

Saying ‘thanks but no thanks,’ to God’s Grace. Dale Ramerman. Proper 7; Luke 8:26-39; 23 June, 2019

I give titles to my homilies as a way to try keep some focus. Perhaps I should ask for suggested titles at the end of my homily to see if anyone was listening, and hearing what I thought I said. I’ve entitled this homily “Saying ‘thanks but no thanks,’ to God’s Grace.”

In our reading from 1 Kings, Elijah, empowered by God to speak the truth, retreats and tells God he is tired and afraid and that God can find someone else to speak for him. But God persists, again enabling Elijah to do God’s work. I think this is a reminder that opting out of God’s work is not an option for us.

Our reading from Galatians sets forth the Apostle Paul’s inspiring words

“In Christ you are all children of God through faith. As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.”

The image of being clothed with Christ is an interesting one in a church where some are set apart by how they are clothed. But I’ll save that for another day.

I would hesitate to ask for a show of hands of those who think Paul describes the Church of today, and how much we would like to live our lives without the divisions and classifications we seem to instinctively want to use.

And then there is our Gospel reading, the story of Jesus freeing the naked man from the demons that possessed him, with the result that everyone is disappointed.

Both the Gospels of Matthew and Luke tell this story. The town identified in Luke was in a town 30 miles inland, a long run for the pigs to reach the sea. Matthew’s version of this healing locates the miracle in a different town about 5 miles from the Sea of Galilee, the location of a notorious slaughter by the Romans in their campaign against the Jewish rebels during the First Jewish-Roman war. Perhaps the name of the possessed man, Legion, is a reference to the Roman legions who had invaded and slaughtered and then ruled.

After Jesus breaks the bonds of oppression, freeing the naked man from his demons, the town’s people ask Jesus to leave. They were afraid, probably because their solution of confining the naked man to the graveyard, where he would be under their control, has been undercut. And the man, Legion, freed of demons, also want to flee, with Jesus. But Jesus says “no,” return and tell what God has done for you.

So the result of Jesus’ intervention is that the owners of the pigs that drowned are, understandably, unhappy they have lost their pigs, their livelihood, their wealth. The town’s people are unhappy because Jesus has upset their solution of keeping the man who runs around naked, out of sight by confining him to live in the graveyard. The healed man is disappointed because he cannot go with Jesus.

And are we also disappointed as well because, well, we don't really believe in demons. We're upset when our solutions and work-arounds are disrupted. We prefer the familiar, the comfortable, the predictable, our plan A, not God's plan B. The Roman Legions that control and direct us are familiar, such as technology, and breaking away is risky.

God's grace is a mystery we experience but don't understand, like gravity that keeps us on the earth but also causes the tides that raise and lower the seas.

In the Lord's prayer we say "thy will be done". But do we mean it?, or are we thinking, thanks but I'll stick with my plan A. I'd really prefer my satisfaction be within my control.

The Apostle Paul assures us that in Christ there is no longer Jew or Greek, slave or free, male and female, surely one of the great acts of God's grace. How well have we adopted those wonderful words in the life of the Church? And do we believe its true?

For me, and perhaps many of you, my age and declining health weigh on me, sometimes more, sometimes less. It's harder to drum up my enthusiasm. I'm more risk adverse, while at the same time susceptible to speak injudiciously. I hear this weariness in *Elijahyknahdnaos9n* in our Psalm, a powerful lament, where the writer speaks of leading the multitudes to the house of God, but feeling no satisfaction as a result. The psalmist prays

As the deer longs for the water-brooks,
so longs my soul for you, O God.
My soul is athirst for God, athirst for the living God;
when shall I come to appear before the presence of God?

Lutheran hymn entitled "When Memory
Fades," sung to the tune *Finlandia*, says:

As frailness grows, and youthful strengths diminish,
In weary arms which worked their earnest fill,
Your aging servants labor now to finish
Their earthly tasks, as fits your mercy's will.
We grieve their waning, yet rejoice, believing,
Your arms, unwearied, shall uphold us still.

And, Jesus' words in the Gospel of Matthew, always beckon me on

"Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."

Amen

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