

Sermon for August 9, 2009: Lessons for the Tenth Sunday after Pentecost

Forgive me if I take you back to your Western Civilization class in college to remind you of Plato's *Republic* and his analogy of the cave.

Plato there explained the inadequacy of human knowledge by comparing all of humanity to a small clan that had always been confined to a cave.

Their eyes were weak from the perpetual darkness. They would have been blinded by the midday sun.

From their cave, all they could see was some shadows of the real world, cast on the cave wall.

Of course, not knowing better, they imagined that those shadows were not shadows of real things but the real things themselves.

The cave dwellers thought the shadow of a tree was a tree; the shadow of a woman was woman.

Plato taught, however, that the true philosopher could escape from the cave.

The philosopher could get his eyes adjusted and see the real things, the tree, the woman.

Through strenuous intellectual and moral improvement, he could perceive the reality that most of humanity would never know, for most of us are blind to the eternal realities and count things that are passing away as eternal.

Now, there is a lot of Plato in Christianity.

He was basically the favorite philosopher of many of the Fathers of the Church, perhaps even the writer of the Gospel of John read a little Plato as he told the story of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection.

But Plato and the Hebrew mind are not easily reconciled.

The idea that we must work strenuously to disassociate ourselves

from the physical world around us and live above God's creation just does not agree with the sweep of Holy Scripture, which Plato, of course, did not read.

In Genesis, we can read the creation story in which God made every element of the world and called it good.

This messy, confusing, physical world, God called good.

And if you doubt Genesis, the most fundamental fact of our salvation is that God became flesh in the incarnation of Jesus Christ to make peace between himself and us through Jesus' death and resurrection.

We are reconciled to God not by words, or thoughts, or mental effort.

God did not send us more books of the Bible, new spiritual techniques, or new knowledge.

God did not reclaim us by making us better or smarter or nicer.

No, God made peace with us through the flesh and blood of Jesus Christ of Nazareth.

That is the scandal of Christianity; its radical particularity; its physical specificity.

The Word Made Flesh.

Some who questioned Jesus in the Gospel of John perhaps had read a little Plato, perhaps were scandalized by the idea that God would do saving work by flesh and blood rather than pure spirit.

They said, "Is not this Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How can he say "I have come down from heaven"?"

Their question implied that coming down from heaven and being born of a human mother were mutually exclusive.

Our confession is that they are not; Jesus came into the world through the blood and water of childbirth and saved us through the

blood of the cross and the water of baptism.

We confess that heaven is not a disconnected spiritual place; heaven in its fullest sense is what we call the universe on the day that the Lord makes all things new, that heaven and earth are joined in a new creation.

And because of Jesus' life and death in the flesh, that has already begun.

We might like for it to be otherwise.

It might be safer for us if God were up in heaven; if the Christian journey could a journey out of this world.

But it is not so. Jesus came down from heaven and called himself bread, the most basic and ancient food, the food of everyday life, the physical thing we cannot do without.

I am bread for you, he said. Eat this bread and taste of heaven.

Martin Luther, always bold with words, connected the incarnation to the Sacrament of the altar in this way:

It is the honor and glory of our God...that, giving himself for our sake in deepest condescension, he passes into the flesh, the bread, our hearts, mouths, entrails, and suffers for our sake that he be dishonorably handled, on the altar, as [he was] on the cross.

Ours is not a world of shadows, in which the truth, or God's grace, or our salvation are difficult to see and know.

God does not demand strenuous spiritual effort and escape from the his world.

God in Christ has already done the hard work of our redemption.

Hug your children and know that God is good.

Read the Scriptures and know the truth about yourself and God.

See the sun rise and sense God's limitless power.

And at the altar rail, extend your hands and feel your salvation.

Stick your nose in the chalice and smell the fruit of the vine and know that you are saved.

Taste and see that the Lord is good.