

Eighteenth Sunday In Ordinary Time
Homily For The Profession Of Sister Katherine Frazier

August 5, 2018
 Patricia Walter, OP

Exodus 16:2-4, 12-15
 Romans 12:1-13
 John 6:24-35

How many of you believe in Jesus? Do you still get hungry? Thirsty? How many of you have gone to wakes and funerals of devout believers and have heard — or sung — another of Jesus' preposterous claims: "everyone who lives and believes in me will never die" (*Jn 11:26a*)?

We live in a context of "fake news," "alternative truths," conflicting narratives, and competing truth claims. Where, in all of this, do we locate the Bible stories and try to make sense of the strange action Katherine is about to perform?

Exodus 16 gives us the first example of conflicting narratives at work. The Israelites have selective memories and freely revise their history. No more stories of slavery and oppression. Instead, back in Egypt were the good old days, when we gathered around the fleshpots, eating our fill. But **you**, Moses, **made** us leave, just to die in the desert. It's the blame game at its best.

Again God hears the people's whining and responds. But the manna, or "fine flakes," is a new phenomenon and needs interpretation, which Moses provides. It's bread *from God*.

That theme is picked up in today's passage from John's Gospel, which follows Jesus' feeding 5,000 people. According to Jesus, the reason some of those folks tracked him down was the lure of a free lunch. They missed the sign value, the "alternative truth" — better, the deeper reality of that feeding. They stopped at the marvel, at the satisfaction of being fed. But Jesus' mission was to do something even more profound. The conversation which ensues develops the identity of God and Jesus. *God* is the one who sent the manna; God is also the one who has sent Jesus, the true bread of life. Jesus is not another Moses, but the bread of *eternal* life, of God's very life. This alone will fully and finally satisfy us.

In an essay on preaching as subversion, Walter Brueggemann says: "In a culture that has learned well how to imagine — how to make sense — of the world without reference to the God of the Bible, it is the preacher's primal responsibility to invite and empower and equip the community to reimagine the world as though Yahweh were a key and decisive player." When we can make sense of everything around us with no reference to God, what the preacher, what the faith community is called to do, is to help people to see, to notice, to name, to re-imagine the world, as if God's will counted, as if God is acting, as if God counts. This is our *good* news, our truth, which is seen as fake and certainly as alternative. Preaching, Brueggemann asserts, "is a subversion. Preaching is never the dominant version, never has been. It is always a sub-version, always a version\rendering of reality that lives under the dominant version."

What can we do? In response to God's liberating the Israelites from their slavery, leading them in times of confusion and desolation, feeding them, forming a covenant with them, the Israelites became a people with a mission. In response to Jesus' healing, feeding, inspiring teaching, example, and gift of himself and of new life in the Spirit, his disciples became a people with a mission.

In response to God's action in your life, Katherine, you are today intensifying and making more specific your baptismal commitment and entering into a community with a mission, to be the Holy

Preaching, the Order of Preachers. And our preaching is that alternative reality, that alternative sub-version, that vision of God's reign and of what the world would *really* be like if God's will were done on earth as it is in heaven.

"We preachers," Brueggemann says, "are summoned to get up and utter a sub-version of reality, an alternative version of reality that says another way of life in the world is not only possible but is peculiarly mandated and peculiarly valid." Our preaching "is a sub-version, because it does indeed intend to sub-vert the dominant version and to empower a community of sub-versions who are determined practice their lives according to a different way of imagining." This is a way in which slaves are freed, refugees find a home, no one is hungry, all are part of the community, spiritual hungers are fed. It is this to which you commit yourself today, Katherine, in the context of this community.

Brueggemann continues, "[The] affirmation of abundance, rooted in the generosity of God, is deeply subversive to the deep social myth of scarcity." The affirmation of community is also subversive. The affirmation that we heard in Paul, of each of us being of great value, each of us gifted, each of us giving what we have, is indeed a sub-version of the dominant story. For the different way of imagining, the alternative vision, the sub-version, is spelled out by Paul: "Do not conform yourselves to this age but be transformed by the renewal of your mind that you may discern what is the will of God, what is good, and pleasing, and perfect." Paul makes this amazing statement that individually we are part of one another. Isn't that a subversive assertion? What would our country look like, what would our politics look like, what would our policies look like, if we truly believed that we are part of one another? What would our Church look like, our Congregation? What would the global community look like, if we really believed we are part of one another? It's a *profoundly* subversive message. And we need one another to hold that vision before us. We need one another around the table, where we recognize we're one in Christ, one in each other, to hear the words again and again, because the dominant narrative is so very strong. Think about Paul's message: "let love be sincere;" "love one another with mutual affection." This is *good news*: The *joy* of living in mutual affection, with deep respect, with giving and receiving, with mutuality, trying to discern together the will of God. "To rejoice in hope. Endure in affliction, persevere in prayer." This is a joyful invitation, a joyful imagining, so much better than being polarized and opposed and finding the worst and broadcasting that.

Back to Brueggemann. He says, "Christians are always odd men and women come together in odd communities and congregations, always at odds, always at risk, always in the presence of large cultural empires that want to dissolve our oddity for reasons of state, always ... different because we have been with Jesus. We are forever reimagining and retelling and reliving our lives through the scandal of Friday and the rumor of Sunday. We, like Jews, devise signals of oddity, the notice of new life, the bread of brokenness, the wine of blessedness, and the neighbor, always the neighbor, who is for us a signal of the love of God."

Brueggemann says that maintaining that oddity, which gives us "energy for caring," and for continuing in the way to which we have been called, "is the first task of the preacher." So what we do today, in this odd community, in this odd Congregation, in this odd event of religious profession, is we celebrate the truth of that alternative vision.

What can we do? We can have faith that God is at work in our midst, here, today, as Katherine makes her profession.