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)