

DRIVING YOUR PRIUS

A Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Arthur M. Suggs
Preached on the Third Sunday after Epiphany, January 24, 2016

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Eddington: Learn More About “and”

Just one sentence of preface: The sermon title doesn't have anything to do with the car.

Okay, I'd like to begin with a quote, and it's an odd one. Sir Arthur Eddington, a scientist and philosopher, once said,

“We used to think that if we knew one, we knew two because one and one are two. We are finding that we must learn a great deal more about ‘and.’”

Now let's go to the Thirteenth Century, in the middle of the 1200's. At this time St. Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) was living in a monastery, and he was not quite 50 years old. He had been writing and writing and writing some more for the better part of his adult life. He had produced approximately six feet on the shelf by the time he was in his late 40's.

Aquinas: All My Writings Are Like Straw

But then Aquinas stopped writing. The other Brothers at the monastery became concerned. Finally, legend has it that Brother Reginald got up the nerve to go and ask him, “What's wrong? Why have you stopped writing?” The answer was surprising:

“All that I have written seems like straw compared to what has been revealed to me.”

Apparently something unusual happened, perhaps some sort of spiritual episode, a

visionary occurrence. In modern times we would call it a unitive experience, in which a person feels oneness with divinity, with the cosmos, with humanity. Many people have had such phenomena, and something like it may have come over Aquinas as he looked back over the six feet on the shelf and realized that those volumes just didn't compare with what had been revealed to him.

Here's one of the most doctrinaire people that the world has ever produced. Yet he said it's like so much straw relative to that visionary experience.

Nearly a millennium passed. It's now 1962 at the University of Chicago's Rockefeller Cathedral. I've had a chance to be in that edifice twice in my life for the graduations of both of my children. It is a magnificent place, holding approximately 5,000 people comfortably, and there were 6,000 in attendance when I was there for graduation ceremonies. You can tell from the building's grandeur that money wasn't a problem when they built it.

Barth: “Jesus Loves Me, This I Know”

Karl Barth had been asked to lecture in that beautiful setting, and the lecture was followed by a question-and-answer time. One of the students asked, “Can you sum up your whole life's work in theology in just one sentence?”

This is not an apocryphal story. Karl Barth has approximately eight feet on the shelf

compared to Aquinas' six feet. Personally, I've read some of both of them, and I would rather have a root canal. So I sympathize with the questioner. It's like, "Do I really have to read all this stuff, or can you please sum up your whole life's work in one sentence?"

Barth's Answer Was Unexpected:

"Yes I can. In the words of a song I learned at my mother's knee, 'Jesus loves me, this I know; for the Bible tells me so.'"

That comment subsequently lent itself to a sort of fad in theology for a couple of decades. It went like this: The enterprise of theology is shaped sort of like a football. It's pointed at one end, thick in the middle, and pointed again at the other end.

The idea is that you start off at a pointed end with a little kid at the mother's knee, and she sings to the child this simple song: "Jesus loves me, this I know; for the Bible tells me so. Little children to him belong; they are weak, but he is strong." You get that feeling of love, of the way in which you fit into the divine plan as a little child.

But then the football shape grows! The next thing you know, theology becomes this huge, complex enterprise. You search for answers to weighty questions: How does this integrate with what's happening in culture or what's happening in politics? How about the dialog with science or the dialog with other religions? How do we understand the big ethical questions of our time? Very quickly the field becomes a big mess of complications, and as the football grows over time, it gets thicker and more complex.

Finally, we have to go back to basics. And theology starts getting narrower and nar-

rower, particularly toward the end of our lives, when we realize that so much of this stuff is like Aquinas' writer's block. It's like so much straw. So we get down to the nitty-gritty: "Jesus loves me, this I know."

Eckhart: My Eye Sees God; God Sees Me with the Same Eye

A couple weeks ago I spoke on Meister Eckhart (1260-1328) at the Sophia Center in our church. If you google him, you find that he spanned the 13th to 14th Centuries.

Eckhart's most famous quote is one that always comes up. He was a brilliant person, hands down, and he was also a magnificent administrator. The Catholic church was in total disarray at this time. This was the era when there were either one, two, or three popes at any given time.

The Catholic church was in a sort of mess, and Eckhart had to cover the territory of a big portion of northern Europe. Take all of Germany and go 200 miles east and 200 miles west and about 100 miles south, and that was his territory as a church administrator with a lot of different titles.

What it meant was that he followed dirt roads by horse and buggy, visiting convents and monasteries. He generally didn't go to churches, but rather to the monks and the nuns. His territory included an estimated 200 monasteries and 150 convents for which he was responsible.

Eckhart's Famous Quote Is Profound:

"The eye with which I see God is the same eye with which God sees me."

He explained the way in which that quote was both literally true and figuratively true. Literally true in that his vision, his consciousness, his perception as an individual

human being are all linked, tied inextricably to what God sees and perceives. God consciousness, Christ consciousness we would call it today. And he lectured on this concept to the monks and nuns throughout his travels.

Now we go way back into the 100-200's. This was the so-called Patristic Age, when the church was governed and led by a group of men called the Church Fathers.

Irenaeus: Jesus Became What We Are In Order to Make Us What He Is

Irenaeus (130-202) was one of them. As a person he was sort of a fool, but his name, by the way, means peace. So there you go. His pedigree was such that Irenaeus was the understudy of another church father by the name of Polycarp, and Polycarp was the understudy of John the Evangelist. Churchly pedigrees don't get much better than that.

The following quote might well have been chosen from among many similar thoughts that ran like a thread through dozens of iterations in the sermons of Irenaeus, with endless variations on the same theme. One of the variations is this:

“Jesus Christ, in his infinite love, has become what we are (namely referring to Christmas, of course) in order to make us entirely what he is.”

It's the same kind of sentiment as Meister Eckhart's "eye," in which God incarnated, became human, in order to make humanity divine. This idea, called divinization, becoming divine, or what the Eastern church called "theosis," was kept alive and venerated throughout the Eastern church for the last two millennia but was completely lost in the Western church. As a matter of fact, it was not only lost but was denigrated, made fun of, and counted as a heresy.

Aquinas the Doctrinaire: Life Precedes Doctrine; Humanity Is Linked to Divinity

Now let's go back to Aquinas for two quick but significant characterizations. Please have a look at the following three indented lines. In the first one I've used Latin for this epigram to make it look as though I know what I'm talking about:

“Prius vita quam doctrina.”

Translates as:

“Life is prior to doctrines.”

It may be hard to believe, but this quote comes from *the* most doctrinaire person that the church has produced in two millennia.

The church has hurt a lot of people by insisting on its doctrines at the expense of life. If you want an example, look at gay people. “Life is prior to doctrines,” said Aquinas, of all people.

He also wrote the following epigram. It is equally profound, if a bit more philosophical:

“Deus est ens”

Translates as

“God is being.”

What's important about this aphorism is what is not there. It's not “God is *a* being” or “God is *the* being,” using an indefinite or definite article. It says that God is verb-like (as opposed to noun-like), which means “God *is* existence.” Which in turn means that, if you have existence, you are linked to divinity, however it is that we might conceive of it. You are part of that divinity. You are a child of God, in other words.

St. Vincent: Take Care to Hold What Is Believed Everywhere, Always, and by All

Go back with me now into the 400's to meet a little-known saint, St. Vincent of Lering

(434 AD). He was not commonly known because he had lost a highly significant argument with the Church Fathers, having put forth an idea that unfortunately didn't fly. St. Vincent lived in the 400's, and he lived or at least died on an island just off the mainland of France, in a place called Lering.

The 400's was a tumultuous time for the church. St. Augustine was holding forth. The Council of Ephesus and the Council of Nicaea took place, with a weighty subject before the participants. The idea in the Nicæan creed, "I believe in the one holy catholic and apostolic church," was being argued at that time. Pelagius was holding forth and was deemed to be a heretic.

But in that statement, "one holy catholic and apostolic church" that they were trying to define, the question arose, "What do you mean by 'catholic'?" You know, as to "one," okay, we get that, and as to "holy," well of course, and "apostolic" means that you're being sent out into the world.

But What Does "Catholic" Really Mean?

It has the sense, throughout the history of the word, of being "whole" or being "universal." Well, poor insignificant St. Vincent was honing in on that idea and trying to promote it before the Church Fathers. He wrote thus:

"Now in the catholic church itself we must take the greatest care to hold that which has been believed everywhere, always, and by all.

"This alone is truly and properly catholic as is shown by the very force and meaning of the word, which means universality. We must hold to this rule if we are to be universal and ecumenical people."

That first sentence is pretty important for the history of the church: "We must take the greatest care to hold that which has been believed everywhere, always, and by all."

The Church Took a Different Direction

As a matter of fact, it took the opposite direction. St. Vincent lost the argument, and few have ever heard of him since. The church instead decided that it should tell other people what to believe. "We have figured it out; we know what the truth is. Therefore, from now on we are going to tell people, in a dictatorial way, what truth is." Thus dialog was banished, and dictation or monologue took the place of dialog.

Now what I would like you to do is to imagine for a moment what might have happened if the church had followed that rule by St. Vincent — "That which has been believed everywhere, always, and by all" — had entered into the dialog of the church?

Imagine when the church went to South America and ended up decimating the Mayans and the Incas and the Aztecs. What might have happened had there been dialog there? And what might have happened when the church went to North America and encountered dozens and maybe even a hundred different spiritualities throughout the peoples of the North American continent prior to entering into war with the savages?

And what might have happened if the church encountered Buddhism or Hinduism when it went east with that very different approach to the local religion? And had a dialog between the Christ and the Buddha, which now happens all the time? Or had the church encountered Judaism or Islam?

One of the "what ifs" that I find fruitful to think about is when the church went into

Africa and encountered the natives and the savages of that continent. There the church found a belief system that was arrogantly made the butt of fun. It was called animism from the Latin “anima” or “animus,” which simply means “spirit.”

The belief was that the spirit was to be found virtually everywhere, not just in people. So the mountain had its spirit and the river had its spirit and the tree had its spirit, and the animal had its spirit. This animism was heresy to the church, which made fun of it while killing people.

And imagine not being at war with science. Or imagine having a respectful, mutual dialog with secular humanists — those who just want to wash their hands of religion in general.

Let me speak personally for a moment. I don’t want to say anything against a seminary education. Loved seminary. Glad I went. Would do it again. But since then I have learned more about my faith through dialog with physics and physicists, with Hindus and then also with atheists. I have learned more from those conversations than I ever learned in seminary. So what’s my point?

St. Vincent Lost the Argument; the Church Doubled Down, Made a Mistake

In the 400’s, when St. Vincent lost the argument, the church made a mistake, a deep, profound mistake. It went the wrong way on how to deal with the rest of the world.

Now there are always two responses to a mistake. One is that you can double down on it. “By God, it wasn’t a mistake; it’s the right thing. God told us what to do. We have the truth. Deal with it.” And the church did just that. It doubled down.

If you look at Martin Luther’s response to people like Meister Eckhart, Luther had a pretty cool way of describing it. He said that these sentimental kinds of thoughts, in which we’re linked to God, we love God, and we’re all subsumed into divinity and all that kind of stuff, he likened to fresh-fallen snow covering a pile of manure. And so both the Catholic church and the Protestant church doubled down.

The thing you do, however, when you find out you’ve made a mistake, is that you ought to correct it.

The Wisdom of Solomon — a Summation

Let me conclude with a passage of scripture several hundred years before Christ from the Wisdom of Solomon (11:22-26 and 12:1):

“For the whole world before thee is as a little grain in the balance, yea, as a drop of morning dew that falleth down upon the earth.

“But thou hast mercy upon all; for thou canst do all things, and winkest at the sins of men, because they should amend.

“For thou lovest all things that are, and abhorrest nothing which thou hast made: for never wouldst thou have made any thing, if thou hadst hated it.

“And how could any thing have endured, if it had not been thy will? Or been preserved, if not called by thee?

“But thou sparest all: for they are all thine, **O Lord, thou lover of souls.**

“For thine incorruptible Spirit is in all things.”

Amen.