

## **"Germinated Disciples"**

Romans 8: 1-11; Matthew 13: 1-9, 18-23  
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### The Fifteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

2017 has been a season of loss for my extended family. My aunt died in February and my uncle died in June. The unexpected loss was their oldest son, my cousin, who died in April; he got meningitis and had a couple of seizures that resulted in brain damage. It was at my uncle's memorial service at the end of June where all the losses caught up with me in tears, a lower ability to concentrate and cope. For a while, I've had some really old songs running through my mind, songs like Peg O' My Heart, Tea for Two, and my old time favorite, The Dark Town Strutter's Ball; after my uncle's funeral, I realized these were all part of my grandmother's repertoire when she sat down at the organ to play. It is comforting to go back in memory to a time when my aunt, uncle and cousin were all well and strong with years of joy ahead. The world as I've know it is shifting as this generation passes away.

And there are many other things around us passing away. I ran into an article online recently lamenting that, though there are more guitar vendors in the world, guitar sales are down. Eric Clapton, they reported, sold twenty-nine guitars from his personal collection, so we find ourselves living unexpectedly (and perhaps tragically) at the time when the likes of Clapton are downsizing and there are, to quote the article, "no new guitar heroes" coming along to inspire the next generations. The younger singers and listeners seem to have a preference for the layered sound of electronic synthesizers, and it is a very real possibility that Rock and Roll is not here to stay.

And then I ran across a new thing at the Barnes and Noble store at the Galleria in Edina over the weekend before the Fourth, the style of the store has morphed from traditional dark woods and leather chairs to a bright, industrial space with wood floors, exposed ceilings, banquets, and an eclectic collection of mostly wooden chairs; it's got miles of fiction, and a restaurant that opens with breakfast and closes with dinner, offering barista services as well as wine and beer. I had trouble finding the religion section and continue to lament that the majority of that designated space is filled Christian fiction rather than Christianity's amazing corpus of history and theology.

What fascinated me the most were couple of the other section headers – Personal Growth and Self-Transformation; from what I could see, these two came from what used to be separate sections for psychology, grief, and sociologies (like the work of Brene Brown) in the first case, and astrology, magic, The Four Agreements, Osho, Tolle, Zuckav, and Eastern belief systems in the second.

This new language of the book marketplace is striking to me because it is saying that many Christians prefer to get their religious information/growth through fiction. It also leaves a nagging vapor trail in my memory, "Christian Fiction" has the potential to say to some, 'Christianity is fiction.' The other new section headers communicate the idea that you can grow if you will it for yourself and that we can transform ourselves through a good read.

This is where Paul and his teaching on flesh versus spirit comes in for me. The history of interpretation of our reading from Romans over the centuries has been minimally helpful if not damaging; history of interpretation has devalued to the Incarnation itself as well as our own bodily experiences, the point of self-flagellation, the sinful and judgmental posture the church has taken toward human sexuality for centuries, and in ignoring domestic violence. But that's not what Paul meant and if I were to put it another way, today I would say that Paul is asking us to trust the Eternity of God over

mortal wisdom; he is asking us to live from the soul's connection to God rather than from our human experience and logic alone. After all, our lives are but a moment in the history of the world whereas God works toward salvation from the beginning of time to eternity. God can see over the next horizon and we cannot. And sadly we put more trust in that limited view.

And it's not serving us well. I happened to catch a tape of the Hendrickson Forum, a yearly, economics lecture at St. Mary's University in Winona; the speaker in April of this year was Zanny Minton Beddoes, the editor of *The Economist* magazine. As one of four economic measures of change, she compared the current shifts in technology as it affects industry across the globe with the Industrial Revolution and said that it is to our detriment that we are not recognizing or naming the scale and results of the changes through which we are living. According to another analyst, "It used to take 387,923 workers to manufacture \$1 billion in goods. Now it takes 26,785," [that's less than 30,000 people taking the place of over 300,000 people]. He continues, "It took 75 years for the telephone to reach 100 million homes after it was invented. It took just a few months for [the computer game] *Candy Crush* to reach that milestone" (*Daily 202*, 7/13/2017). So there is social change – and unnamed economic revolution.

And then there's this. Just after the special election in Montana when Paul Gianforte was elected to the House, a webcaster named Dave Daubenmire lifted up Gianforte's assault on a reporter, saying, "Yes, a fighter! Go dude, go! Who won? The dude that took the other dude to the ground. ... The only thing that is going to save Western Civilization is a more aggressive, a more violent Christianity." A former football coach, Daubenmire sits at a desk with a backdrop that gives the appearance of a press box at a large outdoor football stadium; he is wearing a baseball cap with a cross on it and the microphone headgear all the sportscasters wear and says, "this is not a sissified gospel" (*Pass the Salt* webcast, May 26, 2017). The visual set-up of the webcast is a close-up of the sincerity of his face, with descending bleachers behind leaving the impression he is on higher ground, "moral" inferred. Just like me, right now.

Interpreting Jesus has never been easy and has always been broad in scope. In the chapters preceding today's gospel lesson, Jesus was challenged by the religious authorities: people spread the rumor that he was in the service of Beelzebul, he was pulled up short in comparison to John and his own mother and brothers came to have a word with him, which according to Mark's gospel was to ask him to come home because it appeared to them as though he'd lost his mind. In some ways his message was rejected from the beginning.

Large crowds were still gathering to hear him teach, many people still hoped to be healed but doubt, hardship, disbelief and distrust also wandered among the crowd. In the midst of a revolution on behalf of the poor and the sick, in the midst of antagonism and misunderstanding, he began to teach in parables. Jesus asked his disciples, just as he asks us, to evaluate the ground upon which we stand because our ideas of moral high ground and right action are still hampered by the human horizon. He told his disciples and is telling us to take a look at the garden we each call our life and asking what it is we are cultivating. He's asking us to take an honest look at this seedling we call a self. Starting with the condition of our soil. Or as I keep typing, the condition of our soul.

The marketplace would say otherwise but personal growth is not the same as soul growth. True spiritual strength and wholeness comes when it infuses flesh and soul, and not always but often, requires a witness if not a community. And self-transformation is, to my mind, an oxymoron. Though there are many good books that can help us figure out where we are and why, we are transformed by living – marriage and divorce change us, as do birth, illness, and the death of friends and loved ones – we are changed for better or for worse, as the saying goes. What we go through in life morphs us into bitterness or gratitude; hate or love; or fear or trust.

That's why we are not just disciples, we are "germinated disciples," We are called to address whether or not we are good soil for the mission of God. A germinated disciple, as the word indicates, comes into existence through the word of God, is enlivened and always continues to develop. Our ideal as a church after the Reformation was to be reformed and always reforming; in the garden of life, the ideal is to be transformed and always transforming, through God and with God who is, in the words of Paul Tillich, "the Ground of our Being." Humility, then, is so important; the origin of the word is hummus/ground/ human; it is almost impossible for flesh to sin when being humble. The humble heart knows it doesn't have all the answers, it takes a longer view, an eternal view and one that puts the needs of the poor and the neighbor first. Humility doesn't bully or rejoice at anyone's pain. Humility knows that love and compassion transform the heart and soul.

If we are to bring a faith that transcends the space between the private and the public, and between the personal and the communal, in a time likened to a second industrial revolution via technology and when everything from politics to the marketplace to our language and communication are being remodeled and Christianity itself is unrecognizable in some of its forms, we are invited to allow God to compost us from time to time, to seed us, to tend to our soil/soul, soak up living water and grow deeper roots.

Because we are a part of a much longer revolution, Jesus having been a revolutionary, a Middle Eastern insurgent for love. In the words of Carter Heyward, one of the first ordained women in the Episcopal church, "Among lovers and friends, as well as in our passion for justice for women, blacks, Native Americans, the poor in the United States, Latin America, the Middle East – true love is the most revolutionary act. It is exactly the opposite of romantic love. To really love is to topple unjust structures, bringing down the principalities and powers of domination and control at all levels of human social relations. Such loving needs no church blessing – although it is good when it is forthcoming, whether for a gay or lesbian couple, civil rights, or the revolution of people in El Salvador. ... To love you is to be pushed by a power/God both terrifying and comforting, to touch and be touched by you. To love you is to sing with you, cry with you, pray with you, and to act with you to recreate the world. To say, 'I love you' means – let the revolution begin!" (Our Passion for Justice, p. 92-93).

Change is not an obstacle for God, it is God's very nature. Even death is not an obstacle for God. It can for a while drive us into our memories, but the, if we let it, it can grow us into revolutionary agents of justice and love; we can grow into God's preferred present and thus be a part of God's blessing to those who will carry on when we are gone. Again from Heyward, "God bless the revolution!" Amen.