

Nothing too Splashy....

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Over the holidays, as I drove down to Orlando, I had quite a bit of time to think. I'll admit: I tried to keep my "theological" reflections to a minimum. [After all, I was transitioning into vacation mode.] Nevertheless, the deeper I drove into the "Bible Belt" the more difficult that became. Every 20 miles or so, there was a billboard, the side of a barn, or some big home-made sign, with an in-your-face warning that Christ is coming soon...*and* that he is *really* ticked-off! I remember thinking to myself, "Why?" Not, "Why is Jesus supposedly so angry" but rather, "Why do people think that a negative, out-of-context snippet of Scripture will positively affect the life - or the faith - of a person zipping down the highway?"

It seems to me, that what may *actually* irritate the Compassionate Christ, is when his imminent Reign of Peace is misrepresented as in impending reign of terror. When his gracious welcome is contorted into a judgmental rejection. When his warm and inclusive embrace is replaced by an angry and unforgiving stranglehold. During my time in Orlando, I had the opportunity to talk with some local residents about some of these issues. [What can I say? Even in vacation mode, when someone learns that you're a *pastor* - who happens to be *gay*, and is serving in a congregation that for 25 years has been open and affirming of LGBT people - theological conversation tends to happen!]

One thing I learned, is that many people who live, or who were raised, in the "Bible Belt" are also extremely frustrated when they see the Bible being used to belt people into fearful submission! Many of them want to connect with a faith community; yet they can't respect a church that doesn't respect them - or science, or the marvelous diversity of humankind. They would love to be part of a compassionate, down-to-earth community where their

strengths *and* weaknesses, faith *and* doubts, their whole selves *and* their fractured selves are genuinely welcomed and accepted. In other words, they would gladly connect with a Christian Church which strives to follow the way of Jesus Christ.

Beginning with his Baptism - the launching point of his ministry - and continuing throughout that entire ministry, Jesus displays a genuine desire to connect with the entire spectrum of humanity. This is something that's sometimes lost in today's spiritualized, sanitized image of Jesus; but it's a quality which isn't lost on his enemies, or his closest friends. Jesus' detractors often try to discredit him as being a carousing and corrupt reveler who runs with the wrong crowd - one who enjoys the physical pleasures of Life way too much. And at times, even his own followers try to keep him from those people or situations that might prove distasteful, embarrassing, or too "earthy". Yet Jesus chooses to embrace the fullness of Life as he encounters it. He demonstrates a deep desire to touch and taste and experience all that Life offers, including those less-than-pure people, places and situations!

I think that the essential focus and substance of Jesus' ministry is encapsulated in his Baptismal Experience. As he stands there wet, and vulnerable, and feeling a little gritty - just like all those around him - Jesus is readied to get-down to the nitty-gritty of his mission. In that singular moment of *epiphany*, he realizes the common humanity - and *Divinity* - of every person. And Jesus is primed and prepared to take-on the task of graciously showing everyone that they, too, are beloved children of God!

By lifting-up people who are constantly being put-down by an oppressive religious structure and an in-your-face negativity, Jesus begins to set people free. He knows, that as long as people feel that they must somehow earn Divine acceptance and love, they'll never be able to freely love God, or to fully love one

another. As long as “religion” promotes the idea that Divine Grace is in short supply - available only to a select group of super-righteous individuals - then people will basically watch-out for themselves. Because if we believe that we must somehow compete for God’s favor, then we’ll always be pointing at others as being wrong or inferior or less worthy than ourselves. However, when we begin to trust in the overflowing abundance of Divine Compassion and Grace, then we will be set free to live as genuine children of our One Heavenly Parent!

Jesus understands that Divine Love is a Gift - a wonderful Gift - which should be received as such. Too often, the more religious we become, the more we see this Gift as something exclusively for us, and those who are *like* us. We regard it as something which is ours to protect and control. So rather than receiving it with open hands and hearts, and freely sharing it with others, we grab on to it with tightly clenched fists, and cautiously try to guard it for ourselves. Instead of joyfully ripping this Gift of Love wide-open like excited and grateful children, we wrap it in rules and rituals - and try to protect its pristine packaging from the wear and tear of everyday Life. Fortunately, Jesus comes to show us a better and more authentic way to live.

By standing in the waters of Baptism, by humbly kneeling to wash the dirt from his disciples’ feet, by struggling and sweating under the weight of a wooden cross, Jesus demonstrates his willingness to get wet and dirty, vulnerable and bloodied. He is glad pleased to take-on the entire scope of the Human experience: pain and pleasure, joy and sorrow, living and dying. Jesus’ goal isn’t to establish a new religion; its to re-establish an honest and open, living and loving relationship between the Sacred Source of Life and the entire Human Family. He shows us that the way to righteousness - to living rightly - comes by fully embracing our humanity, and by accepting and cherishing all the people around us. For when we do this, we re-discover the Divine

Spirit which connects us all! Jesus Christ fully expresses his tremendous love for God, by passionately loving and caring for the people around him. I believe this is what you and I are called to do as well. It's certainly better than trying to scare the hell out of people as they're zipping down the highway!