Fourth Sunday of the Year, Cycle B

Old St. Pats, 2021

While it might not be kosher to admit it publicly

and as much as I usually agree with his content

although not always his approach

I need to take exception to the wisdom from St. Paul today

Especially when it comes to the topic of anxiety.

In Paul’s world view, admittedly not mine,

He presumes that the unmarried are only anxious

about the things of the Lord,

while the married are anxious

about the things of the world.

I have spent a lot of time around the unmarried

Especially clergy and religious,

Who are appropriately anxious

about all sorts of things of the world, e.g.,

about keeping a parish afloat during a pandemic.

Conversely, I know many married folk

Who juggling work and life

Finances and family

Have deep concern about the things of the Lord.

No matter whether the source of our anxiety

Is our prayer life, property tax

or just putting food on the table

Living with stress is not good for body or spirit.

The celebrated neuro-endocrinologist Robert Sapolsky

Has a funny yet informative book on the topic

Aptly entitled *Why Zebras don’t get Ulcers.*

If you want the abridged version

Watch the YouTube of Sapolsky lecturing on the topic

at the University of Illinois in 2017.[[1]](#endnote-1)

Backed by formidable research including over 25 years

observing primates and their zebra colleagues in Africa

Sapolsky demonstrates that some stress is not only good

but necessary, e.g., when being chased by a lion.

Stress kicks the body into high gear

Prioritizes what instincts to take over

And increases our chances for success in fleeing danger.

What is not useful, however,

is human’s evolved capacity

for long term psychological fretting

About non-physical threats,

About possibilities, misgivings, or suspicions

which take not just a psychological but a physical toll.

Psychological stress is a documentable contributor to disease

including diabetes, heart problems and even cancer.

Today’s readings, like today’s world,

Point to various sources of anxiety.

In particular they raise questions around issues of trustworthiness

of authenticity

and the enduring question

about whom to invest with authority.

In today’s segment from the book of Deuteronomy

Moses the stuttering whom God invested with authority

Reminds his listeners that God will raise up prophets

Whose words must be heeded

With the additional warning that anyone

Who dares to speak for God falsely

Will suffer a terrible fate.

A key problem with this short passage, however,

Is that it does not provide any criteria for judging

Who is of God and who is not

Except if someone happens to keel over dead

In the middle of a prophecy:

Not a criterion most of us would like to apply

Certainly not I in the midst of this preaching!

In today’s gospel Jesus is at least momentarily invested with authority

after his nifty exorcism in a Galilean synagogue

which could be a pretty good reason

for affirming another’s power.

Ironically enough, however,

many eventually tried to divest Jesus of authority

And many more never made the investment in the first place.

I personally have never witnessed

Such a dramatic or effective exorcism,

Though I have often wished for one.

If you have, please email the details to me.

So in the absence of sensational demon expulsion,

how do we decide not only how or when to empower another

But also when and how to authorize ourselves

As proclaimers of God’s Word?

While it could jeopardize the possibility

Of some of you investing any authority in my preaching

Especially on the cusp of Superbowl 55

I have to admit that I am not much of a sports fan.

Oh, I have a Cubs’ t-shirt – a gift from a relative

And a Bear’s sweatshirt – a gift from a relative

And a Tiger Woods’ baseball cap – a gift from a relative

And Blackhawk’s sweats: Now in unison –

“a gift from a relative” … like a family responsorial psalm.

Nonetheless I have virtually no passion

for following any competitive sports team …

even though I’m a triple Domer

and a card-carrying alum of Notre Dame.

That doesn’t mean I think sports are unimportant

Which is why I try to keep up on the latest sports news

A topic so important for so many.

It is also a prominent arena

In which millions of folk invest their time and finances

And by extension provide empowerment:

For coaches, teams, schools and specially star athletes.

And from time to time,

It also provides some guidance on criteria

for anointing groups and individuals

as worthy of our trust and energy.

As real baseball fans know, this past week

For the first time since 2013

the Baseball Writers Association of American

did not elect anyone to the baseball hall of fame.

It was notable that three of the folks not elected,

In their 9th of 10 years of eligibility,

were Kurt Schilling, Barry Bonds and Roger Clemens.

As widely reported in the media

contributing factors to that outcome

were the many demeaning comments of Schiller,

belittling folk because of race or gender,

and for Bonds and Clemens

the wide-ranging charges that both used

performance enhancing drugs

intimating that they were professional cheats.

I looked up the rules of voting for the hall of fame last week

They include this instruction:

Voting shall be based upon

The player’s record

Playing ability

Integrity

Sportsmanship

Character

And team contributions.

I wonder if we can borrow those as at least a partial list

Of criteria for discipleship and our own authoritative role

As proclaimers of God’s Word?

Besides this baseball drama playing out this past week

More prominent is the current race to Superbowl 55.

One of the more highly anticipated matchups in that race

Was the game between the Buccaneers and the Saints

Featuring two of the most celebrated quarterbacks

In the history of the game.

It is old news that the Buccaneers vanquished the Saints

and subsequently the Packers

so are on their way to the Super Bowl.

What was enlightening for to me, however,

Was the viral YouTube clip of a simple exchange

That occurred after the Bucs beat the Saints.

By almost every standard Drew Brees is a first-class act

The 2010 sportsman of the year

Making multiple USO tours, a true philanthropist,

Committed to a city devasted by Hurricane Katrina

As evidenced by many huge donations

including recent $5 million gift for pandemic relief.

As a committed Christian his creed is his four “f’s”:

Faith, family, football and philanthropy.

There is wide speculation that Drew Brees is about to retire.

After his loss to the Bucs a camera caught him

back out on the field with his wife and 4 kids

After the stadium had emptied

maybe soaking in his final moments as a player.

In the midst of this symbolic last dance

The opposing quarterback, Tom Brady,

Without fanfare or display

Quietly came onto the field.

He hugged Drew, Drew’s wife,

Shared a quiet moment of mutual respect

And when Drew’s oldest boy, Baylen,

Approached Brady with a football

The six-time super bowl champ

Tossed a perfect dime pass to the boy

(I had to look that one up)[[2]](#endnote-2)

Right into the corner of the endzone,

With the compliment “we could have used you tonight.”

And as he quietly left the field, he high-fived the kids

And told the three sons “be nice to your sister.”

There has been an unfortunate trend,

In our country, in our schools, in business

And even in our churches

To allow power to be ceded to the loudest,

To hand authority to self-authorized bullies.

Maybe gentlemen quarterbacks suggest another option.

While it is sometimes thought to be an urban legend

The Director of National Intelligence confirmed its veracity

In an official speech, when he reported:

There’s a party talking to a ship at sea that says, “Ship at sea, please divert your course 15 degrees to the south to avoid a collision.” The response was, “Recommend you divert your course 15 degrees to the north to avoid a collision.” The first party responds, “Sorry, sir, but you will have to divert your course 15 degrees to the south to avoid a collision.” The answering party says, “This is the captain of a United States naval ship. I say again, divert your course.” The first party says, “Pardon me sir, you must divert your course.” Now the American ship says, “This is an American aircraft carrier, the second largest ship in the United States fleet. We are accompanied by three destroyers, three cruisers, numerous support vessels. I demand that you change your course 15 degrees north. I say again, that is 1-5 degrees north or counter-measures will be taken. Do you understand?” The response was, “Dear Captain, the next move is your call. This is a Canadian lighthouse.”[[3]](#endnote-3)

Decades ago the celebrated psychologist, Carl Rogers (d. 1987),

Identified three core conditions[[4]](#endnote-4)

That a client needs in order for their therapy to be effective.

They have been consistently embraced.

I learned them 50 years ago as

empathy, genuineness and respect.

Pushy, belligerent and self-serving never made the list.

Jesus of Nazareth was no push over

But he was no bully either …

His core message was love

His continued witness was care

His ultimate act was total self giving.

It would be difficult to imagine a more incarnate version

of empathy, genuineness and respect in human history.

Jesus not only spoke God’s saving Word

But was revealed as that Word eternally.

In these days of too much distorted speech

And a bewildering chorus of voices claiming

personal license, religious warrants and societal power

and as we grow together in discerning

who truly speaks a holy word,

who embodies spirit driven empathy, genuineness and respect

and who is worthy of being invested with an authority

Resonant with that of the Christ,

And as we grow in our baptismal call

as chrismated as prophets

commissioned to announce in word and deed

The Good news in Jesus Christ,

We pray for the same Spirit

that guided Jesus

that anointed Jesus

that authorized Jesus …

That accompanied him on Golgotha

That rested with him in the tomb

And that raised him up on the third day …

So that, as the psalmist prays,

No hearts are hardened

But instead are only rendered supple and open and wise,

Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

1. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D9H9qTdserM [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Technically a “dime” is a pass that travels at least 30 yards in the air and fits into windows of one yard or less. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. <https://www.dni.gov/files/documents/Newsroom/Speeches%20and%20Interviews/20080312_speech.pdf> [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Carl Rogers, “The Necessity and sufficient conditions of therapeutic personality change,” *Journal of Consulting Psychology* 21:2 (1957) 95-103. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)