
When I'm Plugged into the Source, I Shine

A sermon by the Rev. Canon George Maxwell
Proper 29 – Year B

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart find favor in your sight oh Lord, my strength and my redeemer. Amen.

I've been thinking about my father this week. I remember growing up in a 25,000 person mill town, and dad served on the school board. He sat there, I'm told, conspicuous in his clericals. And everybody knew that the meeting was about to end whenever dad reached into his pocket and pulled out his chapstick applicator because they said he would unscrew the top and apply the lip balm, put it back in his pocket and then proceed to summarize whatever had been said. Everyone had already spoken, all views had been described, and dad would offer a frame of reference, sometimes making a suggestion and sometimes not. But for whatever reason, this meant the meeting was about to end. And it was a protocol that everybody seemingly followed. They laughed at him behind his back, but everybody followed the protocol.

I was thinking about dad this week because I listened to a story about a school board up in Pennsylvania. This school board had degenerated over the course of the pandemic from one that wrestled with problems in a meaningful way to one that was just a venue for angry, shouting, name calling, and fighting. There had been an intervening election, sides had divvied up, everybody was trying to get their candidate on the board and it had worked out, so at the end, there was one person, one man who because he wasn't allied with either side wound up having all the power. He was the swing vote, if you will.

But that just meant that everybody's anger focused on him. That meant that he was the one that got the death threats. That meant that his wife, who was a teacher, was the one who had to be escorted to school with a police escort. That meant that he was the one who was afraid. So finally, as they came to the last meeting and the arguing about critical race theory, and mask wearing, and in-person gathering had all been made, he called for a point of privilege and announced that immediately after this vote, which one is on a statewide mask mandate, he would be retiring. He had already proposed a solution that seemingly worked for both sides, but nobody wanted a compromise. People wanted a victory and they were not going to be appeased. So he resigned, but not before offering a somewhat heated analysis of what was really happening and what needed to happen there.

Listening to those meetings makes it easy for me to understand Jesus when he says, "My kingdom is not of this world." As if to say my kingdom resides under the authority of powers that are not the powers that we encounter so often in this world. But what does that mean? I think sometimes we believe that it means if we're good, God will give us entrance into a paradise where we don't have to worry about any of this anymore. It's all going to be good. But if you look back at the Old Testament and think about what it might have meant to Jesus when he said it, you get a different picture. The Old Testament prophets, particularly the early prophets are struggling with what's happening to Israel. God's people are being exiled and defeated and suppressed. Oppression is the name of the game more often than not. "Where is God?" They're asking, and prophesying that it will be better down the road.

And then by the time the book of Daniel is published or at least written, which we read today as our first lesson, you get the sense that God is the one who's going to make it better. God is the one who's going to intervene and bring about the kingdom where we are reconciled, where good prevails, where evil is vanquished. This then is the vision that Jesus had. Not that we were going to escape all of these problems, but that through God's power, we were going to overcome all of these problems. Not there in the clouds, but here on earth. That's the Jewish apocalyptic vision that Jesus holds, I think.

And that has profound implications for us because if what we're doing is bringing in the kingdom here, it might lead us to act differently than if we thought we were just trying to individually get into heaven. But that's what Jesus seems to be saying. "The kingdom is within your grasp," Jesus says. "The kingdom will be here soon," Jesus says. We are called as a church to inaugurate the kingdom to begin its reign. It's not something that will happen later. It's something that's inbreaking now.

But what does that mean for us as a church? I think it means for us as a church that our calling is reconciliation. Our calling is to somehow engage these forces of violence and oppression and evil and overcome them, not by ourselves, but with God's help. If you look at the prayer book, our mission seems pretty clear. What's the mission of the church? The mission of the church is to restore all people to unity with God and each other in Christ. Restoration. Or look at the collect that we heard today already. The collect prescribed for this Sunday: "Almighty and everlasting God ...grant that the peoples of the earth, divided and enslaved by sin, may be freed and brought together under his most generous rule."

So if reconciliation is our calling, how do we go about doing that? I think we have guidance from our prayers, from our liturgies. Every time there's a baptism or many feast days, we repeat the baptismal covenant. The last portion of which says, we will respect the dignity of every human being. I think maybe that's the key. We will respect the dignity of every human being. Let me give you a model, somebody who shows you what that might look like. I'll start with Nelson Mandela. Now, Mandela is known to many of us. He was in South Africa, became the one who was released from prison on Robben Island after 27 and a half years. And according to his autobiography, *A Long Walk to Freedom*, when he emerged, he had this to say, "I know people expect me to harbor anger and resentment against white people, but I have none. In prison my anger toward whites decreased, but my hatred for the system grew."

Mandela was able to see the powers that are affecting people, the systems that are rendering this oppression, but he drew strength from recognizing the dignity of all people. The first person he recognized the dignity in was amazingly enough, himself. He never let what happened to him steal his dignity. William James, a 19th century psychiatrist, wrote, "We have in us two different selves, an 'I' and a 'me.'" The "I" is the one who sees what the "me" is doing and feeling. The "me" is the part of us which engages the world, which feels shame and honor, which acts to defend itself, which constantly strives to promote the self. The "I", James claims, is more like pure awareness. The mystics would say that the I is God.

So Mandela while in prison drew strength from a poem titled *Invictus*. It's a poem that I know many of you know because several people quoted it to me after the 8:45 service. But the last two verses of this poem are in many ways the most important. "I am the master of my fate. I am the captain of my soul." These words were powerful for Mandela and holding on to his own dignity. He cared what other people thought about him, but only because he cared about them, not because they defined who he was. And it's helpful, I think, to remember what God said to Moses on the mountain when Moses said, "Who is it? Who should I tell them sends me?" And God says, "I am that I am." You might reread these last verses. "I am" is the master of my fate. "I am" is the captain of my soul. Mandela stayed rooted in the "I". And out of that, he maintained his own dignity, which allowed him to see the dignity of others.

But the second figure I want to describe who was there with Mandela is Bishop Tutu. Somebody who might be known a little bit more by many of you because he spent time here in Atlanta. And it was Tutu who carried on the reconciliation ministry in so many prominent ways. It was Tutu, for example, who was a facilitator on the BBC series, *Facing the Truth*, which taking the conflict in Ireland between Protestants and Catholics attempted to effect reconciliation, to bring people back together. They would orchestrate conversations between the widow of somebody killed by an Irish bomb and the IRA bomber, or the cop who was shot in London by an IRA soldier and that soldier.

And to read the accounts of these conversations is to marvel at Tutu's skill. He accepts the dignity of everyone there. He accepts their identity. He doesn't feel that he's superior to them. He doesn't treat them like they're inferior to him. There's an acceptance that you can feel. They are included. They belong. He makes sure of it. They are safe both physically and psychologically because the truth is going to be the rule. He somehow gets them to feel free to speak, to speak their own truth and he listens. He listens like he wants to know what they have to say. He listens like he's curious about the being that they are. And through his listening, other listening happens in that room as well. There is fairness. And he's always giving them the benefit of the doubt. These are just some of the elements which we all recognize to dignity.

And what happens in those conversations is as Tutu is able to acknowledge and point out the dignity of everyone there, they are feeling their own dignity and their freedom allows them to speak. And as they reveal themselves to the other, the other by empathy and compassion reveals themselves back and you know how

this goes. And reconciliation amazingly emerges. After one particularly difficult conversation when a British cop who was shot by an IRA bomber said to the bomber upon hearing about the bomber's life and why he joined the IRA, "If it had been me, if I had been you, I might have done the same thing." And it all changed. Dignity was restored, honored, acknowledged, and reconciliation resulted.

At the end of that particular session, another facilitator came to Tutu and said, "How do you do that?" And Tutu looked up at the ceiling and he said, "Thank you, thank you, thank you." Speaking of course of God and the grace of God which he felt and lived into. And the facilitator said, "Yeah, yeah, God, I know, but I'm like, how did you do it?" And Tutu looked up again at a light in the ceiling and he said, "I'm like that light bulb. When I'm plugged into the source, I shine." *I am like that light bulb. And when I'm plugged into the source, I shine.* And that I think is as good a description of our calling as any I can imagine. To be plugged into the source and shine by holding onto our own dignity and relentlessly recognizing and honoring the dignity of others. It is the path I think to reconciliation. It is the inauguration of the kingdom of God which is not of this world. Amen.