

Isaiah 51:1-6; Ps 138; Rom 12:1-8; Mt 16:13-20  
Jervis. August 2017

The lead article in a magazine that we got last week is an analysis of the reasons that Donald Trump is President Trump. The author's thesis is that America has given way to magical thinking, to a willingness to believe which in his view precludes thinking/reason. The design of the cover is clever. It has the word believe in capital letters and the three middle letters are highlighted – l i e.

The author analyzes what he calls magical thinking in the political and cultural left and the right. He locates the roots of the left's anti-rationalism in the 60's: in that period's openness to relativism, and faith in mystical journeys of various sorts. The right, the author suggests, is anti-rational because it is Christian.

I have been cringing these past months over what to me had been the unthinkable marriage of Christianity and Trump-ism. And this article is just the most recent one that I have forced myself to read. I say forced myself because it pains me so much. I identify myself as a Christian, and being lumped in with folks and beliefs I totally disagree with is hurtful.

The pain I feel is so complicated. It is both the pain of feeling deeply misunderstood by someone like the author of that article, and it is the pain of not knowing how to respond to those Christians who see things entirely differently than I do – who think that Trump represents their interests and their faith.

I wish I could simply discount those Christians, but the painful thing is that I feel constrained to take seriously the words of Paul that we heard today from his letter to Rome - : “we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another”.

I suppose I could adopt Paul's attitude in another of his letters – in Galatians - where he dismisses other people as preaching a non-gospel and curses them. And, maybe I should. But, before I get there I feel that I need first to try to find a

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way that does not participate in the problem: does not participate in the horrific polarizing that is taking place in America and that could easily replicate itself here.

My pain of bewilderment about how to respond to other people who have taken the name of Christ is complicated by the first pain I mentioned – that I am lumped in with them by people who very understandably see Christians as one entity. I want to find a way to care for others in the body of Christ with whom I have fundamental disagreements; and yet to speak and act on behalf of Christ in a way that I think is radically different from the way they do.

And all of this is complicated by recognizing that not only am I lumped in with people I so disagree with, but I as a Christian am loathsome to many because of those other Christians. It makes me very sad and confused.

On the one hand I feel that Christian unity is what God wants – we are one body; and on the other hand I want to cut myself off from parts of Christ’s body or even to say that they are foreign objects in our body.

It is tempting either to run away from the whole mess and join the secular critics of the Christian-Trump alliance; or to keep my head down and live in the wonderful bubble of our church, Redeemer.

Some of Paul’s words from Romans this morning seem right on target for my dilemma, which I am sharing with you because I think it is the dilemma many of you also face.

He writes these words right before his statement “we, though many are one body in Christ and individually members one of another”.

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Paul writes: “I encourage you, by the mercies of God to present your whole selves as a living sacrifice that is holy and pleasing to God. This, Paul says, is your reasonable worship. Do not be conformed to the patterns of this age but be transformed by the renewal of your mind so that you may prove what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and mature. I ask each one of you not to think of yourself more highly than you ought, but with sober judgement because God has measured out a portion of faith to each one of you.”

Paul is writing these words to the Roman church – a church that is divided over fundamental cultural differences. The Jewish believers in Jesus Christ think that they should avoid eating with non-Jewish believers because of the Biblical commandments around what to eat and who to eat with. And the non-Jewish believers in Jesus Christ see themselves as strong because they are free of such scruples. Paul calls the two factions ‘the weak’ and ‘the strong’.

His labels self-identify him with one group. Paul calls those who have gotten over the food laws the strong ones and he is clearly identifying with them.

But Paul does not advocate that the strong discount or separate themselves from the weak. Instead he advocates connection. All those who believe that Jesus is the Christ find themselves not only with individual faith but in an organism – in the body of Christ. Profoundly, inextricably connected to others of faith. As profoundly and inextricably connected as a physical body.

The words we hear from Romans this morning are Paul’s prescription for keeping Christ’s body healthy and connected – an organism that lives. Paul makes it clear that the prescription works only if it is taken – that may sound ridiculous. But it is critical. The prescription must be taken – taken from God. This is not a prescription that is a concoction that we or any other believers in Jesus Christ can create. It is God’s and it only works if it is received from the divine healer.

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Paul exhorts the Romans to present their whole selves to God as a living sacrifice. It is a curious image – a living sacrifice. As if the sacrifice is continual; not a typical sacrifice which is the one time slaughter of an animal, the kind of sacrifice the Romans would have seen many times in the market square. No, Paul talks about a sacrifice that lives; a perpetual, continual sacrifice.

Paul prescribes being sacrifices by means of the mercies of God. God's mercies – which is another way to speak of God's love – God's mercies are what enable us to give ourselves to God.

This complete and continual offering of ourselves enables us not to be shaped by the patterns of this age. This God-enabled offering of our lives is what allows us to escape the demands and constraints of the age. Paul uses the word 'age' much the way we do – this age of terrorism; this age of rage and division.

'Age' signifies the conditions and powers that dominate the lives of people and creation. For Paul it means the conditions and powers that exclude God's love; that worship the structures that human egos create. "This age" is a pseudo-reality that thinks the whole world is about us and what we can grab and get while we are alive.

Paul commands the Roman Christians not to be conformed to this age but to be transformed – by the love of God. Fundamental to this transformation is allowing their minds to be refurbished and renewed, made new and untainted by this age. This involves not thinking of ourselves more highly than we ought and accessing the faith that God has given us.

Paul says this is our reasonable worship. The word 'logiken' is usually translated as spiritual, sometimes as 'appropriate'. The word means 'reasonable'. Our English word 'logical' is rooted in this Greek word logiken.

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Paul, for all that he is a mystic, never gives up on reason and on the critical importance of our minds. Those of us who get to spend a lot of time studying Paul know that Paul's life-altering faith, which he describes mystically as "being found in Christ Jesus" does not mean that Paul gives up on his mind. In fact, some of the greatest western minds – Augustine, Aquinas, Heidegger, currently the continental philosophers Agamben and Badiou, wrestle with the immense concepts that Paul thought. Paul's faith enlivens his mind, focuses his mind.

Paul writes to the Philippians that, being found in Christ Jesus means that now his entire focus is on knowing Christ and the power of Christ's resurrection, sharing Christ's suffering and becoming like Christ in his death.

Paul is certain that his faith is faith in the truth; in a truth that is beyond reason but still demands mental discipline and focus. Believe for Paul does not have the letters 'lie' highlighted. Paul knows that it is true that Jesus Christ gave up his life with God, took on humanity, humbled himself and in obedience to God died on a cross and that God raised Christ from the dead.

This is the truth that Paul bases his life on; the truth on which he focuses his mind; and the truth that transforms/renews his mind.

The most reasonable way, Paul says, for us to respond to this truth is to receive God's mercy/God's love; then to present our whole selves to God and at the same time to recognize that we are bound to others who recognize Jesus Christ as Lord.

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Our task is to allow our minds to be liberated from the infections of the age we live in and to be a community that, as Paul goes on to write has genuine love, hates what is evil, is aglow with the Spirit and serves the Lord by serving others.

Our gospel this morning – the famous passage where Peter gets it right and recognizes that Jesus is the Christ, the son of the living God - is full of curiosities and difficulties. One of the challenging moments in this story comes right after Peter confesses the truth and Jesus extolls Peter's faith as a revelation from God. Matthew then writes: "then Jesus strictly charged the disciples to tell no one that he was the Christ".

What? – we ask. If Peter got it right why can't he tell anyone? And how does this jibe with the end of Matthew where Jesus commands his disciples to tell the world about him?

Right after the episode we have just heard, Matthew offers a way to understand Jesus' silencing response. In the next passage Matthew writes that "from that time Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things and be killed and on the third day be raised."

And Peter took Jesus and rebuked him "God forbid, Lord! This isn't going to happen to you!'. And then Jesus, in stark contrast to his commendation of Peter as the conduit of God's revelation says to Peter, 'Get behind me Satan; you are not on the side of God.'

Jesus doesn't want his disciples to tell anyone he is Messiah – yet. Not until he has gone to Jerusalem, been betrayed and crucified and raised by God. Not until they understand the truth about the Messiah and about being his followers.

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The truth of Jesus Christ – a truth that Paul recognized and embraced and allowed himself to be embraced by – is that Jesus Christ is the one who gave up his life on the cross for the sake of humanity; and that this is what those who believe in him do too – take up our crosses.

So, how do I respond to other Christians who I don't think know this truth? Who believe the lie that faith is about their getting what they want in this age? Who want a Messiah without the cross? And who don't discipline their minds? I am tempted to call them out; or diminish them in my head – they aren't real Christians.

They are caught in this age and are not letting themselves be transformed by the renewal of their minds. I want to say to them – get behind me Satan!

But maybe Jesus' call to us and Paul's wisdom for us is that we are to imitate Christ's response to we ourselves – to all of us – all humanity, including me and including each of you – all of us who were enslaved to the powers of evil in this age at the point when Christ entered this age as one of us and gave himself to us and for us; when he believed that the most reasonable response to our enmity to God's love was to love us.

Jesus says 'get behind me Satan' to Peter but he still gives his life for Peter. Jesus recognizes how shallow and untransformed Peter is yet Jesus doesn't say – I take it back; you are not the rock on which I can build my church.

What Jesus does is the most reasonable thing there is to do in an age of lies and ego and evil. Jesus gives his whole self out of love for Peter's sake, for the sake of the other disciples –for the sake of everyone in every time.

This does not mean that Jesus does not name evil, does not see evil, does not resist evil.

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What is that remarkable space that Jesus lives – that space in between accepting Peter in his misunderstanding and spiritual immaturity and calling Peter out when he gets it wrong.

What is that space between connection and clarity; where Jesus both continues to ground the church in Peter and yet does not let Peter get the nature of Messiahship and discipleship wrong.

I think we might call that space – love. And it is the space we are called to find now in this sad and difficult time for western Christianity.

We will find the place of love – the place in Christ and beside Christ – only by the loving mercy of God. Only as we do what Paul prescribes: offer ourselves anew each morning, and in the afternoon and before we sleep and when we wake in the night. Offer our whole selves to God as a living sacrifice.

This is the only reasonable way to find our way to the place of love. And it is only from that place of love that our threatened world has hope.

My friends in Christ, may we, though many, help each other to be guided by loving mercy of God.