

May 6, 2012

## **The Fifth Sunday of Easter**

1 John 4:7-21; John 15:1-8

All Saints' Episcopal Church, Atlanta, Georgia

*The Rev'd Geoffrey M. St.J. Hoare, rector*

### **Why Can't We All Just Get Along?**

You might have noticed this week that it has been twenty years since Rodney King was beaten brutally by the Los Angeles Police department. A jury's acquittal of the officers caught on videotape led to major riots and fifty-three deaths in Los Angeles and smaller riots elsewhere, including Atlanta. On May 1<sup>st</sup>, 1992 in the midst of the riots, King, the victim, asked "Why can't we all just get along?" Today we are more likely to ask that question with respect to religious or political conflict, but it carries the same recognition that we live in a world of deep disagreement around how we should live, what is best for us and for others, what is moral and expected and so on. *The New Yorker* magazine frequently gets at truths about us and our world through cartoons. Maybe you saw the one in which a man is speaking to his son while his mother sits frostily across the room with her arms folded. The father is saying "Your mother and I are separating because I want what's best for the country and your mother doesn't."

We crave civilized conversation, especially in our national life, but we keep running up against different and competing visions of how the world should work. I hope that here we agree that God is love. More than that, we largely agree that such love is made manifest in Jesus as self-giving love. The writer of First John calls that being "the atoning sacrifice for our sins." It is the kind of love that is a choice as much as a feeling, -effective love, that brings all of creation into right relationship in God. It is the nature of God to be in relationship. That is what God is, and that relationship is revealed as this effective, expansive, inclusive, generative, fecund love that brings universes into being. But still we disagree with one another over what is truly loving in any given set of circumstances.

There are a number of books around today that talk about how we make intuitive choices and snap judgments and that in many cases we are primed to do so. One of these books is by Jonathan Haidt, a professor of psychology at the University of Virginia. His fascinating book is called *The Righteous Mind* with a subtitle of *Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion*<sup>1</sup>. Consider your immediate emotional reaction to words like 'bacon'. Now try 'diaper'. Or how about 'tulip'? What Haidt does is recognize that intuitive emotional response but asks his subjects to consider two words and then categorize only the second one as good or bad. Here we go: 'flower-happiness'. That is easy, right? So is 'cockroach-lonely'. But it gets slightly more complicated and takes us a bit longer to categorize words with a different 'prime'. Try: 'love-cancer' ... or ...'hate-sunshine'. You get the idea. We are shaped by our circumstance. Reason plays a role in our decisions, if only to justify our instincts. Watch the rational contortions that

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<sup>1</sup> (Pantheon, New York, 2012)

opponents of gay marriage have to undergo trying to make the case that it undermines traditional family values. Things get really complicated for all of us when we know something in our bellies or our hearts to be just plumb wrong or we know that something the society around us disapproves really should be OK. Reason is not the driver in many of our fundamental decisions about how the world is meant to be and our disagreements can become pretty vitriolic when we sense that something fundamental is under attack even if we can't express it rationally.

Haidt's book is fascinating and I can't do justice to its many implications in a sermon about love, but he wants us to expand our ability to engage in moral discourse by recognizing a variety of moral values that we develop over time and in relation to circumstance. And then he wants us to band together to accomplish good things without the vitriol that flows from pushing fundamental buttons in us about what is fair and who has power and what is sacred. What he wants, it seems to me, is people who go to church and who think about what it means to love and to put their ideas into practice. In fact he says: "We humans have an extraordinary ability to care about things beyond ourselves, to circle around those things with other people, and in the process bind ourselves into teams that can pursue larger projects. That's what religion is all about. And with just a few adjustments, it's what politics is about too."<sup>2</sup>

Here, we talk about the *practice* of religion. We practice generosity. We practice prayer. We practice self-denial. Worship is a practice of remembering and being shaped by what is of ultimate worth. And increasingly we practice recognizing, understanding and even appreciating difference. We do this in part by placing ourselves in circumstances like a small group for discussion or Bible Study or a really foreign situation for us which might be the Midtown Assistance Center or it might be Tanzania or Brazil. We hear one another's stories and then allow discussion to be shaped by the deepest concerns revealed in those stories about what is fair and unfair, what is restrictive and damaging and what is sustaining to a community. I continue to think that our friends in Tanzania would be strengthened in all kinds of ways if they could figure out how to unleash the power of women through allowing less rigidity in their roles. But at the same time I recognize that what look like fairly rigid gender role-expectations also serve to bind the community in ways that help them respond to continual crises like drought and famine which seem to afflict them with great regularity. I'm glad I live here and have no need to impose my values, but wonder what kind of difference our short exchanges and longer term relationships can make in the big picture. Titus Pressler is a respected authority on mission and world Christianity in our church who has written a book called *Going Global with God*<sup>3</sup> in which he suggests that mission is really *mission into difference*. At home or abroad, this practice of mission into difference involves hearing the deep stories that another has to tell and engaging the conversation around the fundamental concerns that arise for everyone involved.

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<sup>2</sup> Haidt p. 273

<sup>3</sup> Titus Leonard Pressler, *Going Global with God: Reconciling Mission in a World of Difference* (Morehouse, 2010)

A liberal might talk about concern for victims and equal opportunity, while a conservative might respond by talking about personal responsibility and fairness as less about equality and more about proportionality. Surely there is common ground to be found in a country where the extremes seem to be moving further apart and congress seems less a place for conversation, deliberation and good government and more a place for tribal warfare. I'm asking "can't we all just get along?" And I'm answering, yes we can as long as people of faith practice doing so and serving as a leaven in the world. "Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another...We love because first God loved us... The commandment we have from God is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also."

In a brief time of silence for prayer, I invite you to begin the work of identifying where you practice mission in ways that allow you to hear the deep narratives of others and to share your own. And if you can't identify some such place in your life, ask God to lead you for your own sake and for the sake of the world. In silence and in response to the gospel, let us pray....