

The Sacred Ordinary

10/16/2022

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Preaching on:

Luke 18:1–8

I have always believed in the sacred. You know, the sacred—the space or the time or the symbols or the rituals that God is somehow always touching, always a part of. But I’ve also, as my Christian faith has matured, come to believe in the ordinary as well as the sacred. And my belief in the ordinary has freed me to encounter the sacred in ways that wouldn’t have been possible before.

Emile Durkheim’s, who published *The Sacred and the Profane* in 1912, believed, mostly correctly I think, that the distinction between the sacred and the profane is the defining characteristic of the phenomenon of human religion. For him this was the origin of all religion, it was the thing that all religions have in common, and it’s fairly obvious, the idea is that there are some things that are sacred and there are other things that are definitely not sacred—ordinary or profane things that need to be separated from the sacred things. And when you think about it, this division between the sacred and the profane has a profound impact on the way we see and interpret the whole world around us.

This split between the sacred and the profane is maybe the original dualism. Dualism is our culture’s

working theory that all of reality is composed of opposing, irreducible, and irreconcilable elements or natures. Dualism is the intentional pulling apart of things that, I believe, were never meant to be fully separated, and then, once they are separated, our dualistic culture places one of them OVER AND AGAINST the other. And so, we have masculinity over and against femininity. Heterosexuality over and against homosexuality. Whiteness over and against blackness. God over and against humans. Humans over and against nature. Mind over and against body. Reason over and against emotion. Spirituality over and against sexuality. Christianity over and against secularity.

But as my Christian faith has grown, I've encountered in Jesus a gift for finding the sacred in very unusual places—low, unacceptable, dirty, unclean, immoral, unexpected, common places—in the socially abandoned widow, in the fungus known as yeast or leaven, in children, in the tiniest seeds of the unremarkable mustard weed, by the well where the women lingered, among the sick and the dead, in the company of a corrupt tax collector, in the Samaritans, in the Syro-Phoenicians, even in the Romans, in the meek, the mourning, and the poor. And Jesus called some other things profane that it was not popular, not even safe to call profane—the Temple, attitudes about the Sabbath, certain interpretations of the Law, the hypocritical intolerance of the pious, the religious and political authorities of his day.

Let's look more closely at the first example and the example from our reading this morning—the widow. Some of you know that one of my early job titles in ministry was being Chaplain to New York City restaurant workers. Walking down the street one evening, almost 20 years ago, I ran into a group of workers outside their restaurant who were protesting. I asked them what was going on and they told me about stolen tips, unpaid overtime, racial discrimination in promotions, sexual harassment on the job, and the federal lawsuit they had filed. I told them I was a seminary student and would love to learn more.

They told me that they might have to stop protesting soon due to some legal shenanigans being conducted by their employer's lawyers. They said to me, "If you could hold prayer vigils outside the restaurant for anyone who wanted to come, it would be a way to maneuver around any legal blockades the lawyers are inventing." Of course, I agreed, and our weekly sacred prayer vigils (which lasted for 2 years) became deeply entangled in the profane secularity of NYC sidewalks, and labor disputes, and litigations.

I remember the first sermon I preached out on a New York City sidewalk in front of a restaurant surrounded by restaurant workers and their allies. It wasn't good. Not necessarily because of what I said or how I planned the service but because of my attitude. There was some part of me that felt I had to MAKE this whole thing holy, sacred, spiritual. That was the only way it could be acceptable. I didn't want it to just be a protest. I had to elevate it.

But then look at Jesus and our parable this morning. A widow fighting for justice, and perhaps not

afraid to be annoying and obnoxious in her pursuit of that goal, is obviously not only someone that Jesus admires on her own terms, but someone Jesus considers to be a fitting example for all of us on how to engage in a sacred activity—prayer. Is Jesus saying to us that it's not sacred prayer that elevates the profane protest, but the profane protest that can teach us something about the sacred?

I began to see that I didn't have to MAKE any restaurant workers' protest sacred, instead it was my job to bear witness to the sacred that was already there in that protest and to cultivate it—to let everyone know that their noise and their anger and their desire for justice and compensation was a secular and a sacred pursuit. For me, restaurant workers showed me how to take the sacred to the secular—in the sense that they showed me that it was there all along, wrapped up, struggling, shaped and shaping. Not separate, not over and against, but “in the middle of our humanity and in the midst of our human living.” That is where the sacred can be found in it's truest form—at the heart of the ordinary thing that God has chosen.

As followers of Jesus, and as a Church, this, I believe, should be what defines us. Jesus' religion is not about guarding the sacred from the secular. It's not about protecting the inside of the church from the world outside the church. It's not about insulating ourselves from the neighborhood or from the unchurched hordes surrounding us on all sides. Jesus' religion is about carrying the good news out into the world to offer it to everybody. Jesus' religion teaches us that the sacred is dead without the energy of real life, real work, real art, and real people. Jesus' religion is the religion where an ordinary, poor and outcast widow, fighting for justice (and totally outmatched, but refusing to give up) is the sacred symbol that points to God and God's Kingdom better than all the steeples, and stained glass, and Sunday sermons in the world.

Beloved, our job as Christians is to see with Jesus' eyes. We do not to separate ourselves from our neighbors or from God. We do not try to protect holy God from this profane world. Our job is to join ourselves without ceasing to this world, to the people in it, and to the dirty work of the righteous causes that fill it. And when we do that, we are also crossing the boundary into the sacred. We give ourselves to God, and God redeems us all.