

Sermon for the Twenty-first Sunday After Pentecost: Matthew 22:34-46

The Rev. Brooks Cato

I want to tell y'all about an Episcopal Church I encountered in the wild. I'm gonna keep things vague, change some names, shuffle some details around so it's harder to pinpoint who I'm talking about. That's the diplomatic thing to do, right, admittedly with a dash of self-preservation. All that to say, if this sounds familiar, know that I'm not talking about you, necessarily, but I do think there's some truths in here a lot of us will find troubling and maybe a little too close.

Back in the Summer of 2003, someone from -- oh, let's call it St. Whosit's in The Hills -- snuck over to the church under the cover of night and hung a wreath on the church door. Now, normally, I'm all for wreaths on church doors, but this one, this one was different. For one thing, the wreath hanger wasn't a part of any official guild, and how dare they go decorating the church without permission? But for another, the wreath the wreath hanger hung was black. For those of you who aren't familiar with Victorian-era British traditions, a black wreath used to be hung on the door of a house where a death had occurred. It announced to passersby that they should be a little more reverent, keep the noises from the street to a minimum so as not to disturb the mourners sitting vigil with the dead. Inside, for however long it took before the burial could take place, someone always sat up with the deceased. The whole rest of the house may be asleep or doing chores, but at least one was awake and praying. Which, by the way, is why we call that period of sacred visiting after death a "wake;" it's someone's job to give themselves over to staying present, rotating out with other someones, to accompany the dead in faith, love, and hope. All that to say, a black wreath was a sign of death, but with it came a great deal of Christian hope. Hope that this is not the end and hope that the Day of Resurrection will come.

But back at St. Whosit's in The Hills, where the black wreath hung on the church door, much of the meaning of that antiquated practice was missing. The only thing the wreath hanger tried to communicate was that there had been a death inside. The death, of course, of the church itself. See, just the day before, The Episcopal Church confirmed the election of its first openly gay, partnered bishop, Gene Robinson. This was a contentious thing, as you might imagine, so contentious, in fact, that red-faced delegates yelled into cameras and the soon-to-be Bishop Robinson wore a bullet-proof vest while attending the rest of the church's General Convention. As far as St. Whosit's was concerned, or at least as far as the wreath hanger was concerned, Robinson's election in the distant Diocese of New Hampshire meant the death of the church, the death of Christianity, even, and certainly the death of something they held dear. For the record, most folks didn't know Robinson from Adam. This wasn't a death because of his theology or his politics; it was a death because of his identity.

Now, I will admit to perhaps not being the best person to talk about this situation from a position of objectivity. I was horrified when I heard about the now-infamous black wreath. I rather like Bishop Robinson, and I rather don't like St. Whosit's. But there's something bigger going on here, something much bigger. And to understand it, we need to go even further back than those occasionally reverent Victorian streets. See, way back in the earliest days of Christianity, most of our energy was spent spreading the Good News that Jesus was and is the Messiah. The biggest concern that the first round of evangelists had was convincing people of this truth. But very quickly, as early as Paul himself, leaders within the movement began to be concerned with maintaining a set of correct beliefs and practices around that Good News. If Jesus is the Messiah, then there are probably some things that you should do and probably some things that you shouldn't do. Within just a few hundred years, we gave those things names. What you should do and what you should believe, that's orthodoxy. What you shouldn't, that's heresy. So, gather to worship as a community on Sundays? That's an example of orthodoxy.

Gather to worship and maybe do something extra with the temple prostitutes? That's an example of heresy.

I know, I know, when most of us modern thinkers hear about orthodoxy and especially when we hear about heresy, we get our philosophical hackles up. We like inclusionary thinking, generally speaking, or at least an openness of expression and thought, and all this sounds terribly restrictive. But here's the thing. Those earliest expressions of orthodoxy were incredibly inclusive. The Church looked and thought differently nearly everywhere it popped up. It adapted to local custom and practice and evolved into something distinct yet sacred in most of its incarnations. And that early, inclusive orthodoxy blossomed. Likewise, those earliest heresies were troubling and exclusive. Early heretics were the hardliners, ready to kick a person or a group out for the slightest error. Their ideas were often appealing on the surface. But a deeper dive accompanied with their typically harsh practices led a former Presiding Bishop to describe them "like a cold bed with a short blanket." Enticing if you're tired enough and there's nothing else around, but in the end, deeply unsatisfying.

But sometime in the Middle Ages, these two switched places. As the Church gained power and grew more entangled with the ruling powers of the world, orthodoxy grew colder. It lost its inclusive identity in exchange for a harsh exclusivity, and the edges of the Church began to be more understood by who it kicked out rather than who it let in. Heretics in this period, on the other hand, became much more open and accepting as the Church calcified. In modern times, when we think of orthodoxy and heresy, I think it's more that Middle Ages sense that comes to mind. The term "orthodoxy" is scary and brings the force of great power with it. But thanks to that weird historical inversion, the term "orthodoxy" means different things to different people. For some, orthodoxy must be exclusive and defined by its edges; for others, it's inherently inclusive and defined by its center.

So, for the folks at St. Whosit's that hung that black wreath, I have a suspicion that what they felt die in the church wasn't solely because of Bishop Robinson and the church's stance on LGBTQ issues. It was bigger. It was the death knell of that Middle Ages exclusive orthodoxy. This had been happening for a long time by then, and we're still going through that change. As the Church has grown further from the halls of power, we've regained some of our early identity. We are connected with each other because of our core love of God, and we long for everyone to know that love. But what's so dang hard about inclusive orthodoxy isn't the call to love God, that's the easy part. The hard part is loving our neighbors. Because inclusive orthodoxy doesn't leave room for us to choose which neighbors to love. It does allow us to point out where people take things too far, but it doesn't draw the hard line that says "you're out, and you're in." In other words, inclusive orthodoxy makes space for a Bishop Robinson, but it also makes space for a black-wreath hanger.

Jesus says the entirety of scripture hangs on just two commandments: Love God and love your neighbor. And Paul takes this a little deeper still. To show people what that means, we can't just tell them the Good News, we have to share ourselves with them, too. Inclusive orthodoxy is a vulnerable place. It leaves space for someone who thinks differently about the world to show up on the same zoom call and pray to the same God, even if, especially if they don't think just exactly like me. That's inclusive, it's orthodox, it's scripture, and it's love.

Thinking back to that black wreath on the doors of St. Whosit's in The Hills, the wreath hanger made their point, but I think they missed something. Remember, that Victorian-era black wreath meant death had occurred but it also meant that someone in the house was sitting up, showing their faith, their love, and their hope, even as great change came to their lives. For many, that day in 2003 was one of recognition, a day when orthodoxy shifted back to make space. But for some, it was a loss, a death of sorts. But we Christians hold to great hope in all deaths. And while the wreath hanger remembered to mourn, it seems they forgot to hope. Sure, the world changed that day, but it changes everyday. And that's ok. Because everyday, God makes room for change. God makes room for your neighbor. And God makes room for you.