

Pentecost 13, Proper 16
Church of the Good Shepherd, Silver City, NM

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Rev. Paul Moore

The Way of Inner Peace

Today's topic is a touchy one. It has to do with the "don'ts." Religion has for so long been seen as a list of don'ts and rejected for it that to speak of it runs the risk of rehashing old material that nobody considers relevant any more. Yet the theme is there, throughout Scripture, and the tradition of the Church. Perhaps what we can do is this: Instead of glibly listing the don'ts of our faith as absolute mandates on which our salvation depends (which it has never been,) we can go a bit deeper and explore the why. Why is it that the apophatic way, the way of giving up, is so important to the spiritual life? Then, maybe, we can be in a better position to talk about the what.

We live in what we call a high desert. Yes, it is high, by comparison to most of the habitable land of the earth. In 1994 a study identified the mean elevation of inhabited land on the earth at 194 meters, or about 3100 feet—just a bit lower than El Paso. But it is not as high as many places where people live. The village of Kibber in the Himalayas in northern India claims to be the highest inhabited village accessible by road and it sits at 14,200 ft. Yes, it is a desert, though not what one might imagine. It certainly doesn't look like the Sahara or the Atacama Desert of Peru and Chile, or the Sonoran desert around Tucson, or even the Chihuahuan desert around Deming. This year our desert doesn't look very desert-like at all. It's green. We've had tons of rain as of the beginning of May. It's a far cry from the dusty brown place we visited first in March of 2012, at the tail end of 3 years of drought.

One thing is obvious to me in talking to old-timers from around here. This is nice, but it is not unique. The dry was awful, but it was not the first time. Yes, global climate change is occurring, there is little scientific doubt about that, but what it has given us here still fits within the standard deviation from the mean. It's been drier, and it's been wetter. Any attempt to predict too closely the weather is an exercise in futility. Cowboys and Indians alike have come to view the weather with a wary eye. Wet and dry, cool and hot, humid and parched, we get it all. If you don't like what we've got, just wait 15 minutes and you'll have something else to look at! There is a real value for a deepest equanimity that just doesn't get all worked up over any one day of rain or shine. There's always more to the story, and that more hasn't been told yet, so don't get your undies in a wad...

There are two great spiritual principles of the spiritual life. One is the kataphatic principle. This principle includes anything and everything that fits within the category. It embellishes and elaborates liturgy. It adds paintings and statues to sacred space. It

multiplies prayers and study material. It rejoices whenever it sees something new that expresses the faith, and wants to include it. We see the kataphatic principle in Jesus when he turns water into wine at a wedding, heals the blind and the lame, raises the dead, and looks out over 5000 hungry people he turns to the disciples and says, "You give them something to eat." One could almost say that living in the high desert is an experience in kataphatic climatology.

The other is the apophatic principle. The apophatic seeks for the unseen mystery, pushing past image after image as inadequate to encompass what cannot be expressed by word or image. It is the way of turning away, of leaving behind, of defining and cutting free of anything unnecessary. This principle simplifies liturgy, it sees paintings as nice but unessential. It is bored with a multitude of prayers, and it gets suspicious whenever there is something new to express the inexpressible. One could say the old timers practice a kind of apophatic attitude toward the weather.

Jesus in today's Gospel lesson gives us a powerful apophatic message. "Unless you eat my flesh and drink my blood you will not have eternal life." The results are predictable: Grumbling, complaining, and eventually, many people stop following Jesus. They liked the food for 5000, but this stuff was just too much—and yet, this is precisely the important part. Without this to balance the miracle of the multiplication of the bread Jesus would be merely a wonderworker and a very, very generous man, but he wouldn't be the Son of God. The Son of God is a greater idea, a deeper mystery, one that opens up into the mystery of the heart at the heart of the universe.

One must push past the surface meaning to get at the mystery beneath. Jesus is God incarnate. Get close to Jesus and you'll be close to God. Anything and everything else is unimportant. This eating and drinking thing has to do with getting close to Jesus. Eating Jesus' flesh is not cannibalism, it is participation in God. Drinking Jesus' blood is not vampirism, it is sharing in the Spirit of God. Bread and wine become body and blood, and we are shown to be more than what we seem. The 12 get it—well, at least all but Judas. Peter speaks for them all. "To whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life." But pushing past the surface takes sacrifice. It takes letting go. Ultimately it takes letting go of everything you thought you knew about God. Welcome to the apophatic way!

Our culture is like our weather. We are kataphatic to the core. We want things new; we want things now. It has been rightly observed that we are not a materialistic culture, we are a consumerist one. We quickly tire of what we have, and want to replace it. Our whole economy is built on getting rid of what is old so as to make room to acquire more. Restraint and self-control are enemies of the economic state. The Churches are not

immune. It is always tempting to give people what they want so that they will join and be part of us: Flashy liturgy and music, quick and easy programs that require nothing, Starbucks coffee in the parish hall. a consumerist God who is always there with the next miracle for us, but does not require anything from us.

We are called, sisters and brothers, to be counter-cultural. That doesn't mean that we are obstructionists just to be obtuse, but it means we stand in a different place than mainstream life. We have another grounding and we always reserve the right to make judgments about what comes down the pike. Some of what comes is good; some of it is decidedly unhelpful. Like Jesus, we are called sometimes to stand up and speak the controversial truth.

One temptation in the Church constantly is to confuse the message of the Kingdom with the message of some political platform or party. For someone to say that they can't understand how someone could be of one political party or another and still be a Christian shows that they have fallen victim to this kind of thinking. This has never gone well for the Church in the past, and I can't see that it will be any different now.

Another is to confuse the good of the Church with the economic good of a certain slice of society, usually those who are in positions of decision-making power. The power that comes with resources can blind us to the ways power is abused. Here is a quote from the Declaration of Secession of the State of Texas in 1861:

In all the non-slave-holding States, in violation of that good faith and comity which should exist between entirely distinct nations, the people have formed themselves into a great sectional party, now strong enough in numbers to control the affairs of each of those States, based upon the unnatural feeling of hostility to these Southern States and their beneficent and patriarchal system of African slavery, proclaiming the debasing doctrine of the equality of all men, irrespective of race or color--a doctrine at war with nature, in opposition to the experience of mankind, and in violation of the plainest revelations of the Divine Law...

We hold as undeniable truths that the governments of the various States, and of the confederacy itself, were established exclusively by the white race, for themselves and their posterity; that the African race had no agency in their establishment; that they were rightfully held and regarded as an inferior and dependent race, and in that condition only could their existence in this country be rendered beneficial or tolerable. That in this free government all white men are and of right ought to be entitled to equal civil and political rights; that the servitude of the African race, as existing in these States, is mutually beneficial to

both bond and free, and is abundantly authorized and justified by the experience of mankind, and the revealed will of the Almighty Creator, as recognized by all Christian nations;

It is when we get together as a people to talk about what is coming down the pike that we can begin to discern the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Sometimes what we see coming enhances the Kingdom, other times what we conclude will clearly paddle upstream. Some will not walk with us because of our stance, yet if what we seek is the great mystery of God behind all things we will stand humbly and yet firmly, as Jesus did. We will discern the words of eternal life among us.

The Apophatic way that Jesus shows us here calls us to remember that "This, too, shall pass." We must not make an idol of what we like, or a demon of what we don't like. We must always push through, look further, and try to discern the coming of the Kingdom of God. Stand back, sisters and brothers. What is it that has you most perseverating right now? Do not think too highly of it. Do not be too afraid of it. Look beyond it to the kingdom. From the perspective of heaven, what does this look like? From the standpoint of the sacredness of every living thing, what does this look like? Through the eyes of God's love, what does this look like?

The Apophatic Way is the way of inner peace.