

Lenten Musings Of A Minister

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"The Church in our house sends greetings to the Church in yours." That was the way "Jas. A." Jones always closed his letters. That benediction not only went to close friends with whom he had shared some intimate concern or recall, but it also went to strangers who made mere institutional inquiry of him. To the friend, the statement carried a bond of overarching spirit and intention that vaulted geographical separation. To a stranger, there was conveyed a marvelous note of redeeming presumptuousness—Christian relationships are never limited to personal familiarity. We were both reminded that although the church is Catholic, it, more often than seldom, finds its most viable witness, its strongest nurture and its final testimony "close in"—within those private places of our habitation—our houses.

I always found that phrase in his letters to be a tremendous source of "bonding" for me. It lifted up individual turf that now became linked in common cause. I always appreciated greetings to the cell of human effort in which, finally, a "good and faithful witness" stands or falls. For all the "fallings," I was always encouraged to try again. For all the "goods," I was reminded that was "bottom line."

So it is, that I write this article with that phrase as the "greeting" rather than as its benediction. Many of the ones who will read it, I have known for a very long time and we have cared about each other for decades. There will be others who I only know about or know not at all. In either case, I now dare to include both persons in an intimate chain of reflections on matters about which I care, shaped even more by raising them up in the midst of Lenten musings. They will be diverse probings rather than a single theme. *Throughout, I will be assuming that we and those we most care about do intend to be "ways in the wilderness" and "rivers in the desert" in the name of One who calls us to be one in our time.* The Cross is a reminder of the seriousness of that shared call, the empty Tomb, the startling reminder of the intention of God for us to hear that call and become free to pursue it.

Let me begin with reflections on "oneness." The longer I live and the longer I live out responsibilities belonging to the vocation of ordained ministry, the more I come to appreciate the massive diversity of lives, styles, confessions, and affirmations that rightly belong to the Christian family. Those things that bind us together become far more precious than the things that divide us are important. I am far more hungry for the theological substance we can share than giving primary importance to those things that allow us to claim differences and impose alienation. I am far more excited to search after actions and attitudes that attempt to be risks at faithfulness and venture than I am to applaud those who enjoy rigorous and rigid posturings of theological "properness," and by so doing, intimidate and, mostly, attack. The latter continues to create Calvaries

for the One who called us “friends” rather than tradition’s slaves. The longer I live, the more important the Reformed Tradition becomes for me, but it remains redeeming, and I am permitted to attempt to be redemptive in the midst of it only in so far as it does not rob me of compassionate imagination. It is a tradition that is far too vulnerable in wishing to claim blind allegiance and totally rational comprehension of a “tradition.” It cannot be permitted to overrun my constant call to Oneness in the name of a Risen Lord. It can become the mandate for everyone’s “house” rather than being that delicate, precious attempt of but *one* room in the great household of faith to express faithfulness. In this Lenten Season, reminded afresh of that unnervingly diverse group of folk Jesus first called to join Him in a faithful venture, I am humbled by the diversity that “my” tradition rightly should celebrate and haunted by the divisiveness that my very own tradition often times seems joyfully interested in authoring. Ecclesiastical righteousness becomes the goal in that arena. The fact is, we are called to faithfulness and to discovery. Amid a religious season of muted kettle drums, cries of HOSANNA gone stale and stultified by betrayals, denials and hammer blows to nailheads, I best always be more concerned to see a Way in the Wilderness and know a River in the Desert when I see it in order to quest in faithfulness toward that oneness to which we are all called on Easter Morn.

What about the church in our houses, in the houses of those who are called to be priests and prophets, pastors and practitioners of holy things? How do we break out of the routines of gathering data to dispense to others and claim insight that becomes resources for our own religious fidelity, our own spiritual survival? As we have gone and will continue to go our separate ways, touching and being touched now and again by other lives and ministries, returning to or finding each other along the way, where do we turn for discovery, recovery, restoration? Where do we find the shade from the heat of having to “pull it off” every Lenten Season, bring not just “knowledge” but *wisdom* to every Maundy Thursday, peel the insularity from every Good Friday, rise refreshed and eager every Resurrection Morn?

Let me advance a very simple statement. We can become vulnerable “one more time” to grace, to the grace that intrudes even into our own houses; to a “presence” that will not let *us* go; to a “good word” that is still “Good News” *for* us and not just *through* us to “them.” Believing fully, along with you, that the Bible is indeed a narrative of incredible worth and vitality, that it is a story that still moves us to depths of our own being as persons, it helps me every now and again to listen for myself.

“wounded for *our* transgressions . . . bruised for our iniquities . . . borne *our* grief . . . carried *our* sorrows . . . by whose stripes *we* are healed . . . upon that One was the chastisement that made *us* whole . . . !!”

Those are the astounding reminders as to the terrifying risks God was/is/will forever be willing to love *us*, not always just “them”—a love given with no assurance that “they” then or “we” now would/will even notice. Those are the clear evidences of a God who intends to get us out of Egypt and intends to get Egypt out of us. These are those luminous gems in our darkness that are gifts to our house and to the Church within it to free us at last. Great God A’mighty! Lo and behold, we are set apart not just to dispense grace but to receive it!

Suddenly, Maundy Thursday looms large. We've got Communion to do. The elders had better all show up. The bread had better be prepared and whacked into the appropriate itty-bitsy pieces. We had better have no "interlopers." What do we do if there are? On the other hand, we have got a chance not to trivialize or be trivialized. That bread snap and that wine splash is sufficient for all our days. "Adequate comprehension" is no longer sufficient for me to bar anyone from the Table. Who of us can really comprehend grace or accept finally a gift merely as "given?"—perhaps the children among us better than any. The Orthodox priest, placing wine on thumb and placing it in the mouth of a suckling infant is onto something more profound and responsible than we, who, in our tradition, posture as if "to know" is requirement to "experience" a gift, first given to twelve folk, each of whom thought Jesus believed that he was that one who was the betrayer! It is a new day in the life of the soul when we are far more moved by who is to be included in that moment than being often obsessed with who should be excluded. Ways open in the wilderness and rivers do flow in the desert. We are called to Oneness! "Emmanuel" joins us at table there, here, over yonder and the Kingdom breaks in upon us, for us, with us. We even are linked with all "the saints who from their labors rest" and we are rested in grace.

We, as humans beings, cannot talk about "oneness" without also dealing frontally with language. Language still remains the currency of human evaluation. I have been saddened by how lightly many of us deal with that reality. Is it not far better theology to refer to God as God than as "He?" "She" doesn't cut it either but it is a declaration of who will no longer be excluded from our sloppy address, even when "tradition" is on "our" side. The amazing mystery of the Gospel is its serious commitments to inclusiveness, vulnerable to the bungling minds of even its best chroniclers. Christian nurture inevitably has been borne in the lives and words of women amid all night vigils and sides of family and friends, Sunday school rooms, around session tables, by new colleagues at ordination services where they, too, were being ordained as women of faith and competence who remained and remain faithful even when male language exclude, mostly unintentional, and because of that "unthinkingness," even more hurtful. "Inclusive language" is no mere fad, no mere band-wagon matter. It has to do with a call to oneness. Inclusive language deals openly with ways in the wilderness and rivers appearing in the desert of human exclusion.

We best rethink how we pray and preach, pastor and administer. Who was excluded last week? Who would have felt excluded this Easter morn had we not checked ourselves? It is not an issue of allowing someone, some "movement," some editorial board to invade our right to speak. Rather, it is a matter that calls us to oneness to insure that we do not violate some other person's rights by the way we speak. I would always prefer at least to have tried to be inclusive substantively than to be known as one who would never be willing to do other than exclude because of some "generic rhetoric" that rings with hollow justification. I know you share that wish with me, but we best be getting on with it. Easters really do occur not just for "them" but for "us," too. "In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. The same was in the beginning with God. All things were made by God and without God

was not anything made that was made. In God was life and life was the light sufficient for us all.”

Confident that, in oneness, we will be ways in the wilderness and rivers in the deserts in God’s good name, know that the Church in our house sends affectionate greetings to the Church in yours amid this Lenten Season, 1979.