

Sermon, St. John's Episcopal Church, January 30, 2022

Everyone likes to be comfortable. There's nothing inherently wrong with that! We do, however, miss out on something when we are too comfortable or too satisfied with the way we do things or the way we see the world. There is much to be gained by being comfortably uncomfortable.

In the world of athletics (there is no avoiding the fact that I have coached college swimming for 40 years) we have what we call a comfort zone. There are some athletes that cling fiercely to that comfort zone. They seldom leave it. They may show up on time and do everything you tell them to do, but they do not have a restless desire to push against their personal boundaries. There is an intensity level, an effort level, they are not challenging themselves to reach. They tend to stay inside their little boxes. They also don't get faster, or at least not as fast as they could be! Improvement comes with embracing new challenges, but it's not easy.

People have intellectual comfort zones, too. There are folks who are perfectly content with their understanding of the world and everything in it. Like the swimmer who does the entire workout at a pace that is too relaxed, these folks read and think and discuss the issues of the day, but they do so almost exclusively with those that agree with them. They access news media that confirms their established beliefs. They shy away from intellectual challenges that could make them uncomfortable. Their conception of reality is in a comfortable box with sensible (to them) boundaries. That's all well and good, but these are people who struggle, if they care to, to see the world through other people's eyes. They may not even see other people's opinions as being legitimate or worthy of consideration. They lack empathy.

What would Jesus say about this? What does Jesus think about this? I believe He would understand, but be perfectly aghast! There are some things about Jesus of Nazareth that scholars agree on whether or not they are people of faith. Historian Bart Ehrman wrote that Jesus believed that there would be a reversal in the world's social organization. His message appealed to society's outcasts and threatened the established leadership of His time. There would be, as Ehrman said, condemnation and judgement against those who prospered. There would also be salvation and justice to the poor, downtrodden, and oppressed. In Epiphany we worship a Jesus that is not "boxed in" or residing in any "comfort zone". Spiritual upheaval was part of his message. Social upheaval was inevitable. Two thousand years ago He was crucified for His ministry.

I remember taking a course titled "Religion and Revolution". This was a while back! At first I thought that it was a contradictory title. Jesus is the "Prince of Peace"! I soon came to understand that it most certainly was not. In Luke's gospel today we see how Jesus could challenge people and arouse passions that became overtly hostile. Their reaction to His sermon started out with positive amazement, progressed through some mild condescension ( He does pretty well for a laborer's boy, doesn't he?), and concludes with outright hostility. They want to throw Him off a cliff! Why?

The crowd was fine with Jesus saying that He was the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy. They took that pretty well according to Luke. It seems like they were most upset that Jesus pointed out some instances in Jewish scripture where God showed preferential treatment to gentiles. There may be some truth to that but the real issue runs much deeper. Peter Gomes, in his book "The Scandalous Gospel of Jesus" wrote that the Jewish people in that synagogue

took the greatest offense to the fact that Jesus was saying God is more than their Jewish tribal deity. They believed that God was “theirs”, thus trying to place God in a comfortable, easily understood box. They wanted no challenge to that notion. The reality is, both then and now, that God is bigger than our imaginations. God will challenge us. We will feel discomfort, but that discomfort, if we can only embrace it, leads to spiritual growth. It can yield empathy.

History is filled with examples of how misused religion can be when people grow too comfortable with their notions of who God is and what God wants. Look at the history of race relations in this country. The God of the white Christians was not one of liberation and social justice for African Americans. Not in the era of slavery. Not in the plethora of restrictive laws enacted in the “Jim Crow” era, laws designed to relegate persons of color to an inferior status. Many “God fearing” white Christians worshiped a God who in their minds thought that white superiority was part of the natural order of things.

Desmond Tutu spoke of an African proverb that goes something like this: When white Christians came to Africa they had the Bible and the Africans had the land. Then, the Africans had the Bible and the white Christians had the land. In both instances, here and in Africa, using the Bible as an instrument of control rather than one of liberation is an insult to the Scandalous Gospel of Jesus! When we think about it, we can come up with scores of examples of how people who claim to know what God wants can do things based on prejudice and fear. Jesus of Nazareth was a martyr for social justice. Our faith in the resurrection means that His message did not vanish in the mists of time but has instead become our template, our example, for the mission of the church. It allows us to believe that in the long term God will reign. Love wins!

Someone said that Jesus will “afflict the comfortable and comfort the afflicted”. In Epiphany we understand that God presents Himself both to the world and in the world outside of any boundaries we can draw around Him. He will not fit in a box. God will surprise us, amaze us, and challenge us. We can live with being comfortably uncomfortable. Further, any modern prophet worth listening to will be striving for the same thing as Jesus. Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done, ON EARTH as it is in heaven.