



The New England Church Pulpit

New England Congregational Church UCC
Aurora Illinois

A BACKSTAGE VIEW OF EASTER

April 27, 2014

John 20.19-23

On the evening of that first day of the week, when the disciples were together, with the doors locked for fear of the authorities, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you!" After he said this, he showed them his hands and side. The disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord. Again Jesus said, "Peace be with you! As God has sent me, I am sending you." And with that he breathed on them and said, "Receive the holy spirit. If you forgive anyone their sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven."

Qur'an 5

*In the Name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful
Believers, be true to your obligations. Do not allow your hatred for those who would debar you from the Holy Place to lead you into sin. Help one another in what is good and pious, not in what is wicked and sinful. We laid it down for the Israelites that whoever killed a human being, except as punishment for murder or other villainy in the land, shall be regarded as having killed all mankind; and that whoever saved a human life shall be regarded as having saved all mankind.*

Shakespeare said:

All the world's a stage, And all the men and women merely players. They have their exits and their entrances; And one man in his time plays many parts... (As You Like It)

In Michael Frayn's play 'Noises Off' the audience sees a play from two perspectives. The first act gives us a view of the storyline of the play within this play, and we see various people coming and going in the living room of the house. We hear the director stopping and starting, props being rearranged to better fit the blocking, and things, for the most part, seem smooth and the play is on its way to an exciting performance.

The second half of the play, however, is spent viewing the performance from backstage. The set is turned around, so we now see what happens when the actors are OFF stage and the audience sees what goes on—or what doesn't go on—as the actors go on and off the set during the performance. Missed cues, misplaced anchovies, an alcoholic gardener who keeps a supply in various places backstage, all play a part in the play's failure to come off smoothly, at least from the perspective of those in it.

Knowing what it's supposed to look like from the front view, we now see what really happens when things get mixed up behind the scene. We realize that what goes on *backstage* influences what happens *on stage*.

In this account from John's gospel, we get a little peek into the backstage room where the disciples are cloistered. We get a snippet of their confusion, their fear and their grief that sits alongside their elation at this encounter with Jesus. He's obviously in a form quite unlike any other; he comes into the room unseen, through locked doors, and yet isn't a ghost. It's a rather surreal story that pulls back the curtain for a quick glimpse into something of what's going on behind the scenes as they try to make sense of it all. They had all witnessed Jesus' death; they'd heard resurrection rumors. They've gathered behind closed, locked doors fearful that those who had murdered Jesus were now looking for those who were his followers. Here's the nucleus of what would eventually become a new world religion huddled in the corner of a little room shaking in their boots.

But Jesus doesn't let them wallow in their fear and trembling for long. He offers them peace, and then reminds them that as human beings they have the power to create heaven or hell on earth. "If you forgive anyone, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive, they are not forgiven." This is the backstage pep talk that compels them—and ultimately us—to act out what it means to bring the kingdom of God to the world when we are on stage, at work, at school, in our homes.

Garrison Keillor said, "We always have a backstage view of ourselves." We let people see only the neatly arranged stage, but behind the curtain all kinds of things are lying around: old failures, hurts, guilt, disappointments, anger, our fears, our disbelief, our pessimism, our wounds.

The interior of our lives—that backstage that is our mind and heart, our attitude, our perspective, our history, our goals—is an important place for people of faith. It is here that we rehearse the lines we portray on the daily stage at work, at home, in the neighborhood, among friends. This is why we come to church, I think, to learn what it is we are about, who we are in God's kingdom, who everyone is in God's kingdom, rehearsing our lines with one another so we can take it on the stage the rest of the week. If what happens here stays here, it serves no purpose. Here we sensitize ourselves to the cares and quirks of life so we can be better actors in portraying the kingdom of God when we leave here.

I have a friend whose two sons were vastly different in their potential. One was quicker of wit, brighter in school, a better athlete and a compliant child. The other was slower to catch on to things, often unruly, acting out in order to get attention. Their dad had the power to help them both find their way in life, even with different skillsets. The brighter son was always affirmed and encouraged in what he did; and he grew into a well-adjusted young man. The other son was often belittled, described as stupid and dumb in the presence of others even while the child was right there beside him. Not surprisingly, that child has grown up with serious dysfunction and low self-esteem. What we forgive is forgiven, and what we don't forgive isn't. What was rehearsed backstage at home for those years ultimately had effect on those boys on their life's stage for years to come.

The great cellist Pablo Casals wrote this:

Each second we live is a new and unique moment of the universe, a moment that will never be again. And what do we teach our children? We teach them that two and two make four and that Paris is the capital of France. When will we also teach them who they are? We should tell them they are a marvel, that they are unique, that in all the world there will never be another child like you. You may become Shakespeare, a Michelangelo, a Beethoven. You have the capacity for anything. And of course, this applies to how we treat adults as well.

Fear and angst are natural. Prejudice and bias are natural human tendencies. The danger comes in wallowing in our fear, feeding on our angst, harboring our prejudices and nursing our angers. What we do in the interior of our mind and heart influences what we portray on the stage of daily life. It is difficult to be truly inclusive of people who are poor if backstage we rehearse script that poor means lazy. Without adequately preparing our role as agents of love, we merely patronize the poor. If we learn the lines of ourselves as the top of the food chain, we treat the earth and its natural resources as mere things to serve our purpose. When we practice backstage in our mind what it means to be successful at all costs, we take advantage on the stage of life anyone who will help us serve our purpose. We enslave, we coerce, we manipulate, we connive rather than forgive and encourage as the kingdom of God is scripted.

Jesus said that attitude counts. His followers were locked up in a room backstage, afraid of what would happen to them if they ventured out. Jesus joins them there, empowers them with peace, and pushes them on stage with a script of peace and justice to all the players of life's drama. And what he says to them, he says to us: feed the hungry, empower the powerless, affirm the timid, uplift the downtrodden, invite those relegated to the wings by society onto the main stage to play out the life God has given to each. Amen.

–Gary L. McCann

PASTORAL PRAYER

Eternal Spirit, whom the heaven of heavens cannot contain, much less these temples of stone and wood which our hands build, but whose holy spirit dwells within our human spirit, we come to focus our thoughts on your eternal values. From the violence and turmoil of our world, from the confusion of our too-busy lives, and from the anxiety of coping with matters beyond our control, we come for an hour of tranquility, of prayer, of singing and praying. Meet us in this room that we may encounter your peace in a way that will transform us, even if only in part and for a brief time.

Today we pray you to lift us above the immediate and set us in the wider horizons of the eternal. It is easy to grow accustomed to the ugliness of life; it is easy to become complacent to the tragedies of each day; it is sometimes our best coping mechanism to just shut down due to the overload of bad news on the television and world-wide atrocities in the newspapers. As people of faith we want to be part of the healing, and we pray you to empower us to overcome complacent minds and apathetic hearts so we may serve.

Center our lives on faith instead of fear. While fear is often justified and the natural reaction of the human spirit to the unknown, faith is the only conqueror of the fear that so easily numbs our souls. May those of us who have come here with dark foreboding go out with faith renewed and spirits empowered to overcome.

Make us mindful of the natural resources of our world, to conserve them wisely for the health of the planet. We lay before you with solemn prayer the sorry state of our world today, its violence and uproar, its trust in force, its menace of war. In the Ukraine and around the world, we pray for peace. On this historic day, when two Pontiffs of the Roman Catholic Church are being canonized, we remember their commitment to peace and the welfare of humanity. It is by faith that we offer up ourselves and our resources for that which may never be achieved in our lifetime, believing that in some lifetime, peace will be the order of the day.

To that end we vow to be peacemakers and healers whenever the situation demands. May we reach out to those who are ill, to those who are grieving, to those who are homebound, to those dealing with mental illness, to those dealing with physical challenges, to those with special needs, to those whose lives are made difficult by prejudice, and to those for whom liberty and justice has not been an option. Wing your way to them through us.

Lead us today in your love. In the name of the Christ, Amen.

(Based on a prayer by Harry Emerson Fosdick of Riverside Church, New York City)