

A SERMON FROM SAINT FRANCIS

CURIOSITY KILLED THE CAT

A sermon preached by the Rev. Phillip Channing Ellsworth, Jr., the Third Sunday in Lent, March 7, 2010 at Saint Francis Episcopal Church, Potomac, Maryland. Based on The Gospel according to Luke, 13: 1 – 9.

“I am telling you your story. Not hers. I tell no one any story but his own.”
— The voice of Aslan in C. S. Lewis’ *The Horse and His Boy*

When I learned a year ago where my nephew Phillip would be going to high school, I sent an email to the school’s Senior Chaplain, the Rev. Will Billow, sometime seminarian here at St Francis, to give Will fair warning. The motto of St. Albans School is *Pro Ecclesia et Pro Patria* (“For Church and for Country”). The boys there in the shadow of our cathedral have landed on their academic feet, but the tagline that flashes on the school’s website before any other is “inspires intellectual curiosity and a passion for learning,” a slogan so popular with schools across the country that an avuncular curmudgeon — not that my nephew has one in his life — is tempted to put up a fake website of a fake school bearing proudly the slogan, “Curiosity killed the cat.”

That is a proverb we don’t hear much anymore. In the age of Oprah and encounter groups, devotees of the cult of frankness who would have us always putting all our cards on the table presume that to ask a question is to be entitled to an answer. But there are lots of things that we are not given to know, a lot of things that God has chosen not to reveal to us (and somebody should whisper this in Pat Robertson’s ear). It is striking the danger that some religious people take upon themselves in presuming to answer questions that Jesus himself would not answer. There are many questions that people have that they have out of curiosity, a curiosity that Jesus does not wish to reward.

Consider this encounter in today’s gospel. People come to Jesus and say to him, “Did you hear about the Galileans at worship who were killed by Pilate’s men? Do you think those murdered Galileans were worse sinners than all the others?” And Jesus says, “No. And next you’re going to ask me about the eighteen who died in Jerusalem the other day, the ones crushed when the Tower of Siloam collapsed and fell on them, you’ll ask me if they were worse citizens than other Jerusalemites. No, they weren’t. What you need to do is to repent lest you perish.”

He doesn’t gratify their curiosity. They want to know,

“What does this mean? Is this a kind of karma thing going on so that those who do evil are rewarded appropriately, punished for their sins right here on earth? Is that what’s happening?” And Jesus says, “You repent or you will perish.” *What you ask is none of your business* is what he’s saying essentially. He will not gratify their curiosity.

I’ve had conversations with people and I’ve tried to do what Jesus did and say *this is not our business*, and people don’t like it. They think, Well, I have a question! I deserve an answer! They don’t like it when I say that I don’t believe we mortals do always deserve answers to our questions.

I think of Jacob. He is about to face his estranged brother Esau whom he’d swindled out of his inheritance. Esau and four hundred men are just beyond the river Jabbok with every reason to kill him, so to save his skin Jacob sends word that everything he has, including his wife and children, are Esau’s now. That night he sleeps alone. In the darkness a mysterious presence pounces on him and after a long night of wrestling Jacob, ever the operator, refuses to let go of his adversary without receiving a blessing. The angel of God dubs him with a new name *Israel* (which means struggle with God) and puts his hip out of socket so that the rest of his life Jacob walks with a limp. When the sun rises Jacob gets not what was coming to him but something else. Esau “ran to meet him and embraced him and fell on his neck and kissed him, and they wept.”

A people who tell the Jacob story in the recital of their sacred story ought to know better than to believe in karma. That is one reason Jacob’s story comes to mind in connection with today’s gospel. The other is that Jacob asks a question of his adversary, “What is your name?” and the reply he receives is, “Why do you ask?”

What kind of an answer is that? In the book of Judges there is a similar example of such concealment. The angel of the Lord appears to Samson’s mother and father to proclaim that after years of barrenness they are to have a

child. As the angel is leaving, Samson's father Manoah asks, "What is your name?" And the angel of God says: "Why do you want to know? It is too wonderful" (Judges 13: 18). There are things that are not vouchsafed to us creatures, wonderful things that only God knows and keeps in his own counsel.

The way Jesus answers the questions he's asked gives us a vivid sense of what kind of man he was. He had the grace to respect the shrine that is the other person, including the dead. He had words with those who hadn't the decency to do the same. He wasn't subtle. *Repent or die.*

You and I know too well what it's like to regard others, including the dead, in a way that reduces them to membership in our supporting cast. Even at our prayers it's possible for us, operators on a level with Jacob, to imagine ourselves in the central role while everyone else the Most High included is off stage or "masked" as they say in the language of the theater. And if we don't put ourselves in front of others, still it tempts us this assumption that if we snoop around and maybe ask a few questions we can size someone up and pigeonhole them. That we don't know fully even our own story doesn't keep us from presuming ourselves qualified to know someone else's.

In C. S. Lewis' Narnian Chronicle *The Horse and His Boy*, Shasta, who is described as a young uneducated boy who hasn't learned good manners, gets lost in a fog and separated from King Luna and his companions. He can't see much in front of him in that fog and darkness but he senses he's been joined by a mysterious presence which he discerns only by its voice. He asks a lot of questions some but not all of which the Voice answers.

When the Voice reveals that he is one of the lions the boy was so afraid of, Shasta asks, "Then it was you who wounded Aravis?" The Voice allows, "It was I." "But what for?" the inquisitive boy wants to know.

"Child," said the Voice. "I am telling you your story, not hers. I tell no one any story but his own."

"Who are you?" asked Shasta.

"Myself," said the Voice, very deep and low so that the earth shook: and again "Myself," loud and clear and gay: and then the third time "Myself," whispered so softly you could hardly hear it, and yet it seemed to come from all around you as if the leaves rustled with it.

Today's Collect in its original form dates to the eighth century when it was sent in Latin by Pope Hadrian I to Charlemagne. Seven hundred and fifty years later, Archbishop Cranmer improved it with a few words. "Almighty God, who seest that we have no power in ourselves to help ourselves: keep us both outwardly in our bodies and inwardly in our souls; that we may be defended from all adversities which may happen to the body, and from all evil thoughts which may assault and hurt the soul." *Which may assault and hurt the soul.* Those are words that Thomas Cranmer added.

There are high hedges that stand between you and me psychologically and spiritually. To disrespect those hedges, what they conceal and protect, prying into God's business with somebody else, especially someone who has died, is to assault and hurt not them but only yourself. It is also, particularly if you are an Anglican Christian, bad form. "We don't open windows on men's souls," said Queen Elizabeth describing a character trait of Anglican Christianity. We don't barge in without warrant on the soul of the faithful, living or departed.

Who then can be trusted with all our cards? The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, that's who. Your neighbor's story and the role our Lord assigned them in the time given to them, these are things too wonderful for us beyond our knowing. Only God knows their story, why some tragedy befell them, why a devout wish was never granted. The Most High reserves the revealing of such mysteries to them alone, as he reserves revealing the mysteries of your own story to you. Amen.

For more information about Saint Francis Episcopal Church and its life of faith and mission just northwest of the Capital Beltway, please contact the church office at 10033 River Road, Potomac, Maryland 20854, call 301.365.2055, or see us on the web at www.stfrancispotomac.org