal. Yet, all he has to say to Jesus is “Please remember me”. With that small spark of repentance, Jesus tells him he has won acceptance into heaven. The thief wins a last second reprieve.

Tutu concludes: “There is hope for us all.” After all, “God’s standards are quite low.” (excerpts from an interview with Gyles Brandreth, Easter 2001)

In asserting that God’s standards are quite low – that you might be surprised who gets ushered through the Pearly Gates to dwell in eternity in God’s transcendent love – Tutu was advocating a branch of Christian theology called universalism or universal salvation.

Universalism suggests that even the worst among us – I will let you make that list in your own head and heart – even the worst among us has a shot at heaven because, at death, they will find themselves in the presence of divine love and will be unable to resist it. They, too, like the thief on the cross, will win a last second reprieve.

It is something to ponder on this Easter Sunday.

On the one hand, I adore this theology, its promise and possibility. It rings true to the God of grace whom we meet over and over again, in biblical story and in parable, in endless forgiveness, in free healing, in prophetic proclamation.

On the other hand, I admit that I rather cling to the thought that those who are cruel to others now – or, indifferent to human suffering; or so greedy as to stomp on others’ backs, or kneel on their necks on their way to power, fame or fortune – well, a part of me can’t wait for them to get what is due them. This, too is in the Bible. It’s in Mary’s *Magnificat*. Mary sings of the mighty being dethroned and the humble exalted; of the hungry fed with good things while the rich are sent away hungry. It’s in the Lukan woes: “But woe to you who are rich, for you have already received your comfort. Woe to you who are well fed now, for you will go hungry. Woe to you who laugh now, for you will mourn and weep.”

On this Easter Sunday I side with Desmond Tutu. In the end, universalism rings true to the God whom I have met in the Bible, through Jesus, and through Jesus' best emissaries, among them, Desmond Tutu. I side with Tutu. In this divided and hate-filled world, in this divided and hate-filled country the prospect of universal salvation is astonishing. From a human standpoint it is unbelievable. It is utterly implausible. We are simply incapable of offering to each other such grace. However, from a divine standpoint it makes all the sense in the world. It is a bracing reminder that God is God and we are not.

Today, on Easter Sunday, Resurrection Day, on this The-Why-of-Christianity-Day, I have three questions for you.

First, if God has a soft spot for sinners, do you, too, have such a soft spot? Will you work on that?

Second, if God's standards are so low, might you lower your standards to God's level? Will you endeavor to work on that?

Finally, if your salvation and mine—and that of even the worst among us—hinges on our response to the Divine invitation, what is your response? If God is calling you, wooing you into a way of life premised on astonishing quantities of divine grace, on otherworldly forgiveness, on generous and soft hearts, what is your response?

It's Easter Sunday. Christ is risen! He is risen, indeed. That, is all the difference. Alleluia. Amen.

BENEDICTION

On this Easter Sunday, may you love God so much, that you love nothing else too much. And may you fear God enough, that you need fear nothing else at all.