

“Salvation for a Demon and the Stages of Faith”

Epiphany 2A (January 19, 2020)

Scriptures: Psalm 40:1-4; John 1:29-50

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>>Open our eyes that we might see wondrous things in your word, Amen.<<

Theologian Peter Rollins is known for telling provocative stories about faith, several of which I’ve shared with you in past sermons. I’ve got another one for you. This one’s titled “Salvation for a Demon.”¹

“In the center of a once-great city there stood a magnificent cathedral,” writes Rollins. “[It] was cared for by a kindly old priest who spent his days praying in the vestry and caring for the poor. As a result of the priest’s tireless work, the cathedral was known throughout the land as a true sanctuary. The priest welcomed all who came to his door and gave completely without prejudice or restraint. Each stranger was, to the priest, a neighbor in need and thus the incoming of Christ. His hospitality was famous and his heart was known to be pure. No one could steal from this old man, for he considered no possession his own, and while thieves sometimes left that place with items pillaged from the sanctuary, the priest never grew concerned: he had given everything to God and knew that these people needed such items more than the church did. Early one evening in the middle of winter, while the priest was praying before the cross, there was a loud and ominous knock on the cathedral door. The priest quickly got to his feet and went to the entrance, as he knew it was a terrible night and reasoned that his visitor might be in need of shelter. Upon opening the door he was surprised to find a terrifying demon towering over him with large dead eyes ‘Old man,’ the demon hissed, ‘I have traveled many miles to seek your shelter. Will you welcome me in?’ Without hesitation, the priest bid this hideous demon welcome and beckoned him into the church. . . . In full view of the priest [inside the church], the demon proceeded to tear down the various icons that adorned the walls and rip the fine linens that hung around the sanctuary [T]he priest [just] knelt silently on the floor and continued in his devotions until it was time for him to retire for the night. ‘Old man,’ cried the demon, ‘where are you going now?’ ‘I am returning home to rest, for it has been a long day,’ replied the kindly priest. ‘May I come with you?’ spat the demon. ‘I too am tired and in need of a place to lay my head.’ ‘Why, of course,’ replied the priest. ‘Come, and I will prepare a meal.’ On returning to his house, the priest prepared some food while the . . . demon mocked [him] and broke the various religious artifacts that adorned his humble dwelling. The demon then ate the meal that was provided and afterward turned his attention to the priest. ‘Old man, you welcomed me first into your church and then into your house. I have one more request for you: will you now welcome me into your heart?’ ‘Why, of course,’ said the priest, ‘what I have is yours and what I am is yours.’ This heartfelt response brought the demon to a standstill, for by giving everything the priest had retained the very thing that the demon sought to take. For the demon was unable to rob [the priest] of his kindness and his hospitality, his love and his compassion. And so,” concludes Rollins, “the great demon left in defeat, never to return. . . . [After he left, the priest] simply ascended his stairs, got into bed and drifted off to sleep, all the time wondering what guise his Christ would take next.”

¹ Peter Rollins, *The Orthodox Heretic and Other Impossible Tales* (Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press, 2015 [2009]), ch. 5.

Peter Rollins calls this provocative story, a story of “impossible hospitality, a hospitality that flings open its doors to anyone, without condition” - a story about loving *even* one’s enemies. The moral of the story is this, says Rollins: “through our trying to show hospitality to the demon at our door, the demon may well be transformed by the grace that is shown. Or,” he says, “we may come to realize that it was not really a demon at all, but just a broken, damaged person” in need of love.

I think what I like so much about this story is that the priest looked for the face of Christ in everyone he met, including a demon - after the demon left, the priest “drifted off to sleep, all the time wondering what guise his Christ would take next.” And I like that phrase Rollins uses at the end: “we may come to realize that it was not really a demon at all [at our door], but just a broken, damaged person” in need of love.

The serenity of the priest reminds me of what the late James W. Fowler, professor of theology at Emory University, called the sixth and final stage of faith.² It’s the stage, he wrote, when people “live their lives to the full in service of others without any real worries ...” - a stage infused by love - love of self, love of others - the stage exemplified by the priest in Rollins’ story. James Fowler’s research is dated now, but it is interesting. There are six stages of faith, he argued. In its infancy - its earlier stages - he said, faith is defined by literalism: scripture is interpreted literally; beliefs inherited from parents are accepted without question; such faith sees the world in simplistic, black-white terms, a world of certainty without any gray. Some people, says Fowler, mature to the middle stages of faith, when they begin to accept that there are other, valid religious boxes outside their own. They may react by clinging more closely to the stability of their tradition, they may become disillusioned with their inherited tradition and leave it altogether in search of something else, or, in searching, they may move on to the later stages of faith. In these later, more mature stages, he says, people accept that there are paradoxes and mysteries in life, some of which may never be resolved. They learn to accept life’s and theology’s grayness. But the final stage of faith - the sixth stage, that of Rollins’ priest - is occupied by a rarefied group, says Fowler, mostly contemplatives and mystics, who have learned to detach themselves from the trappings of the world, accepting other people and accepting themselves for their value as human beings, and not because of their titles or money or achievements or states in life - they live in love and can even open their doors to demons. There’s a long history of contemplation and mysticism in Christianity - people like St. Anthony of Egypt in the fourth century, or Hildegard of Bingen in the 12th century, or Julian of Norwich in the 14th century, or Mother Teresa or Thomas Merton in the 20th century, or Father Richard Rohr in the 21st century, or perhaps, Martin Luther King Jr. - I’ll return to him in a bit.

Jesus himself, according to some scholars, was a Jewish mystic.³ And, the Gospel of John - the gospel today’s New Testament reading is taken from - has been called by these scholars, the most mystical of the four New Testament gospels. One purpose of John’s gospel is to spur readers to grow in their faith toward those upper levels that James Fowler describes. Today’s reading is about the first encounter people have of Jesus. And each person who encounters Jesus immediately tries to label him - to give him a title, put him in a box - a trait of those early stages of faith that seek certainty and literalism. When John the Baptist meets Jesus, he calls him the “Lamb of God.” A label. When John’s disciples meet Jesus for the

² You can read a summary here: <http://www.psychologycharts.com/james-fowler-stages-of-faith.html>

³ E.g., John Shelby Spong, *The Fourth Gospel: Tales of a Jewish Mystic* (New York: HarperOne, 2013).

first time, they call him “rabbi.” Another label. When Andrew first meets Jesus, he invites his brother Peter to join him, saying, “We have found the Messiah!” Another label. When Philip meets Jesus, he tells his friend Nathaniel, “we have found the one about whom Moses in the law, and also the prophets wrote.” The Promised One - another label. Then when Nathaniel meets Jesus, he exclaims, “You are the Son of God, the King of Israel!” More labels. Each one of these labels has a rich history in ancient Judaism. “Lamb of God” refers to the Jewish Passover lamb sacrificed to save the people. “Rabbis” were and are religious leaders and teachers. “Messiah” was Israel’s anointed one, destined for military glory. And “Son of God” was a phrase used in the Psalms to describe Israel’s king, a political term. The rest of John’s gospel adds more labels to Jesus: he is a wonder-worker who does many “signs,” as John calls them (turning water to wine; feeding the five thousand; walking on water; raising Lazarus from the dead); Jesus is called the “Good Shepherd” in John’s gospel (another label); the “Bread of Life”; the “Light of the World”; the “Gate”; the “Vine,” the list goes on. Like stair-steps on the stages of faith, each label gets closer to truth, but the reader of John’s gospel needs to keep climbing. And it’s only near the end of the gospel that Jesus pushes his disciples and we the readers toward the final stage of faith. The word “love” appears nearly 60 times in John’s gospel, more than in the three other New Testament gospels combined; and most of the references to love are in the second half of John’s gospel - near the top of the staircase of faith, so to speak. *A new commandment I give to you*, says Jesus on the eve of his death, *love one another*. And John’s gospel concludes in ch. 21 with Jesus teaching a final lesson about love.

Tomorrow we celebrate Martin Luther King Jr. Day, and in 1957, Dr. King delivered a sermon in which he spoke about the power of love.⁴ “Far from being the pious injunction of a utopian dreamer,” said Dr. King, “[love] is an absolute necessity for the survival of our civilization. Yes, it is love that will save our world and our civilization, love even for enemies.” When you rise in faith to love, he said, “you begin to love [people], not because they are likeable, but because God loves them. You look at every [person], and you love [them] because you know God loves [them]. [Even if it’s] the worst person you’ve ever seen.” Even if, we might add, it’s a demon at your door.

In his book *What Christianity is Not*, theologian Douglas John Hall treats the Christian tradition like an onion. Each chapter of the book peels back a layer to get closer to some core. Hall peels away the hymns and the prayers, the practices and the ancient dogmas. Christianity is *not* these, he says. He then peels away systems of ethics, statements of morality; he even peels away the notion of “truth.” It’s not these either, he says. “If I were asked to say, in a word, what [Christianity is, after saying what it is *not*,]” he writes, “I would answer [with a single word] ... *love*. Eternal, forgiving, expectant, suffering love.”⁵

This reminds me of an ancient legend about The Book of Love, and about “God’s struggle to guide the destiny of humanity.” “It is said,” so the story goes, “that God had grown tired of the way that mortals constantly lose their way, creating disasters as they go. So [God] sent out ... angelic messengers to gather together the timeless wisdom contained in the world and to place this wisdom into a multitude of books that would be housed in a great library - a library that mortals could use in order to work out how they should live and act in the world. When, after many millennia, the great task was completed, the colossal library stood proudly

⁴ <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/loving-your-enemies-sermon-delivered-dexter-avenue-baptist-church>

⁵ Douglas John Hall, *What Christianity is Not: An Exercise in “Negative” Theology* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2013), xv.

in one of the world's great cultural capitals, dominating the skyline. However, this huge building contained too many books for any individual to read. It was all but impossible to reach for the majority of people, and the library's sheer size was enough to put anyone off even entering it. So God [had] ... couriers compress the essential wisdom into a single, encyclopedic book. Once completed, this single work was widely circulated, but the manuscript was so huge that one could hardly lift it, let alone read it or put what it said into practice. So yet again God put ... couriers to work, crafting a booklet with all the essential information. But [this booklet was still too large], ... so the booklet was refined into a single word, and that word was sent out on the lips and life of a messenger. And the word? It was *love*.”⁶

Let me close today with these timeless words of Dr. King in 1957:⁷ “There is a power in love that our world has not discovered yet. Jesus discovered it centuries ago. Mahatma Gandhi of India discovered it a few years ago, but most [people] never [quite] discover it. For they believe in hitting for hitting; they believe in an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth; they believe in hating for hating; but Jesus comes to us and says, ‘This isn’t the way.’” “There is a little tree planted on a little hill,” said Dr. King, “and on that tree hangs the [Christ]. But never feel that that tree is a meaningless drama that took place on the stages of history. Oh no, it is a telescope through which we look out into the long vista of eternity, and see the love of God breaking forth into time. It is an eternal reminder to a power-drunk generation that love is the only way.” “And I’m foolish enough to believe,” he concludes, “that through the power of this love somewhere, [people] of the most recalcitrant bent will be transformed. And then we will be in God’s kingdom.”

Amen.

⁶ Rollins, *The Orthodox Heretic*, ch. 30.

⁷ <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/loving-your-enemies-sermon-delivered-dexter-avenue-baptist-church>