

Reflection for September 26, 2021

“The Divine Heretic”

God is Holy Mystery, beyond complete knowledge, above perfect description. Yet, in love, the one eternal God seeks relationship. So God creates the universe and with it the possibility of being and relating. God tends the universe, mending the broken and reconciling the estranged. God enlivens the universe, guiding all things toward harmony with their Source. Grateful for God’s loving action, we cannot keep from singing.

May the peace of the Lord be always with you.

Let us pray:

O God, the only source of life and energy and wealth, defend our planet earth. Teach us to conserve and not to squander the riches of nature, to use aright the heritage of former generations, and to plan for the welfare of our children’s children. Renew our wonder, awaken our concern, and make us better stewards and more careful tenants of the world you lend us as our home. Hear us, O God, our creator and redeemer, in the name of Christ. Amen.

A little Dutch village awakened one Sunday morning to find that a terrible storm had come up overnight. Conditions were so severe that town officials had some concern for the dikes. Every able-bodied person in town would be needed to get out to the dikes to make the necessary repairs. But it was Sunday! The people of the village would be expecting to go to church. Perhaps the minister could be convinced to cancel the service.

The minister was contacted, and as soon as he was told of the crisis he agreed that the service should be cancelled. It was not, however, his

decision to make alone. The elders would have to be consulted. The meeting was quickly convened and the minister explained the situation. But the elders were not so quickly convinced as he had been. Sunday was Sunday, and storm or no storm the people had a duty to worship. Perhaps, one elder suggested, God was testing their faith in this storm. If God were to see them confidently at worship, then surely God would calm the wind and the waves as Jesus had done on Galilee. The minister reminded them that Jesus had also been known to break the Sabbath with acts of healing; that once he had plucked grain on the Sabbath that he and his disciples might eat. At that point one of the elders got to his feet. "I suppose what you say is true, pastor," he began, "and we ought to go and tend the dikes. But I often wish that our Lord had shown a little more propriety in such matters."

Propriety has always been the church's long suit. The dictionary defines propriety as "conformity to established rules or custom, decorum; fitness; the standards or usages of good society." It has a conservative ring to it, a quality cherished by all institutions which must maintain and perpetuate themselves by holding fast to customs and values that are tried and true and generally approved. In the name of propriety, tradition is upheld, the collective wisdom of the ages is preserved, and anything that seems rashly innovative (or simply out of the ordinary!) is rejected.

Certainly, there is a need for some institutional conservatism in human society. One of the major contributions of the church as an institution with a long history has been to preserve attitudes and beliefs, values and customs of proven worth which might otherwise be lost in a kind of moral entropy. Concern for propriety in the church isn't necessarily a bad thing. But sometimes, because of our propriety, we end up having a bit of a problem with God.

As the elder complained, God at times demonstrates a lack of propriety that often borders on the heretical. No sooner have we established rules and customs for the sake of good order and decorum than God, the divine heretic, steps beyond the bounds that we have set. And one can almost hear the mumble of a “transcendent chuckle” as we nurse our wounded sense of propriety.

And when John, wanting to salvage a little something of the rights and privileges that should belong to the disciples, complains about the impropriety of an outsider casting out demons in the name of Jesus, Jesus’ reaction is disappointing. No indignation; no angry outburst— “How dare he do such a thing! I’ll soon put a stop to that.” Nothing like that at all. “Do not stop him; for no one who does a deed of power in my name will be able soon afterward to speak evil of me. Whoever is not against us is for us” (Mark 9:39-41).

The church as we’re all aware, has spent a lot of time and energy over the centuries trying to determine who’s in and who’s out. Rules and regulations have been established; doctrine has been formulated to test for proper belief. Then along comes Jesus who, it appears, pushes it all to one side with the words, “Whoever is not against us is for us.”

We always over-react and get defensive when God shows heretical tendencies. Many of the things that we are scrupulous about, position, prestige, financial clout, good breeding, proper schooling, seem to impress God hardly at all. Might we not be the ones guilty of a kind of heresy of seeking to preserve our cherished rules and systems against all the urgings of God’s spirit to give first place to the values and priorities that God reveals.

It would be wrong to conclude that everything is up for grabs, that everyone is free to believe as he or she chooses. God has some very definite standards which we ignore at our peril. It’s much more a

question of how our standards compare with God's standards. What does our propriety look like from God's point of view?

While we're wondering about who's with us and who's against us, who belongs and who doesn't belong, God is wondering about how people are going to be healed. In the economy of God "whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you bear the name of Christ will by no means lose the reward" (Mark 9:41). While we're wondering if we can balance this year's budget, God is wondering if the people who need our help are going to be left empty-handed. What in our eyes is the tragedy of red ink, bank loans and deficits, is in God's eyes the tragedy of ministries unfulfilled, of challenges, well within our means, unmet.

We wonder about friends and neighbours, fellow church members who are suffering marital difficulties, parent-child problems, problems related to alcohol and drug dependency. God is wondering too; wondering who will reach out to the sorrowful in our midst, wondering who will speak in God's name words of comfort, of love and compassion to those who feel guilty and ashamed.

Such are the "heresies" of God, heresies that confront and challenge the orthodoxies of every generation, our own included, calling into question virtually everything we take for granted in the church and in the world.

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