

THE CARICATURE OF GOD

A SERMON PREACHED AT SAINT JOHN'S PARISH, FEBRUARY 19, 2006
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Gospel text assigned for Seventh Sunday of Epiphany Season, Year B:

When Jesus returned to Capernaum after some days, it was reported that he was at home. So many gathered around that there was no longer room for them, not even in front of the door; and he was speaking the word to them. Then some people came, bringing to him a paralyzed man, carried by four of them. And when they could not bring him to Jesus because of the crowd, they removed the roof above him; and after having dug through it, they let down the mat on which the paralytic lay. When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, "Son, your sins are forgiven." Now some of the scribes were sitting there, questioning in their hearts, "Why does this fellow speak in this way? It is blasphemy! Who can forgive sins but God alone?" At once Jesus perceived in his spirit that they were discussing these questions among themselves; and he said to them, "Why do you raise such questions in your hearts? Which is easier, to say to the paralytic, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Stand up and take your mat and walk'? But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins" -- he said to the paralytic-- "I say to you, stand up, take your mat and go to your home." And he stood up, and immediately took the mat and went out before all of them; so that they were all amazed and glorified God, saying, "We have never seen anything like this!" Mark 2:1-12

*"Why do you raise such questions in your hearts?
Which is easier to say: you are forgiven, or get up and walk?"*

When it comes to political cartoons, we can readily remember the way American presidents have been portrayed in exaggerated caricature. There was Jimmy Carter's toothy grin, Richard Nixon's swooping nose, Lyndon Johnson's drooping earlobes, and George Bush's ears that stick out too far. In honor of President's weekend then, we can also recall remember Abe Lincoln with his lanky frame and top hat, or George Washington's in his white powdered wig and forced grimace of a smile. Presumably he had a toothache, but his looks always reminded me of my paternal grandmother.

It may be awhile before Vice President Cheney's cartoon caricature is ever anything other than the way he was portrayed this last week; after that near-fatal hunting accident with his friend, that -- if it were anyone other than a famous or controversial figure -- would be no laughing matter, of course. But like Jimmy Carter's incident with the mythic, giant rabbit, or the suspect second glances each time Bill Clinton would embrace an enthusiastic female fan, old dead-eye Dick's mishap will inevitably become legendary.

The mere idea of a principal proponent of our nation's armed conflict, loaded for bear himself, with everything he needed in his entourage except a legal license to do so, then hunting for his prey, but coming up empty handed, while wounding and almost killing a countryman instead ... that's the kind of made-to-order metaphor that will live on in the world of political satire for a long time. It may be awhile before the Vice President can risk being seen in public dressed in camouflage, with a 12-gauge slung over his shoulder.

If some political cartoonist hasn't already beaten me to it, I can just see it now in the editorial section of dailies: Osama Ben Laden is hiding out in the Texas brush, dressed in a quail costume and turning to one of his lieutenant's, with the caption: "Don't worry, we've found the safest place in the world"

Now, the reason I can get away with saying something like this is because there is a well-established tradition in this freedom-lovin' land of ours to be able to criticize and poke fun at our leaders, and all those who would assume positions of power, notoriety or popularity; even to the point of mocking ridicule or sometimes downright offensive characterization. There are those who declare freedom of speech and freedom of the press is broad enough to even include bad taste.



*The grumbling, mumbling
hearts of the offended scribes.*

Elsewhere however, it is self-evident, that if a picture is worth a thousand words, then a biting, offensive political cartoon can be worth a hundred riots with thousands & thousands of protesters; especially in the Muslim world. The presumably-benign country of Denmark is shell-shocked by the firestorm that has erupted globally over the publication and re-publication of those inflammatory cartoons which not only dared to depict the prophet Muhammad in the first place, but in a negative, critical light, as well.

While some free-press advocates now say they would defend to the death their rights to print whatever they choose, others enraged by the exercise of those same rights have literally died as a result of the affront to their religious sensibilities. For, as with many things that are labeled "religious protest" it is self-evident to many dispassionate observers that the controversy is about far more -- and runs far deeper -- than some derogatory depictions of a revered leader of one of the world's great religious traditions.

The "Muslim world" is a seething stew in turmoil, whose demographics know no borders; and whose citizenry is substantially made up of millions of the world's oppressed and desperate poor. Clearly, they are easily incited by any affront to one of the few things they can claim as their own; that is, their faith. Which, in turn, makes them all the more susceptible to the counter-distortions and caricatures depicting those who would denigrate their religious beliefs, to the advantage of expedient zealots, terrorist fanatics and political despots.

Perhaps it is because the very nature of religion presumes to define what one believes to be of ultimate value, and encompasses the totality of one's essential, sacred being, that there is probably nothing worse than a religious offense; or at least anything that can be deemed or misconstrued as a religious offense. The extreme situation now where a tolerant, open-minded country like Denmark could be targeted worldwide for attack should be evidence enough of that.

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But more so, the fact is -- like most strife and division between different peoples that are sometimes labeled as "religious" intolerance or derision -- I suspect, say, the fifteen Muslim rioters killed in Nigeria yesterday were not arguing over theological fine points in the Koran regarding the propriety or blasphemy of whether or how to depict the revered prophet. It was rather the belief that someone, somewhere was mocking their God; and they were willing to die the death of a faithful believer over such defilement.

Depictions of the divine in our own Judeo-Christian tradition is a mixed bag, of course. In the Jewish scriptures, God is first manifested in the created order of things; but whose name Yahweh is so sacred one would not even spell it out, or fully pronounce it; let alone dare to depict the face of God. So God speaks through a burning bush, or a booming voice out of a cloud, or pillar of fire, or in any of the various depicted natural and supernatural acts.

But with the story of the incarnation in our own Christian tradition, the foundational claim that God was manifested in real, visible, tangible flesh and bone made subsequent depictions of God, in the Christ, fair game. While the Eastern Church attempted to downplay a kind of in-your-face realism of a three-dimension divine image through the flattened depictions of iconography, portrayals of God's image reflected in the figure of Jesus Christ flourished in the Western Church. It was no longer a matter of whether one dared to imagine what God looked like, but rather who Jesus was. The manner in which Jesus happened to be depicted was reflective of the impression of how the artist, or the writer, or the story teller saw the character, the personhood of Jesus.

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Next week, when we observe the last Sunday of Epiphany Season, a version of the story of the transfiguration of Jesus is always read from one of the synoptic gospels. There on the mountaintop, as Jesus' likeness is somehow changed, the subsequent commission of the three disciples who witnessed the dazzling event becomes a matter of depicting for the early community of believers what that transformative appearance meant.

In a sense, this of course became the defining task of the whole gospel tradition in the various portrayals of this character, Jesus of Nazareth. As generations of the early church quickly moved from eyewitness accounts to retold stories, the pictures sketched out in the believer's mind and heart, begged the question: How shall we characterize this God-man? It was no longer a matter of how blasphemous it was to try to depict an image of God. On the contrary, it became the gospel imperative to proclaim God as revealed in Jesus Christ. And the gospels – as if they were a political cartoon of their day – attempted to depict these incarnate characteristics of God by exaggerating how they were portrayed in Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus' ministry of preaching and miracle healings then becomes caricature, in a sense; an exaggeration to make a point. How does the gospel writer do this? And what was the point?

In the reading today from Mark's gospel we have another miracle story; in this case, the healing of the paralytic. We have already read how Jesus' touch was sufficient to dispel a fever that had laid low Peter's mother-in-law; and then with his touch and a few words – "I do choose, be made clean" – Jesus had cured a leper of his incurable disease.

Now he seeks escape from the overnight success and notoriety that has pursued him, preventing him from being able to concentrate on his message about the near-likeness of the reign of God in our midst. He has retreated to his home; but the crowds have been relentless, and the house is surrounded. He has caused such a stir there are even informants from the religious authorities in the throng; in his own house he is under surveillance by some temple scribes, there to record his every word and action.

The scene Mark describes is one of exaggerated extremes, which only becomes more ludicrous with the lengths to which some friends of a paralytic are willing to go in order to get Jesus' attention. Just imagine all four of them jostling and straining to first hoist the invalid up onto the roof, then tearing a hole in it, before lowering the one who couldn't fend for himself down on a stretcher into the room where the dismayed and exhausted Jesus sits; perhaps with a mixture of stunned disbelief and pity on his face.

Mark describes the extreme actions of some believers in order to convey what was an even more extreme message; which is that healing and forgiveness are about the same thing. As the story goes, Jesus is not only portrayed as a wonder-worker, but a mind reader, as well. Or rather, in this case, a heart-reader: "Why do you raise such questions in your hearts? Which is easier, to say you are forgiven, or get up and walk?"

If the picture sketched for us by Mark is worth a thousand words, then it is found in this caricature of Jesus; and, in fact, the extreme words and actions by which he will become known by his followers, and the wild claims they will subsequently make about him. He will become the one through whom anyone who is crippled by whatever faults and failures they have suffered in their lives is raised up again, put back on their feet and given a new life and way of living.

This was a very irregular way to portray Yahweh acting among God's people. As the amazed onlookers exclaimed to one another, "We've never seen anything like this!" To the scribes, however, it was also a blasphemous offense. Their religious sensibilities were duly offended.

But if this miracle healer's words and actions were to be seen as something extraordinary and uncharacteristic of God, what would it mean? In the hands of this living, walking, talking caricature of God, God was forgiving first; then looking for such forgiveness to make a difference in the life of the one who'd been given legs to walk again.

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Even this point is exaggerated in this story. Whereas in the case of the leper's miraculous healing it was suggested one's own faith was the pre-condition for healing, in this case it isn't even the notion that one necessarily needs a single ounce of faith. Mark doesn't give us a clue whether the crippled man believes in any power or divine presence of the one who sat exhausted in the center of a crowded house that day or not. Who knows what was the hope, or doubt, or fear, or faith of that disabled soul. A paralytic in those days would have most likely been condemned to a life of begging. He who would have been regarded by most in that crowd as a pitiable excuse for a man.

In this story it is only the faith – and faith in action -- of the crippled man's four friends that effectuate his resurrection, of sorts! It is accomplished by this outrageous, extraordinary, extreme act of compassion and love; which is portrayed as the only requirement for God to be able to act.

As the Collect prayer in this morning's worship puts it: "O Lord, you have taught us that without love whatever we do is worth nothing; Send your Holy Spirit and pour into our hearts your greatest gift, which is love, the true bond of peace and of all virtue, without which whoever lives is accounted dead before you."

Because we know the story well enough, we know this "caricature" of Jesus will subsequently be portrayed again and again in Mark's gospel; all the way to the extreme depiction of God hanging on a cross, and then the most outrageous act we call the resurrection.

There have been many depictions of the image of God, as well as various prophets and saviors. People are sometimes captivated by the idea of what Jesus looked like, more than the more profound question of what kind of impression *he* made on *them*.

But there has never – in my mind's eye – been anything that could sufficiently capture what resurrection could possibly look like. Perhaps that is why the gospels can only sketch for us the picture of an empty tomb, and the absence of what once was and is no more. And leave us with nothing more than the picture of that "greatest gift, which is love," and the "true bond of peace," reflected in the words and deeds of Jesus.

Amen. *jb+*