

October 19, 2014

Sermon: *Matthew 22:15-22*

Laurel Mathewson

Wouldn't it be nice, we think, if we had eyes to see the world like Jesus? After today's Gospel reading, we might be tempted to believe that through Jesus's eyes, the world divides neatly into two boxes: God's box, and everything else: the not-God's box. Wouldn't that be convenient? Wouldn't that be fantastic, if we could scan a room or walk through our days with this clarity about things that belong to God, and things that don't. Because this is a question that haunts us, and seems to have haunted humanity from the beginning: What belongs to God? What is holy, of God, filled with God, and what isn't? While there is no simple answer to that question, there is a simple and ancient interpretation of today's Gospel that illuminates my reading of this life -- not into neat boxes but into a heightened sense of holy values.

The coin Jesus is presented with bears the image of Caesar; thus it belongs to Caesar. *Let him have those lifeless coins*, Jesus says. This much is obvious. But what bears God's image? And what, then, belongs to God? Those steeped in the Torah knew the answer, as, I suspect, do you: *We do*. We are taught and we proclaim that *WE bear God's image*: human beings of every tribe and tongue. We, the human race, every man and woman: we are made in the image of God. And these lives, ah, they are precious. God wants these lives, our lives, for God's self; the one who formed even our inmost parts is much, much more interested in these lives than in any coin. *Give the bits of metal to others as you need, both to survive and thrive. But your very life? I really hope you give it to me*, God says.

But we don't *have to* offer our lives and service to God, the one who made us, knows us, loves us, wants us. We can choose to live for ourselves and at the service of other idols, like good reputations, individual happiness, or self preservation. Or we can give our lives to love: we can offer ourselves, as Jesus did, for the benefit others, and in so doing find a holy depth previously unimagined. Or, we can do something in between. I suspect that is where most of us fall, in that middle ground where we strive each day to give a little more to our life giving God, and a little less to the soul-draining idols.

But it's worth remembering that we might be training for bigger choices. In 1873 Memphis was consumed, absolutely overrun, by yellow fever. Half the population fled. No one yet understood that the disease spread through mosquitoes, so, quite rationally, the going theory was that it was passed from person to person by contact or breath, or by contaminated linens and open bathrooms. The Board of Health burned pine tar to disinfect the air, covered the streets with powdered lime, and soaked sheets with carbolic acid. This chaos came just months after a small group of young Episcopal nuns had arrived in town, ready to serve in a more mundane way. It was assumed they would leave when the disease hit; instead they asked for permission to stay, under the charge of their 28-year-old Superior, Sister Constance. They cared for over 60 patients, and nearly all of them survived. They went on to teach, to nurse, to serve the city.

When yellow fever again swept Memphis five years later, the sisters were on retreat in New York. When they heard the news that the disease had returned, they returned to Memphis immediately. And when they got there, they found that this time around, the devastation and death toll were even greater. Yet they chose again to give their lives in service to the suffering, and that late summer four of them, including 33-year-old Constance, died as a result.

But there is a simple reason our church calls the nuns and priests who died that summer “The Martyrs of Memphis.” We recognize that they acted out of faith and free choice, not delusional compulsion. They knew it was risky. They chose to love. But they didn’t have to.

This is a point of Jewish and Christian theology so basic that we are apt to overlook it: We are free to do as we will. This matters, says revered theologian Rowan Williams, because in the very beginning, God acts in creation out of freedom, not need: God freely chose to create something that was different, that was not-God, and then be in relationship with that creation. Yet “if God makes a world that is *really different* from him, a world of interactions and interconnection, this means a world that is capable of change ... [and] the very notion of a coherent universe implies that the process of change won’t always be smooth or gradual; there will be cataclysms, ‘violent’ moments when the interactions are explosive.” (39-40, ToT) We see this in volcanoes, earthquakes, tsunamis -- and, I would submit, in the violent virus that filled our news-channels this week, Ebola.

Williams acknowledges that thinking about the created universe as an inherently risky place doesn’t make it emotionally easier to face: it won’t -- and shouldn’t stop us from questioning God or protesting to God in the face of natural evils or suffering. But he also suggests that “we have to try and keep our heads clear enough to recognize that natural disasters are just that, the laws of nature going ahead. It is unspeakably terrible that people and animals are caught in the flow, so to speak; but can we imagine a world where certain processes were always halted in their tracks by God if there were a risk to living creatures?” (41 ToT)

So God makes a risky world, and then “God takes the riskiness to an extreme” with the emergence of creatures with minds and freedom. “As the Bible says, creation comes to a sort of climax point when God makes something that reflects him more fully than anything else -- beings capable of choice and of love. ... The riskiness and uncertainty built into creation also reaches a new level.” Now, the threats to our security are not just from natural processes but also from human choices. (42)

This new layer of freedom and riskiness is tragically on display in Liberia, and too many other war-torn countries. We’ve been hearing a lot about the nearly 2,500 people who have died from Ebola in Liberia -- as well we should, and we probably weren’t paying enough attention early enough. But another layer to this story is that between 1989 and 2003, some 500,000 people died in Liberia from two successive civil wars. Let me say those numbers one more time, for just this one country: 2,500 deaths from Ebola. 500,000 deaths from war.

So yes, it is risky to be a human being, to be alive: But think of the *power* that we human beings have through our choices, and the difference those choices make: our freedom to use our all of our intelligence, our bodies, and our spirits in the service of love -- or the choice to act out of selfish, fearful hate -- is much more significant than any particular virus. That said, this virus is indeed scary.

Famata Dunoh knows first hand how scary it is for communities where the Ebola death tolls have been highest. She runs a child-care center outside Monrovia, in Liberia. Along with 4 other caretakers, she recently welcomed 10 young children who have survived Ebola. In most cases, their parents and siblings died from the disease.

Famata tells the children to put their faith in God, tells them that all is not lost.” But she acknowledges, too, the mystery, the ways that God’s face is hidden from all humanity, not just Moses. “I tell them,” she says, “only God knows the reason why you survived Ebola and your parents did not.” As survivors, the children are effectively immune from the virus, but there are barriers of fear to re-entering suffering communities: people do not trust that these children are not infectious; neighbors and family may claim the child survived due to witchcraft. There is more stigma and fear for children who have survived Ebola than for HIV-orphans. One UNICEF representative described a country where fear is breaking down that normal sense of human compassion.

In that place of acute danger and fear, Famata lives out a reasonable and loving response. She is not reckless. But she chooses to love.

In the face of physical vulnerability and chaos -- whether perceived or real -- it is easy to be distracted by the fear-mongering illusion that we have *no choice* but to respond with self-defense and paranoia, *no choice* but to act out of a natural and desperate sense of self-preservation for our lives and the lives of our children or family. This is not true! Jesus’ voice calls us out of this illusion, reminding us that we *do* have a choice, always, about who and what we give our lives to. While I trust completely that God wants us to use our brains to the best of our ability to take care of the lives and the bodies we’ve been given, we balance that practical and basic self care with the acknowledgment that on this earth we are never totally safe, never secure. We trust every day, every time we step into a moving vehicle, that whether we live or die, we are the Lord’s. So while we act on reason and yes, sometimes fear, in doing what we can to protect our lives and our loved ones, as Christians any posture of self-preservation and self protection is also shaped by the Spirit of Jesus, who whispers in our ear that fear must not break down our bonds of compassion. We are not prisoners of fear. We always have the freedom to love.

And so we pray this day and in the days to come for those suffering and dying from Ebola; for their families, neighbors, and friends; for those risking their lives to contain this pandemic's spread; and for all those in any kind of danger -- whether from disease or from human choices warped by cowardice, ignorance, or greed.

The good news, today and always, is that with God's help, we humans can do heroic things. We have a choice, a *powerful* choice, about who and what we will serve with our lives.

Give your life to God, Jesus says. Lean into love.