

Sunday, March 16, 2025
The Second Sunday In Lent

Solemn Eucharist
11:00 am

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A Sermon by
The Rev. Dr. Luigi Gioia

on
Luke 13:31-35

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What Makes Us Neighbors

You know an advert is effective when you remember it even decades later! Now, if you visited London in 2008 you might have run into buses that sported an intriguing and catchy sentence: “There’s probably no God. Now stop worrying and enjoy your life.” By that time I had become familiar with the wave of so-called *New Atheism* and with his main advocate, the evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins. Dawkins was a fellow of New College at Oxford during my time there and ubiquitous in debates at the University and on TV. It looked as if his views were winning the day. In those years, a buoyant and almost messianic mood was still propelling secular liberalism in the aftermath of the fall of the Berlin Wall – and before the reality check of the 2008 financial crash that triggered the descent into the era of populism, bigotry, and authoritarianism that is depressingly in full display under our eyes right now. I know very few people who would readily buy such a gullible invitation to “stop worrying and enjoy your life” today!

The *Atheist Bus Campaign* was not the first time that Christianity had been decried as a killjoy (literally!) and that clever slogans were deployed to break the pernicious hold of belief in God on weak minds. Nor was the first time that such attempts came to nothing. To the vexation of its detractors, the constant feature of Christianity has been that the more you vilify it, the more people seem to be drawn towards it.

There are many explanations for this resilience but one of the most compelling I came across recently is passionately argued by Francis Spufford in his book *Unapologetic: Why, Despite Everything, Christianity Can Still Make Surprising Emotional Sense* (a mouthful I know!). Spufford’s argument is quite simple: take God out of the equation and people not only do not stop worrying but become more anxious, restless, and aimless. Take God out of equation and people find that life does not bring you just enjoyment – that there still remains guilt, sadness, fear, and inevitably at some point pain, loss, and grief.

“The implication of the bus slogan –Spufford says– is that enjoyment would be your natural state if you weren’t being “worried” by us believers”. In reality, like all forms of advertising, such a slogan want you to embrace “a picture of human life in which the pieces of living where easy enjoyment is more likely become the only pieces that are visible. You’d think, if you based your knowledge of the human species

exclusively on adverts, that the normal condition of humanity was to be a good-looking single between twenty and thirty-five, with excellent muscle definition and/or an excellent figure, and a large disposable income [...] that the center of gravity of the human race, our default condition, is to be young, buff and available". (8f.)

In the wake of Nietzsche many have argued that Christianity is a religion for weak people – that is people who are drawn to faith in God as a way of coping with worry and anxiety and of finding neat answers to the problem of suffering and evil.

Anyone who *really* believes in the God of Jesus Christ though knows that faith does not give us compelling explanations to the questions of suffering and evil, nor erases sadness, anxiety, and grief from our life with magical thinking about a God who intervenes to fix our problems with miracles in this life or reward in the life to come.

The reason for Christianity's enduring appeal is precisely the contrary: it is the seriousness with which it embraces both positive and negative emotions and provides us with words and narratives that fully acknowledge and honor every aspect of *this* life. Even a cursory acquaintance with the book of Psalms, for example, will persuade you of this: in the Psalms you find enjoyment and sadness, love and hatred, despair and hope, praise and complaint, dejection and wonder, belief and doubt about God, and much more.

Spufford would say that Christianity is so remarkably resilient not because it is compelling rationally, but because it makes sense *emotionally*, unlike the sanitized version of humanity on display in social media – and on long gone Atheist bus advertising.

Enter now one of the first detractors of the Christian message, the Pharisees of today's Gospel. We see them warning Jesus that Herod wants to kill him and receiving this cryptic reply in return: "I am casting out demons and performing cures today and tomorrow, and on the third day I finish my work". (Luke 13.32)

In this vignette, Herod epitomizes the exclusive worldly pursuit of enjoyment and power that cannot stand the 'prophet' who instead moves the spotlight on those who cannot enjoy themselves because they are poor, sick, in need – or are battling with their demons, which I take as a metaphor for everything in our lives that we are keen to hide from view, or use as a pretext to scapegoat certain categories of people, dehumanize them, keep them in chains, erase them from spaces of respectability.

Like the prophets of the Old Testament, Jesus is a threat and has to be killed because he won't shut up about the blind spots of social norms of propriety, the hypocrisy of a religion that honours the Sabbath and dishonors the covenant. The most intolerable aspect of his teaching is his reminder that the commitment to love and worship God means caring for our neighbors, especially those in need, and seeking first and foremost the justice of the Kingdom.

In his sermon last week, Fr Carl invited us to begin our Lenten journey by starting "with ourselves; by examining who we are and where we are going" and in "so doing, deepen our self-awareness". And, in relation to those who are less fortunate, he acknowledged that like every one of us here "I am someone who does not have to worry about being cold, or hungry, or being ill, or feeling unsafe. If I do not reflect on my own pretense and my own masks, I cannot change the power differential between me and those who are not guests but neighbors and, therefore, essential to my community".

‘Changing the power differential’ is at the core of the Christian message –think only of Mary’s *Magnificat*. Jesus’ preaching and action unmask our pretenses, chief among them the fantasy that life can be about “stop worrying and enjoying ourselves”.

When –still Spufford speaking– the atheist bus comes by, and tells you that there’s probably no God so you should stop worrying and enjoy your life, the slogan is not just bitterly inappropriate in mood. What it means, if it’s true, is that anyone who isn’t enjoying themselves is entirely on their own. (11)

One of the reasons why I am getting tired of Instagram is that it tends to present this manicured version of people’s lives that is about checking all the boxes of things to be enjoyed – everyone should look like a model, always be on holiday somewhere, smiling, thriving, surrounded by friends. Those who do not have anything to show for are left out – in the Instagram world they not exist, other than maybe as envious anonymous profiles with no posts and whose only function is to increase the number of followers of those who are better at pretending.

At Saint Thomas we started our social outreach program well before we found a name for it, and I think this was a blessing. It means that we tried to learn what we were supposed to be not from a program, a name, a slogan, but from experience. A group of about 20 of our parishioners started to volunteer on Mondays and Wednesdays at the meal distribution program *A Place At The Table* at Fifth Presbyterian. After few months we felt that the time was right to start a program here at Saint Thomas and we needed a name for it. I do not remember who suggested the name *Neighbor to Neighbor* first, but I know that as soon as it came into the picture everyone immediately loved it.

Every name that suggested the idea of *us* helping *others in need* was yet another way of distancing those who can pretend they are ‘enjoying their lives’ from those who can’t (pretend) – thus perpetuating illusions about ourselves and caricatures about others.

We do not unmask the power differential by feeling guilty about what is good in our lives. Joy, safety, comfort, health, flourishing are the things God wants for *every* human person and they are not spread by resenting ourselves for having them more than others do.

Our advantages in life cease to be a ‘power’ and to make us feel ‘different’, entitled, or patronizing when, as Fr Carl reminded us, we are honest and lucid about ourselves – and find value and worth not only in the shining side of our lives, but also at the valuable school of our failures, our frustrations, and our losses. More than any positive achievement in our lives, it is these shortcomings that teach us to be human, compassionate, and humble.

This in turn completely changes the way in which we meet the shortcomings, deprivation and needs of our neighbors.

We become aware that it is *our shared frailty, our shared failings, our shared regrets*, that truly make us ‘neighbors’. There is no ‘power differential’ in there.

There is no ‘us’ and ‘them’ when it comes to our need of Jesus’ healing.

There is no ‘us’ and ‘them’ when it comes to our need of Jesus’ power to exorcise our demons, unmask our pretenses.

Only then we will learn to find value, beauty, and meaning in our neighbors' losses and ours – only then our social outreach will become neighbors meeting neighbors, *Neighbor to Neighbor*.
