

ALL THE TRIBES OF THE EARTH

REVELATION 1:4-8

In the beginning, I envisioned this sermon as an invitation to behold God's grace in Jesus Christ through the lens of tribalism. Look at radical monotheism. Quote H. Richard Niebuhr. Say something about polytheism and henotheism. Remind you that God loves you, and encourage you to celebrate this love by sharing it within your tribe and with all tribes of the earth.

Now I am not sure. I am not so sure, because I am capable of being tribal to a fault. Ask me about Florida Gators or New York Yankees or Alabama legislators who think that taxing groceries is a good idea. Circumstances change, but Scripture, like God's faithfulness, endures.

At least the Lectionary gives us Revelation, a book that speaks of justice as a distant dream: "Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of the prophecy, and blessed are those who hear and who keep what is written in it; for the time is near."

I am capable of being tribal when, in the past two weeks, I have participated in meetings with the Diaconate and the Stewardship, Finance and Personnel Committee and looked at the food pantry's numbers, numbers that suggest that way too many of God's children are hungry. Many of God's children are not able to afford groceries, much less taxes on them.

Meanwhile, the church is in the midst of a campaign that affords us an opportunity to think theologically about the environment, to celebrate God's good creation and to invest in an earth that will bear witness to the resurrection years after you and I have returned to dust. Will we be faithful stewards then? Will we be faithful stewards now? How do we do both?

Do we belong to the church or the world? We belong to the God, who created the heavens and earth, and in the language of Revelation, in the God "who is and who was and who is to come." Notice the sequence of tenses. Revelation speaks of God first in the present, then in the past and at last in

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2nd Sunday of Easter, Year C, April 11, 2010

future. Both Richard Niebuhr and his brother Reinhold, who taught us to pray for serenity, belong to a tradition who proclaims even now that “God is still speaking.”

If God still speaks, wonder what God said this past week when the proposed amendment to the one of the most amended constitutions in the Western world to remove the 4 percent sales tax on groceries was defeated? Did God cite the Sermon on the Mount or the Sermon on the Plain? Did God say, “Blessed are the poor in spirit” or “Blessed are the poor”? And if you are poor, did you feel blessed? If you did not feel blessed, it is my job to remind you that you are. Given a choice between being blessed by God or the state legislature, I would choose God every time, and the beauty of being a resurrected people is that God gives us life even in death. God chooses us before we choose God.

Saying that we belong to God or that we are a resurrected people is tribal. It assumes that a “we” exists and that “we” share a common ancestry or culture. The 12 tribes of ancient Israel, who appear in the Book of Revelation, share a common history that is marked by justice and mercy, slavery and freedom, Exodus and Exile. One may be Jewish in terms of one’s faith or ethnicity or both, but all are Jewish, because unity does require uniformity. The same applies in Christianity. In Jesus Christ, there is neither Jew nor Greek, male nor female, and yet we do not go about being Jew or Greek, male or female, the same way.

Radical monotheism looks beyond tribalism in an effort to behold the God beyond the gods that reflect the images of the human beings who make them. Beyond polytheism, beyond henotheism, there is God. Now allow me to define these terms. A polytheist worships many gods self-consciously and openly. A henotheist is a loyal to a cause, and this loyalty looks and acts like tribalism.

If we were in Sunday School, I would probably stop here and ask if you think of Christianity as tribalism or monotheism, and given who you are, I am sure that somebody would suggest that it is polytheistic given all the Trinitarian language that marks our tradition. Is the Christian religion one

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among many? Or does it take us beyond tribalism to the God beyond the gods? God is beyond tribalism, but what about the church and the tribes that exist within it? When Jesus says, “Love thy neighbor,” he may be interpreted as saying, “Love that tribe...and that tribe...and that tribe. Consider the (Cahaba) lilies of the field. Look at everything that God has created, each and every tribe, and do not be defensive if they love you back!”

One of the pleasures of working with Robert Hay, Ellen Potts and Barbara Shelton in beginning UPC’s Living River partnership has been learning about the diversity of fish and plant life along the Cahaba. At one point, I pointed out that UPC is like the Cahaba of the Presbytery of Sheppards and Lapsley because of the variety of experiences represented in this safe place, this sanctuary, every time that God gathers us to worship. I doubt that I said it this eloquently at that meeting, but that was the point. Ask Linda Grote, Phil Grote, Annabel Stephens or Julia Hartman, who, as this year’s recipient of the Karen LaMoreaux Bryan Environmental Award, knows this stuff much better than do I. They were at that meeting. In fact, they have been at many of them, and their diligence in participating in presbytery’s dream for God’s greater glory is appreciated. God’s dream for the church and the world is bigger than UPC or the Presbytery of Sheppards and Lapsley. It is the dream by which we are empowered; it is the dream by which we will be judged.

“Grace to you and peace from the one who was and who is and who is to come, and from...Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the first born of the dead...the ruler...of the earth.” This Jesus, who once was tribal, has been resurrected. Of this, he is a living, breathing witness, and now that he sits beside God, I wonder if or how his perspective has changed since he was on earth.

The statements about Jesus in this passage are beautiful not only because of who Jesus is, but because of what he does. Notice the verbs. Jesus loves, frees and makes. He loves us. He loves our neighbors, the tribe next door and on the other side of the world. Revelation, in fact, is addressed to

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the 7 churches that are in Asia. He frees us, like Moses liberates Hebrews who were slaves in Egypt, and he calls all members of his body to ordained ministry, because to do otherwise is oppressive.

The Book of Revelation helps us to imagine what life on the other side of resurrection looks like. It speaks of eternity, of God's glory and dominion forever and ever, and God's glory and dominion look a lot like clouds: "Look! Christ is coming with the clouds." With clouds come rain, rain that gives life to plants and fish by filling rivers and streams, rain that washes away pollen and sustains the earth, through which God sustains our bodies, homes to our hearts and minds.

"Look! Christ is coming...(and) every eye will see him." Everybody: the blind and the lame. All the tribes of the earth will be there, "even those who pierced him," tribes who tax groceries and those, like me, who judge them for doing so. "On Christ's account all the tribes of the earth will wail," and they will wail both at each other and at themselves, and God will judge them---and us---for both offenses. The God who created you also created the neighbor you judge. The God who created me also created the neighbor I judge. To assume otherwise is to put the tribe to which we belong before the God of all.

Should we feel guilty for not doing more? Sure, if it feels good to feel guilty, do it, but know this: self-loathing is sinful insofar as it denies the possibility of grace. God is sovereign. You and I are not. To whom much is given, much is expected. I understand that, too, but God is the one who gives, and the Spirit of God guides us in discerning how to share what we have been given.

Hear now and believe the Good News: God is gracious, merciful and just. In Isaiah, God says, "I am about to create new heavens and a new earth; the former things (like grocery taxes in Alabama) shall not be remembered or come to mind. But be glad and rejoice forever in what I am creating." God still speaks within and beyond all the tribes of the earth, and God is recreating the heavens and earth that God created. In the face of injustice, remember God's promise. In an effort to help you do so, this section of Isaiah, which was an alternate reading for last Sunday, will serve as the affirmation of faith

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throughout the church's celebration of Easter. Yes, on this and every Sunday, there is something to celebrate. In Jesus Christ, grace, mercy and justice has come, and grace, mercy and justice will come again. Worthy is the Lamb who was slain to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing! Amen.

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