

May 16 - Gospel Mass Meditation

An old friend wrote a song about how families can become islands, separated by lawns and fences; trying to have all the stuff they need for life. The chorus says: 41 houses, only 1 street / 41 yards, 82 trees. / 41 mowers all sitting in sheds / 41 families in over their heads / 41 neighbors with nothing to say / building their lives the American way / & everybody's got their own everything.

He could have been writing about churches and denominations of the past 100 years. It hasn't been that long ago that our hymns came from Nashville; our anthems came from Nashville; our SS literature came from Nashville; our programs and ministries came from Nashville; yes our identity came from Nashville. We lived in a religious silo.

Those days are gone. There will soon be no one who drives only Buicks or Fords their entire life, and there will soon be no one who always joins the Baptist or Lutheran church when they move. Is this good news or bad? Do we lose our identity and help each other grow?

Dr. Curtis Freeman from Duke Divinity School is one of the participants in a formal dialogue between Baptist and Catholic theologians. He told me after a recent trip to Rome that the RCC is actually modifying her baptismal practices if only in baby steps. What used to be an infant baptism only to remove original sin has expanded to include baptism at confirmation which is a baptism of initiation like ours and there is provision for priests to baptize by immersion. Dr. Freeman said this has been the Baptist influence on the RCC.

There is a larger world of Christian faith out there that will enrich our lives as well. Our young people learned from a very different class and language in **Hungary**. They learned that happiness and hospitality happens even in families and churches that are poor. They learned that there is a spiritual bond that transcends language and culture.

What if instead of holy wars and division, the Church began to show some of the unity Jesus taught us? What if instead of trying to blend our beliefs, we tried to blend our fellowship? Would this weaken us or strengthen us?

Aesop wrote a story about **Three Bulls**. They were grazing in a meadow, and were watched by a Lion, who longed to capture and eat them, but who felt he was no match for the three so long as they kept together; whenever he came near they turned their tails to one another, so that whichever way he approached them he was met by the horns of one of them. So he began by false whispers and rumors to cause jealousy and distrust among them. This method worked so well that at last, the Bulls grew cold and unfriendly, and finally avoided each other, feeding alone. Then the Lion attacked them one by one and soon ate all three.

Does not Scripture show us that unity is our strength and the will of God? Jesus said it plainly in John 10. *I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, ¹⁵just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep. ¹⁶I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd. I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, ¹⁵just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep. ¹⁶I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd.*

Early in my ministry, I was in a meeting of ministers from various Christian traditions gathered to address problems of drinking in our local high school. It was my first ecumenical gathering.

I met the young pastor of an Episcopal church and he seemed overconfident to me; or maybe I was just the insecure youth minister. I was in seminary however and had a few cards of my sleeve (mixed metaphor). When he and I sat down for lunch, I asked him, “why do you guys **baptize infants** when there’s no clear biblical picture of that?” He said his answer would be too long but invited me to ask another. So I asked, “do you really believe that your prayer over the host and the wine brings the **substance** of Jesus body and blood along side that bread and wine?” He told me yes but offered that he couldn’t explain it. I had him backpedaling due to my superior education. If he thought Baptists were just backwater believers with no sense of history, he’d learn to think again.

Yet he didn’t act upset or challenged but rather kept inviting me to ask. He offered simple answers or appealed to the mystery of God. I asked about doctrines of **Mary**. I asked about **church governance**. I asked about reading all the **prayers from a book**. I asked about **incense** and he never got incensed.

After some time, however, he asked me a question I’ll never forget. He asked, “**do you suppose we do anything that pleases God?**” The question had never crossed my mind. Seems that the only thing I had been taught to that point was how we are superior in our doctrine. But a shift happened in me that day. I began to look at practices from different Christian traditions for what I could learn, not refute. I don’t mean I accepted everything; only that I was open to all of it.

From Latin Mass to Black Gospel, God inhabits the praises of his people. God gives us teachers. I pray that we will let every tongue confess that Jesus is Lord!