

The Gate

A fellow remembers losing a close friend when they were both youngsters and the devastation that he felt at the loss of this friend.

At the funeral, the minister was trying to cheer everyone up because after all, the youngster who passed away was happy with God.

In a better place.

And the friend who has left behind was devastated by the cheeriness and vacuity of this minister.

The friend who was left behind had it right.

The minister is the one who had it wrong.

Sadly, when Christianity changed from being a force intended to change the world into a faith that concentrates on what happens after we die, faith is reduced to personal piety combined all too often with an obsession over sex and cigarettes – rather than with justice and equity.

As such, much in our faith died on the vine.

And unless we reclaim what our faith actually calls us to, we will never understand dense and difficult gospel lessons like the one that we have today.

That's because today and in the next several weeks, we will be listening in as Jesus speaks of himself as "the gate", as "the bread of life", as "the way, the truth and the life."

And while many have interpreted these sayings as requiring people to "sign up for the Jesus club!", or to declare Jesus as your personal Lord and Savior, that's not, respectfully, what Jesus has in mind at all.

First of all, when he refers to himself as "I am", he is embracing for himself and reminding us that "I am" is the name that God shared with Moses when Moses asked God to disclose God's name.

The reply that came from the burning bush was: "I am."

So when Jesus uses those two exact words to refer to himself, we know that he's telling us what we need to know about God — and about how our relationship with God is channeled through Jesus.

When Jesus starts talking about entering through the narrow gate and not climbing over the fence, when he says that he is the way, the truth, and the life, what he's actually telling us is that he's showing us how to live God's life, here and now.

That if you want to experience the life that really is life, then look out for other people, and not just yourself.

Get involved in self-giving service with no expectation of reward or return.

Learn how to let go of anger and resentment.

Especially the angers and resentments that arise on those occasions when I am actually in the right!

Because the hardest anger to let go of is justified anger.

But if we can leave resentment and anger and anxiety behind, and move toward the life of openness and forgiveness, that's when we have walked through the narrow gate.

That's when we have truly consumed the bread of life.

That's when we begin to experience what Jesus repeatedly calls "eternal life."

We so often think of "eternal life" as something that happens after we're in the grave.

But Jesus constantly says that we can have eternal life right here and now.

In this life.

Because eternal life is simply a life that is lived within the embrace of the living God.

The God who is infused and suffused with this world.

The God who is at all times under your roof, and if he cannot remain there, he is no further away than your front porch.

When faith is focused on pie in the sky in the sweet bye and bye, it has little impact on how we deal with each other or get through our day-to-day lives.

Faith focused on the afterlife has nothing to say about our politics or our social arrangements or our economics.

But if we come to understand that the purpose of Jesus's ministry is to show us how to be human in this world, as we take part in a humanity that's concerned with every aspect of our lives, then the values and virtues of selflessness and kindness; of compassion and justice and equity – these suddenly play a huge part in every decision we make.

In every person with whom we meet and interact.

In every circumstance that life throws at us.

In other words, our faith all of a sudden becomes something dynamic and real.

Something that has a claim on us in real time, as we make real choices.

It's not sentimental or gooey love.

It's hard love.

It's a recognition, as Dorothy Day once said, that "I only love God as much as I love the person I love the least."

Which imposes on us an obligation to open our hearts and minds every day to the stranger, to the unexpected, to the unusual.

And to recognize that in each of these circumstances, God is present.

Like Jesus in the garden after his resurrection.

His identity, unclear to Mary, until she recognizes him through his earth-stained hands.

Like the two on the road to Emmaus, who recognize him at last in the breaking of the bread.

Jesus is always right next to us, even though we so often fail to see him.

There's another piece to this puzzle.

It's the piece that asks this question:

"Why did Jesus have to die for our sins?"

Like our misunderstanding about "eternal life", just so this question has been answered in ways that take us far from God's truth.

Many of us were taught that Jesus died for our sins because we had so offended God that only Jesus, God incarnate, could satisfy God's honor by sacrificing himself on our behalf.

That's a way of thinking straight out of the Middle Ages with knights and Lords and Ladies.

Honor, and restoring honor, were the coin of the realm back then.

But if you sit with that answer to the question of why Jesus died for us, what you get is God as a monster.

One who requires a terrible sacrifice to forgive.

That's not the God that Jesus reveals to us.

Perhaps the reason why Jesus died for us is not because God required it, but because we did.

Because of our love affair with controlling people, places and things.

Because of our worship of money, power and fame; all of which Jesus challenges on a daily basis.

Making Jesus an unacceptable threat to who we are as human beings.

It wasn't God who willed Jesus's death, it was us.

We humans who could not get over ourselves, who refused to let go, who refused surrender.

It was us who demanded his death.

And we repeat that demand with every missile fired in the Middle East.

With every houseless person we consign to the sidewalk.

With every mocking glance leveled at the odd or the different.

And yet, in the resurrection of Jesus, a new way is opened to all of us.

We are obsessed with power and control because we think that without it we will surely die.

In the resurrection, Jesus shows us that death is defeated.

And therefore it's safe to let go of having to be in charge and instead, to enter into the flow of God.

It is love that sends Jesus to live among us and to submit to our viciousness.

It is love that raises Jesus from the dead.

It is love that is at the core of all of our beings.

It is love that heals.

It is love that comforts.

It is love that changes worlds.

As a people born into the new creation, made new on that first Easter Sunday, we too can find ourselves smack dab in the middle of this New World.

We too, can let go of fear and anxiety.

We too can take that deep dive into the beautiful stream that is our loving God.

For Jesus "came that we may have life, and have it abundantly."

Thanks be to God!

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