Novena reflection

5 March 2022

I’ve sometimes thought of writing a book about teaching religion to middle schoolers. I’d call it *God Deflects the Shark*, after a guided meditation Seyi, one of my 8th-grade boys, led his class in. It was a project for Lent, actually: writing and leading the 14 of us in any kind of extended prayer. Seyi guided us into deep ocean…. *You’re in the ocean; it’s very peaceful, cold, dark, beautiful. You see God. What does God look like? There’s a shark… it’s coming at you… God deflects the shark!* If you know 8th grade boys, you know they were there for it. And it was a real God moment for me, too.

Not unlike today’s reading from Isaiah: *Light shall rise for you in the darkness… He will renew your strength… and I will make you ride on the heights of the Earth.* Seyi had that part right.

But he was missing the IFs in Isaiah’s prophecy. *IF you remove from your midst oppression, false accusation and malicious speech; IF you bestow your bread on the hungry and satisfy the afflicted; THEN light shall rise for you in the darkness, and the gloom shall become for you like midday; THEN the Lord will guide you always and give you plenty even on parched land.*

We know living with and for God demands a lot. We know Jesus instructs us to give our possessions to the poor—to tear apart our families, even—in order to follow him. We know that turning back to God as we await Easter is hard, requires sacrifice—is more than just existing in a beautiful, peaceful ocean while God deflects all danger from us.

And yet—today’s Gospel reminds us—sometimes it IS as simple as making a choice. Levi, a tax collector—seen as a traitor by his people for working for the Romans, an occupying force—makes a choice. Jesus says to Levi, “Follow me,” so he does. And then Jesus follows Levi to his house to eat and drink with his friends. And Jesus brings his disciples. Jesus is not just serving the sinner who made one choice one day; he is sharing a meal—finding joy—with him.

I struggle with how both of these can be true: God requires us to live righteously, to remove oppression from our midst AND God wants to feast with us sinners, in our homes, with our sinner friends. Right living will bring gifts from God AND we don’t have to earn God’s grace—we can’t possibly earn that much goodness, even.

Jesus tells the Pharisees, “Those who are healthy do not need a physician, but the sick do. I have not come to call the righteous to repentance but sinners.” There is judgement in his statement. My modern mindset is tempted to say Jesus accompanied Levi and his friends without judgement—but he is God. He knows their sins, which he knows are curable, as a sickness. So there is honest assessment, there is equity in prioritizing people with the greatest need, there is redemption, and there is healing. And yes, there is joy and companionship.

But let us put ourselves for a moment in the role of the Pharisee and scribes. (We faithful of 2022 are happy for Levi, we really are, but I imagine it’s not too far a stretch to consider we who are walking this Novena, at church or livestreaming mass on a Saturday, to fall in the camp of ‘the righteous.’)

This person and his friends are at banquet with a traitor and his traitor friends, eating and drinking while the righteous are fasting. In the same chapter in Luke’s Gospel, Luke describes standing room only gatherings where people are taking the roof apart to lower in their crippled friend. Jesus telling the Pharisees and scribes that it’s okay to party, to eat well, to harvest on the Sabbath because he is there and won’t be for long. Must have seemed pretty full of himself, if not heretical. They ask why, or how, and they’re met with sarcasm, or dismissal, or shame.

Jesus looks like a politician, holding himself up as the solution, acting entitled to break the rules. And his only answer is, “I’m here for the sinners.” Did that answer change any hearts that day? It is comforting now, no doubt—the statement that everyone can be redeemed. That God sees our sins as a sickness: curable, part of who we are, but not the whole story of who we are. Today, Jesus’s answers are galvanizing in our equity work, in our commitment to move to the margins and meet people where they are. But how would we have received it if we were the Pharisees asking the question?

How do we receive it now, when this truth calls for us to be overlooked? “Those who are healthy do not need a physician, but the sick do. I have not come to call the righteous to repentance but sinners.” ‘Well, I may not need a physician right now,’ we think to ourselves, ‘but I sure would like one!’ When we don’t get the recognition we’ve earned through devotion and sacrifice and playing by the rules and staying true to the calling—when others who have not done all that get accolades, the thriving marriage, the healthy children, the good luck? When we HAVE *removed* *from our midst oppression, false accusation and malicious speech;* when we HAVE *bestowed our bread on the hungry and satisfied the afflicted;* and still *light DOES NOT rise for US in the darkness, and the gloom PERSISTS, NOT becoming for us like midday.*

We feel frustrated, disappointed, angry, or like something is wrong with us. Often we feel this way secretly—because we know from Scripture that this is how it should be. God goes after the lost sheep; God prefers the widow’s sacrifice; Ash Wednesday reminds us to “Take care not to perform righteous deeds in order that people may see them;” today’s Call of Levi. We don’t even talk to God about our frustration. And Ignatius teaches us THIS is where the enemy of human nature gets its power—from secrecy and suppressed emotions. They fester, they push us away from God, away from right living.

In rereading today’s Gospel, I realized the Pharisees and scribes ask the DISCIPLES why they eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners. Would Jesus’s response have been different if they had asked HIM? Maybe. Maybe they didn’t get a straight answer because they didn’t ask a straight question.

Recently I applied for a graduate program that I was really excited about. I spent countless hours on my application, not to mention years of hard work that I believed qualified me. I didn’t even get an interview. And I realized as I was praying with this Gospel, preparing for this Novena presentation, that I had been too embarrassed or ashamed of my feelings about that rejection, that I hadn’t even brought them to God. I hadn’t asked God in prayer, “Why?” And lo and behold, in bringing that question to God in prayer, being present to the darkness and rejection I was feeling… God deflected the shark!

Ok maybe it’s not quite as cool as Seyi’s meditation, but truly, a weight has been lifted for me. So today, in this third day of Novena, let us contribute to the slow work of God by finding the question we are too ashamed or too oppressed to ask God, and let us ask it.

You see God; what does God look like? What do you need to ask Him?