Nineteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time, Cycle C

St. Mary’s, 2022

A number of years ago

 there was a paper circulating around theological faculties

* including my own

with the provocative title, “Why God did not get tenure.”

 it was pretty amusing

 at least for any who have endured the tenure process.

Among the purported reasons that God did not get tenure were:

1. He only wrote one book;
2. It had no footnotes;
3. Some doubted that he wrote it by himself;
4. The scientific community could never replicate God’s results, as in the creation story;
5. God rarely came to class, telling his students: read the book;
6. Often God had his untenured Son teach class in his place.

In a similar but more-timely vein

 this past week an analogous list has been circulating

 delineating why Jesus could never win a political election.

Included in those reasons were:

1. His ludicrous views on nonviolence that render him unpalatable to national security voters in all parties;
2. That he provided free health care so must be a socialist;
3. He undermined family fishing businesses by recruiting labor out of the work force, so is an enemy of small business;
4. He was not particularly available to the wealthy or powerful, spending too much time with illegal aliens and unregistered voters;
5. He rebuked a follower for using a concealed weapon to defend him in the garden of Gethsemane, revealing his weakness on the 2nd amendment and inability to get an NRA endorsement;
6. And, He was more interested in the kingdom of God than the good old U.S. of A.

I not only agree that Jesus would never be elected

 To statewide office, congress,

the senate and especially president

 but also, that he would be supremely unqualified for the job

especially because of his broad and inclusive commitment

to God’s reign.

Admittedly today’s readings do not seem much focused on God’s reign

 and appear see more like virtually impossible instructions

for would be disciples, such as:

 sell all your belongings,

 give them all to the poor,

 and live on high alert for God’s imminent appearance.

 However, reducing today’s readings

to an unrealistic checklist for future apostolic recruits

could be just a pretext

 for not taking today’s readings seriously.

If we reduce God’s Words to a series

 of utterly preposterous instructions for becoming disciples

 then it is easy to dismiss and ignore such a Word.

 What happens, however, if instead of dismissing the readings

 as outrageous requirements for reluctant disciples,

 we read them, instead,

as insights into the very nature of Jesus?

 Suddenly all of those images and teachings about “faith”

 enumerated in the reading from Hebrews

 not only illustrate the virtues of Abraham

 but also, of Jesus

 who similarly was “as good as dead,”

 but from whom came forth spiritual descendants

 as numerous as the stars in the sky.

 Likewise, all of those Gospel directives

 about having no wealth.

 about giving everything you have away,

 about living every minute as though God,

 might momentarily burst onto the scene,

 all start to take on an air of realism

 because they perfectly describe the Son of God

 who had no earthly treasure

 not even a place to lay his head

 and constantly thrived in the presence of God.

There is an obvious problem in pursuing this thinking, however,

for if you now are prone to believe that today’s readings

are more descriptions of the exceptional Jesus

rather than unrealistic expectations

for his very unexceptional followers …

 you might be wondering,

 why we read them at all?

 Do they have anything to do with us

 other than awe or embarrass us

 in the presence of this amazing Christ?

In order to dig myself out of this homiletic hole

 I need to make a small excursion away from the readings

into an insight from a brilliant colleague[[1]](#footnote-1)

who works at the intersection of theology and the sciences.

This colleague introduced me to the work of [Allan Schore](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lY7XOu0yi-E)

 a psychologist who studies brain development in children

 especially during the first few months of life.

Schore describes the life of a newborn as somewhat chaotic,

filled with unformed feelings and new sensations,

made more complex because they lack

any verbal comprehension of their world.

The role of the nurturing parent, according to Shore,

is to mirror the infant’s inner emotional life

– the excitement, pain, joy, sadness –

and give these emotions both verbal and physical expression

 on the child’s behalf.

 We’ve all done or at least observed his process:

 holding and comforting a child when crying or startled

 patting their bottoms and making sympathetic sounds

 singing your equivalent of “Soft Kitty,”

 manufacturing those foolish baby sounds and faces

 when playing peek-a-boo

 or improvising airplane noises

 as you try to fly the pureed peas

 into the unsuspecting mouth of a 6-month-old.

 According to Shore, the nurturing parent [or celibate uncle]

 helps to strength and consolidate the child’s awareness

 of her own feelings by amplifying them often by exaggeration.

 The parent takes the chaotic and unformed feelings of the infant

 synthesizes them

and then offers them back to the child.

 In a sense, the parent is loaning the child

 the use of her more mature brain

 as the child struggles to organize her experiences.

 In the process, empirical evidence demonstrates that

the child’s brain actually changes because of this process:

 the neural bridge between

 the rational, problem-solving part of the brain

 and the emotional limbic system gets stronger.

 Patterns of attachment and security

 through nurturing and emotionally available parents

 are thus literally engineered into our brains

 and subsequently influence for the rest of our lives

our ability to relate, to trust, to be emotionally available.

The reason I make this excursion into intersubjective psychology

 limbic systems, and parenting

 is not to distract you from the homiletic hole I created for myself

 when suggesting that the readings

are more about Jesus than about us,

 but to provide a strategy for thinking about sacred texts

 proclaimed to very flawed and imperfect disciples.

that describe the flawless Son of God.

 Borrowing psychologist Shores’ model

 I suggest that, like infants, we live in a chaotic world

 a global politic of disregard and derision

filled with violence and indignities

 especially the brutalization of innocents

 indiscriminately bombed

 deprived of food and clean water

 or more genteelly subjected to discrimination

allegedly even at [Sesame Street Theme parks](https://www.forbes.com/sites/alisondurkee/2022/07/28/heres-why-sesame-street-theme-park-sesame-place-is-coming-under-fire-for-alleged-racism/?sh=7ff1b1bc1d80).

Like a nurturing parent

 today’s readings invite us to encounter a Jesus

 who, instead of offering us his pre-frontal lobe

 to give order to our chaotic emotional lives

spiritually loans us his divinely mature soul,

 his faith, his self-lessness,

 and his vision of God’s reign,

so that we, in turn, can not only reengineer

 our very plastic brains

 and change our patterns of thinking

 but maybe actually change our much less plastics hearts

 and change our patterns of living

becoming more empathic, inclusive, and vulnerable:

 spiritually evolving from distantiated

 even lethargic observers of faith

 into committed disciples forged in the image of Christ

missioned to be agents of change.

There are an increasing number of people in the world

including Christians, though that may surprise you,

who no longer believe in Jesus’ divinity.

Since all are welcome to this praying and this preaching

In person or on-line

And while respecting people’s individual belief systems

I contend that it is undeniable

that Jesus was a world class change agent:

 through his teaching

 his healing

 his preaching

 and his sustained example of a self-sacrificing life

 culminating in his self-sacrificing death.

 Jesus changed the way that countless millions, even billions

 think about God and about each other.

 By lending us soul, his vision, his word

 even his sacramental body

 he commissions us to enflesh the virtues he enfleshed,

 those gifts that our society and our city need so desperately:

 care for the marginalized and the sick

 witness against violence

 defense of the dignity of every individual

 and above all peace building

 between nations and neighborhoods

 between law officers and law-abiding citizens

 And between those of every political persuasion

 who too often believe that

 a different political opinion

 is license for uncommon hostility

 and disturbing malice.

In November of 1961, The Catalonian Maestro, Pablo Casals

 Was invited to perform in the East Wing of the Whitehouse

 For President and Mrs. Kennedy and other distinguished guests.

 Performing a program of works by

Felix Mendelssohn,

Robert Schumann

 Francois Couperin

 And even one of his own compositions.

 At the time he was 85 years old,

 widely touted as the finest cellist of the century

 and some contended among the finest of all time.

 In an interview around that performance

 he was asked by a cub reported

 why he was still practicing some 4 or 5 hours each day

 Even though he stood at the pinnacle of the musical world.

 Casals reportedly responded, “because young man,

 I think I am showing some progress.”

We pray we do as well,

 No matter what our age, no matter what our position in life

 our vocation or our state of well-being:

 we can all make continue to make some progress,

 through Christ our Lord.

1. David Hogue, “Because we are: Practical theology, intersubjectivity and the human brain,” in *Practicing Ubuntu: Practical Theological Perspectives on Injustice, Personhood and human dignity,* ed. Jaco Dreyer, Edward Foley, Malan Nel (Berlin: LIT Verlag, 2017), pp. 180-190. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)