

Sunday, July 19th, 2020

Pentecost 7A

Genesis 28:10-19a, Psalm 139: 1-12, 23-24, Romans 8:12-25, Matthew 13: 24-30, 36-43

Generosity: Suspending Judgment

Introduction

I think the Bible has as much to say about people as it does about God. In fact, one of the reasons I find Scripture so engaging, so fascinating, is its sophisticated reading of human beings: the way it offers numerous windows into human psychology and sociability, the way in which it understands that the person and society can be distinguished but never separated from each other.

These last few weeks, we have very much focused on the human condition and its connection with God. Each week, we have seen a consistency within Matthew's Gospel about Jesus' understanding of people and society as rivalrous, competitive to the point of mutual destruction. Two weeks ago, we explored the idea of *Beyond Rivalry: Living Lightly*, where Jesus invites people think again about the contentious gender relationships of his day, as he challenges the way in which the girls and boys would play games in the street, acting out their future adult antagonisms: "But to what will I compare this generation? It is like children sitting in the marketplace, calling to one another, ¹⁷'We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we wailed, and you did not mourn.'" Last week, we thought through the idea of *Generosity as Attention*, looking at the Parable of the Sower, and its proposition that God's generosity, God's attention to us in Jesus, is so compelling, that it shapes the way we live, the attitudes we have. In short Christian ethics is about the acceptance of divine generosity and simply copying it. Today we bring these two themes together: *Generosity over Rivalry*.

And so, to our film clip! Let's scroll back to 1961, to segregated America, to the space race, one of the most public battles of the cold war. So desperate was the rivalry between the USA and the then USSR, that even segregation was put to one side in the attempt to put Project Mercury, an American into space, into effect. As one former NASA employee said, "In fact, NASA was one of the few employers at the time willing to employ African-American women. One of the reasons they were able to buck this trend was because NASA was, "nerd-heaven"" and could get away with flouting Virginia law". What is compelling in this real story, is the way Katherine Johnson, tolerated a double-whammy: not just racial, but also gender discrimination. In our clip, her perspicacity, her astuteness, which only inflames the anger of her male superiors, leads to the accusation that she must have access to top secret data, that she must be a Russian spy. Even though raised in the bowels of bigotry, this is just too puzzling for words: the perverse logic of rivalry, momentarily escapes her, and she gently states the obvious, "I am not Russian". The interrogation ends and everyone gets back to work. Despite the ongoing opposition, Katherine *generously* saves the team from its mathematical errors and folly, with astronaut John Glenn ultimately requiring that *she* check, that she alone sign-off on the data. Still today the racial/gender balance is skewed. As one employee says, "We're nowhere near 50 per cent representation of women in NASA. The same applies with African-American people and a number of minority groups. The numbers don't reflect the capabilities."

The Reading

With this rivalry and demonization of a gifted black woman on the record, even in a comparatively enlightened place as nerdy NASA, let's think about the Gospel reading. Matthew is dealing with a pastoral and political issue. He faces two groups who have crossed swords with each other. One group, Jews of a conservative, legalistic disposition, hold to the idea that Christians are to follow the Jewish ethical law by the letter. The other group, possibly non-Jews, *the libertarians*, hold that Jesus has delivered them from all and any rule-based ethical constraints. Life in Jesus, is life in the Spirit. It is one's internal spiritual state that matters. Neither group has any time for the other. In fact, it seems that the faith nature of the conflict, sharpens, exacerbates it. The stakes are always higher when God language is part of the picture. After all, when God is on your side, there is little need for moderation.

But this is precisely, Matthew's approach: one of rational moderation. In seizing upon the memory of Jesus' story about the field of the wheat and weeds, he warns of theological purism, of that belligerent, pugnacious attitude that confidently claims that God is *with you*, but *against your rival*. Matthew is clear that the attempt to pull out the weeds, whoever they are – each group has an opposite reading of that – will only lead to the destruction of the community itself. For Matthew, there is no place for holy war. That does not mean to say, however that all opinions are correct. Matthew is not naïve, a mere relativist; he sees that some views are more questionable than others, some more legitimate than others, but he is careful to warn against narcissism, against *hubris*; he is careful to counsel constraint and moderation.

But there is something more here I think. There is here a wisdom, a wisdom that is clear about the fact that rivalry has more to do with our human condition, than with God. Our human need to demonize in direct proportion to the passion with which we hold to a position, is an anthropological thing, a human thing, not a God thing. Matthew sees that religious, that faith constructs, so easily become *little more than a reflection of our self-interest, projected onto God*. In other words, God language, carries inherent dangers to it, as it is indiscriminately employed to justify our agendas.

Conclusion

Back to the film clip! We cannot be sure to what extent the racial and gender rivalry, the abuse to which Katherine was subject over months and years, bore a religious component. On the part of some perhaps. What *is* certain, is that it was anthropologically grounded: it is what we humans do, as we seek every and any justification, secular or religious, to gain our advantage. The only antidote to such predatory behaviour is generosity: Katherine's generosity as she played her creative part in NASA, the generosity counselled by Matthew, which refuses to demonize the rival and destroy the community: the generosity of God, divine generosity.