



ST. ANDREW'S IN THE PINES EPISCOPAL CHURCH

SERMON
6-14-15

Williams book and stories from the desert Fathers and Mothers. Today's story:

A certain brother came to see Abba Ardsenius at Scetis. He arrived at the church and asked the clergy if he could go and visit Abba Aresenius. "Have a bit to eat," they said, "before you go to see him." "No," he replied, "I shan't eat anything until I have met him." Arsenious's cell was a long way off, so they sent a brother along with him. They knocked on the door, went in and greeted the old man, then sat down' nothing was said. The brother from the church said, "I'll leave you now, pray for me." But the visitor didn't feel a ease with the old man and said, "I'm coming with you." So off they went together. Then the visitor said, "Will you take me to see Abba Moses, the one who used to be a highwayman?" When they arrived, Abba Moses welcomed them happily and enjoyed himself thoroughly with them until they left. The brother who had escorted the visitor said to him, "Well, I've taken you to see the foreigner and the Egyptian; which do you like better?" "The Egyptian for me!" he said. One of the father overheard this and prayed to God saying, "Lord explain this to me. For you sake one of these men runs from human company and for your sake the other receives them with open arms." Then two large boats floating on the water were shown to him. In one of them sat Abba Arsenius and the Holy Spirit of God in complete silence. And in the other boat was Abba Moses, with the angels of God; they were all eating honeycakes."

Silence and honeycakes – the name of today's sermon. Another story: *It was revealed to Abba Antony in the desert that there was a person living in the city who was spiritually his equal. He was a workman; whatever he had beyond what he needed he gave to the poor, and every day he sang the Trisagion, (the threefold liturgical payers, Holy, God, Holy and strong, holy and immortal, have mercy on us) with the angels."*

At this point you might be scratching your head and saying, "huh?" Two stories a bit like the parables from Jesus. Wheat growing, the owner does not know how, in the kingdom of God, and a mustard seed growing in the kingdom of God. And a silent desert father in the kingdom of God, and a partying Abba in the kingdom of God, and a spiritual giant in the kingdom of God, and a humble working person in the kingdom of God.

Here is a line I like from one of the prayers we use at noon day prayer. It is written by Kathy Galloway. "All I know is that I cannot make myself any more than I could in my mother's womb. But this I can do, this I choose, to give myself into the hand of your continuing creativity."

Silence and honeycakes, grain and mustard seeds.....each of us is born into different lives, different experiences, different vocations and ministries. And that simple fact is not so simple. Many of us spend a lifetime denying the importance of those differences. When I worked with with homeless people and services, I used the term "Biographic vulnerability" to try and get people to contemplate profound differences in our lives and situations. Where were you born, what was your living situation, how was and is your health, what do you like to do? These variations are hugely significant in how we make a life. And I'd say, far too often we spend too much time self-justifying our desires and choices, not recognizing our prejudices, our cultural influences, the variations in who we are as persons.

Today I am speaking about us as persons. I make a distinction between being an individual. The Marlboro Man, the rebellious teen-ager, being told to be an individual is marketing and unfruitful. But to seek the truth of who we each are as persons is of extreme importance. No one else, no one is the same person as another. An obsession that haunts you won't bother me, what tempts me to sin will be trivial to you and it is dangerous to ever consider that we all can or should be the same. Instead, what is important is that we take time to be honest with ourselves about who we are. Theologian Henri de Lubac wrote, "It is not sincerity, it is truth which frees us... To seek sincerity above all things is perhaps at bottom, not to want to be transformed." How many of us spend "sincere" time trying to create who we want to be, or trying to persuade others that who they see on the outside is who I really am. We avoid the tough truths about our prejudices, our weaknesses, our sins, and the truth that pulls us in the silence. God alone will tell us who we really are – a mustard seed, a grain of wheat, a contemplative, a gregarious host.

How might that happen? This week I recalled loving the calendula flowers that grew along the back door step at my grandparent's house in Laramie. I remember bright yellows and orange, and the warmth of the sun along that south wall, and the hot smell of summer. That small image gives me a sense of pleasure and of love. It must bring me again to a place where I felt so loved and accepted. I believe this memory comes to mind because John and I had our grandson James with us for a week and every day it was a pure delight for all three of us. It was so fun to watch James blossom into enjoying himself so completely. There was no competition with siblings, there was no need to prove himself for anyone, no response needed to justify himself. Instead, he was beloved and he soaked up that love and responded with joy and delight. And in that love he was so good, so helpful, so honest about what he liked and how he wished to spend his time.

Watching James last week, I began wondering how marvelous it would be if our entire society could be that way – all of us so sure of our belovedness that we respond and live with total trust and honesty, with transparency about our likes and dislikes, always sure we will be carefully received and honored. Then I wondered about our church being that place.

Rowan Williams writes: "think of what the church would be like if it were indeed a community not only where each saw his or her vocation as primarily to put the neighbor in touch with God, but where it was possible to engage with each other in this kind of quest for the truth of oneself, without fear, without expectation of being despised or condemned for not having a standard or acceptable spiritual life. It would need there to be some very fearless people around.....it must know how to work with the grain of different personal gifts and histories. ...a place for distinctive vocations to be discovered in such a way that they are a source of mutual enrichment and delight, not threat. It is a place where real human difference is nourished. A healthy church is one where there is evident diversity, with plenty of bizarre characters."

I am not speaking of merely making space for different preferences. I am talking about the much tougher work of making space for people to be genuine, to be vulnerable, to unfold into the truth of their personhood...all the little differences that were not and are not part of me. And this takes time and courageous honesty. I spoke last week about being honest in figuring out our own sinfulness. Now I am speaking about the courage to share our fears, our biographic vulnerabilities in the open, and our longings, and our gifts – different voices, different instruments, but creating beautiful results.

That is why in the church we are so involved in blessing lifelong commitments – we pledge ourselves to each other and to a way of life. In William's words, we must "remind all baptized believers that, because of their baptism, they are bound to the patient, long-term discovery of what grace will do with them. And it is work that requires the kind of vulnerability to each other that can only come with the building up of trust over time, and the kind of silence that brings our fantasy identities to judgement, "life and death with the neighbor once more."

Silence and honeycakes, and the patient, long-term discovery of what grace will do with us.

Thanks be to God.