

Psalm 5: 1-8
Galatians 3: 27-29
Luke 7: 36- 8:3

Showing Up
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June 16, 2013

Last month, a horrific murder on the streets of London by Islamic extremists shocked and angered the people of Great Britain and the entire world, including British Muslims. Since then there have been vocal and, at times, violent responses. But I read this story in the Guardian:

“A York mosque dealt with a potentially volatile situation after reports that it was going to be the focus of a demonstration organized by a far-right street protest movement - by inviting those taking part in the protest in for tea and biscuits.

Around half a dozen people arrived for the protest, promoted online by supporters of the EDL (the English Defense League). A St George's flag was nailed to the wooden fence in front of the mosque. However, after members of the group accepted an invitation into the mosque, tensions were rapidly defused over tea and plates of custard creams, followed by an impromptu game of football.”

How tempting it must have been for the Muslims of York to stay home, or to lock the doors of the mosque, or to get into a shouting match over who belongs in England and who does not. Instead, they showed up, opened the door, offered hospitality and showed another side of Islam. When I read the account of that strange meeting of enemies, it struck me that the whole gamut of human emotions is contained in the story: anger, fear, regret, grief, relief, and in some unexpected way, joy. Out of that cauldron of conflict came some kind of grace.

We humans often act in predictable ways when we feel threatened. We “circle the wagons.” We try to make the boundaries very clear: there are good guys and bad guys. It’s a natural reaction to pain and fear a sort of immune response. There are a number of Psalms that are prayers of deliverance from enemies: we heard part of one today. The Psalmist is distressed, and recruits God as both advocate and judge. He makes a bright line between himself and the “evildoers,” who are “bloodthirsty and deceitful.” He withdraws into himself. It is much easier to think this way that to offer tea and biscuits, or play a game of street soccer.

But sometimes, in the Hebrew Scriptures or the Christian Scriptures, we hear of a more expansive approach, a more extravagant hospitality, a mind-bending response to conflict and threat. In the first century, the followers of Jesus were certainly fearful at times: during the entire New Testament period, their religion was illegal. Not only that: within each little church community there was conflict as they wrestled with what faith meant, what baptism meant, what Jesus meant by the Kingdom of God. Paul’s letter to the Galatians is addressed to one of these conflicted congregations. They were having fierce arguments, ready to throw people out, or label them as “evildoers,” and drawing that bright line between us and them. Paul has his **own** opinions, of course, but he makes this amazing assertion: that belonging to Christ transforms the world. “There is no longer Jew or Greek (Jews and Greeks were the 2 “factions” within the Galatian church), there is no longer slave or free (both slaves and their owners belonged to these early house churches), there is no longer male or female (these early Christians were trying to live out the radical inclusion

of women into the ministry of Jesus.) With this one sentence, Paul opens up a future that continues to move us and challenge us today.

Our Gospel reading is a story, and a parable within the story, that shows how the early church treasured Jesus' strange way of re-drawing the boundary lines and transforming the world. In each of the four Gospels, there is a story of a woman (sometimes named, sometimes not) who chooses the setting of a supper party to anoint Jesus with an expensive ointment. The details vary: clearly this comes from an oral tradition that knows that some woman made an extravagant gesture and crossed a line. In each re-telling, someone protests her behavior; in each version, someone questions Jesus' credentials as a generous person or a true prophet; in each case, Jesus defends the gesture as necessary and appropriate.

Our reading from Luke contains so many details that it is hard to absorb all of them: a very confusing picture is painted in our minds and so many lines are blurred that we can hardly take it in. A Pharisee welcomes Jesus to a meal – is he open-minded or curious or does it matter? An invitation is an invitation, after all. A notorious woman wanders in off the street – how does she get in to a respectable Jewish home? And she was so over the top: tears, hair, perfume, kisses – this is almost a sexual display of emotion. And the way Jesus “reads Simon's mind” – or was he just really observant of body language or facial expression? And that parable, with its criticism of Simon as a lackluster host – what do we make of the mathematics – or sequence - of debt, forgiveness and love?”

Out of the complexity of this passage, I want to distill a fairly simple conclusion. I am going to borrow it from Martin Copenhaver, a pastor and writer. When asked to say briefly what the message of the Gospel is he wrote: “God gets the last word. And that last word is ‘Yes.’”

God's “Yes” is big enough and final enough to include the ambivalent Simon, curious and skeptical. It is big enough to include all his guests, squeamish and disapproving as they are. It is big enough to include the “woman of the city,” whatever her sins. It is big enough to include other women: Mary Magdalene, who had been so ill; and Joanna, who belonged to Herod's household; and Susanna. It is big enough to include Paul and all his detractors. It is big enough to include Jew and Greek, slave and free, man and women. It is big enough to include the Muslims and demonstrators in York, England. If God's love is so big, who are we to draw a line in the sand? If God's love is so big, who are we not to show up at the feast?

The sad note in all this is the way that we remain in places of inner judgment (of ourselves or of others), spoken, or perhaps unspoken, as Simon's was. Simon's judgment clouded his vision and he missed a chance to hear gracious words from Jesus. And yet, Jesus does not speak a “NO” here. Perhaps Simon had little in his life which needed forgiveness, but the forgiveness is freely offered nonetheless. And perhaps he was able to hear Jesus, and to move from that place of inner judgment to a new place, and really enjoy the extravagance of the feast.

Instead of asking God to be on our side, as the Psalmist does (and, as I said earlier, we do not condemn the speaker in the Psalm: we recognize ourselves there), we should ask how to see humanity as God does. With a God's eye view, we are all extremely lovable, even when we have made mistakes. Even our clumsy, inappropriate gestures of remorse and joy are accepted for their intent, not their respectability. And when we have been so lovingly welcomed to the banquet, how can we refuse entrance to anyone else?

We are called to more than mere acceptance, though, more than tolerance. We are called to spiritual extravagance. We are called to transform the world, one jar of ointment at a time, one banquet at a time, one cup of tea at a time, one plate of custard creams at a time. And first of all, we are called to show up.

Judy Chicago, who comes from the Jewish tradition, has written a poem, or perhaps a litany, that describes a vision of the future, called the Merger poem. I think that it is good for Christians to hear it because it helps us appreciate all the ways we can transform the world, touched by love, empowered by extravagant grace. It goes:

*And then all that has divided us will merge.
And then compassion will be wedded to power
And then softness will come to a world that is harsh and unkind.
And then both men and women will be gentle.
And then both women and men will be strong.
And then no person will be subject to another's will.
And then all will be rich and free and varied.
And then the greed of some will give way to the needs of many.
And then all will share equally in the earth's abundance.
And then all will care for the sick and the weak and the old.
And then all will nourish the young.
And then all will cherish life's creatures.
And then all will live in harmony with each other and the earth.
And then everywhere will be called Eden once again.*

Amen.