

The Resurrection of our Lord + April 1, 2018

On Maundy Thursday, I received word that Elfriede died. Elfriede was a great friend to us. She was a member of the parish I served in Northern California. She was known for her “straight talk,” being a little outspoken and possessing a heart of gold.

We had great conversations. Many of them were rather spirited conversations. We didn’t always agree because we had very different ways of thinking about things. Trained in the hard sciences and a teacher of mathematics for years, Elfriede prided herself in being a rationalist, whereas I was always appealing to the imagination, caught up in the exotic realm of sign and symbol. One of her favorite subjects was the concept of God and that came up quite a bit in our weekly bible studies. Her best friend also attended the bible study and she always said “God is love.” Folks shared any number of ideas and experiences. To the question, “Who is God?” Elfriede always answered, “God is the “cosmic singularity.” Routinely, I told her I admired her reason.

Who is God? Some of us will respond to that question with our feelings. Some of us will respond with our heads. Some of us will respond with our hearts.

“Who is God?” I rather like the answer once given by Robert Jenson, the Lutheran theologian who taught at Gettysburg Seminary for years and died late last year. To the question, “Who is God?” Jenson replied: “God is whoever raised Jesus for the dead, having before raised Israel from Egypt.”

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I rather like that response because it directs us back, again, to our sacred story. We may respond to the God question in a variety of ways, based on our individual experiences and notions, but as those who claim the faith of Jesus our first response, always, is to go back to the story. For the story is what we share in common. It is our sacred story. The Bible describes God’s love affair with God’s people and all the world. It is the story by which we live.

Who is God? Go back to the story. We forever tell the story and live through the story. It is the story we immersed ourselves in over the past three days.

It is the story told by Peter when he preached to the Gentiles. Peter told the story of how God anointed Jesus; and how Jesus went about doing God’s work, and was put to death, and then raised by God; and how the Risen Jesus then appeared to the disciples, eating and drinking with them. Peter tells the story as a witness to it all. Do you notice how he begins the story?

“I truly understand that God shows no partiality.” What an astonishing statement! God does not play favorites, loves everyone the same. On the heels of receiving a vision from God in a

dream, Peter now knows that nothing God has made – no one and, in fact, no thing – is considered unclean. God loves all, and anyone, anywhere, may receive this good news and make it their story.

Finally, it is the story of what happens when Mary, Mary Magdalene and Salome visit the tomb, expecting to find Jesus' corpse, only to discover an empty tomb and a mysterious young man dressed in white who announces that Jesus has gone ahead before them into Galilee.

"Go and tell the others," he says. But they do not. They are afraid. Filled with terror and amazement, they say nothing to anyone.

This is how the Gospel of Mark tells the story but it seems so incomplete. It's been called a "dangling gospel." A cliffhanger without resolution or completion. In fact, some of our Christian ancestors seemed so dissatisfied that they tacked on not one but two endings in later centuries. But I quite like the way Mark concludes the story. For this Gospel account says to us that the story continues. No need to supply a neat ending. No need to tie up the loose ends. Let God complete the story.

I think Mark says the story continues, and you and I and all who claim the faith of Jesus are actors in this on-going drama.

We are participants in this story. For the story isn't relegated to the past. God continues to do God's work in and through the Risen Jesus. The one who raised Jesus has raised up a new body of Christ set apart and set into the world to bear witness and live as practitioners of holy love.

Do you see this over here? Some of you may be wondering what on earth this might be.

It is a horse trough. We pull it out every Easter for baptisms for full immersion baptism every year at the Easter Vigil. So, here four persons were baptized in this temporary baptistery.

And in the service we read encountered, again, the stories of God's acts of deliverance and in the Prayer of Thanksgiving over the waters, we recalled all the stories within the story where God uses water to save and deliver and bring freedom: Noah and the flood, the woman at the well, Naaman washed clean of his leprosy, Israel's deliverance from slavery, the baptism of Jesus, and Jesus death and resurrection. When new Christians step into these waters, we become the story we tell. Among the promises parents make for their children is this one: "Will you lace in their hands the scriptures?"

Do you see? The Resurrection of Jesus becomes our primary narrative.

We get to live out, with God's help, this amazing adventure of the risen Christ. It is a delight to let the world know that God shows no partiality, that God brings newness and forgiveness AND it is unsettling. It is unsettling because there are many other narratives and stories that suggest something else.

Might makes right. Whoever has the most toys wins. Climb to the top. Pull yourself up by your own bootstraps. Better fences make better neighbors. Greed is good. Be number one. Give no regard to those who are different than you.

The Risen Jesus, however, is the author of a very different script or narrative. And it looks something like this:

- Sins forgiven
- Enemies reconciled
- Doing justice and loving kindness
- Lifting up the poor and forgotten
- Exercising extravagant generosity
- Loving neighbors simply for the joy of loving your neighbor

The Risen Christ is enacting this story and you are participants in this adventure.

I have a friend who, along with his wife, spent a very long time finding the right church. They visited a bunch of congregations in and around the town where they made a new home. Neither of them was all that concerned about denominational loyalty. They looked for a community that felt authentic.

Finally, they found an Episcopal church, not because they were necessarily interested in being Episcopalians, but because there was something in the liturgy that really spoke to them and sold them, over the weeks they visited time, on that particular community.

I wondered what it was: the sermon, the music, and the prayers. No. My friend reported that it was the Sharing of the Peace. You know, it is what we do following the Intercessions where we greet one another with Christ's peace with a handshake or an embrace. What was it about the Peace that was so moving? "Well," said my friend, "they just all seem to genuinely like each other." I was happy to report to him that I'm in a congregation like that, too.

But, here's the distinction. He saw it happen among people who are obviously very different from each other but have the Risen Christ in common. And because they share faith in Jesus, they can love each other with all their marvelous diversity. So, around election time some wore campaign buttons revealing a heart and sympathy toward the left and some wore buttons revealing a heart and sympathy for the right, and they really do love one another.

Do you see? When everyone is the same in a congregation that smacks of a story, a narrative very different than the one led by Jesus. Remember, God shows no partiality, and the story by which we live, the story we become, shows forth God's holy work of love and reconciliation as unsettling as that may be, but it is the work of God that finally saves us all.

So, on this great Easter we return to the story that lives deep in our bones and is imprinted on our hearts and binds us together and sets us free.

We get to live the story and trust God to complete the story and we even have a glimpse of how the story ends Did you hear it in the passage from Isaiah?

On this mountain, the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples, a feast of rich food, a feast of well aged wines, God will destroy on this mountain the shroud cast over all people, spread over all nations and God will swallow up death forever.

In this Feast of Victory for our God, that happy ending is celebrated now. Leaked out ahead of time. We get a glimpse of it around God's gifts of grace. And we have a foretaste in this sharing of bread and cup where God fashions us that we may continue to be the story we tell.

Alleluia! Christ is risen! Amen.