



ALL SAINTS CHURCH
PASADENA, CALIFORNIA

Our Destiny Is A Party

A sermon preached by the Rev. J. Edwin Bacon, Jr.
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Albert Einstein famously said, “No problem can be solved from the same level of consciousness that created it.”

Fox News commentator Glen Beck famously said, that if your preacher mentions the terms, ‘social action’ or ‘social justice’ in sermons or teachings, flee from that church or synagogue. Boycott that congregation. These are really code words for communism and socialism. And, then he advised, you should report that congregation to the authorities.

Upon hearing Glen Beck’s advice to his listeners to boycott and report All Saints Church, Pasadena and almost every other church, synagogue, and mosque I know, I was stunned by Glen Beck’s glaring ignorance that what All Saints has in common with these other congregations are scriptures which evaluate the effectiveness of those congregations by whether those who do not worship there – particularly the most vulnerable in society – have better lives because of those who do worship there. Teachings on economic and social justice are the heart of Jewish, Islamic, and Christian scriptures. Upon hearing reports about what Glen Beck said, I also chuckled to myself. The authorities already know about us here at All Saints. [laughter & applause] The IRS knows that we preach the good news that citizens have the responsibility to transform their government’s policies when such policies dehumanize, degrade, and kill those who are the least of these. *The* central mandate of our scriptures involves making peace and transforming economic structures when they actually are factories of poverty, hunger, sickness, homelessness, and discrimination.

Then I talked with my ultimate authority, the Spirit of God, who moved my conscience to realize that Glen Beck’s thinking and level of consciousness is nothing short of fascism. Please note that I do not believe that Glen Beck is a fascist at the level of his being. But the fascist thinking he employs must be spoken against. The most effective way to speak up against fascism is to equip myself and others to be so transformed that you and I in turn can be instruments of transforming the world to abolish poverty, the death penalty, discrimination, and war. An awakened conscience within my heart counseled me to focus the rest of this sermon not on the words of Glen Beck but on the wisdom of Albert Einstein.

How do we gain a new consciousness sufficiently different from that which created the problems that dehumanize and destroy?

Poverty; homelessness; inadequate education for the young; inadequate health care coverage for the sick; religious institutions and a culture that discriminate against people of

color, against women, and against people with same-sex attractions; and a society that lives by violence – all of these problems, according to Einstein, must be solved and can only be solved by a new level of consciousness. A consciousness different than the consciousness that created those problems in the first place.

Interestingly enough, I believe that St. Paul of the New Testament was interested in the same change in consciousness. One of the Bible verses I had to memorize when I was a child was Romans 2:2: “And be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind.” The consciousness change Paul called for was the transformation of our minds rather than having a consciousness that is conformed to the consciousness of the world and, thereby is a mindset inadequate to critique effectively the wisdom of the world. Paul wrote, “All of us are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit.” (2 Cor. 3:18) “We do not lose heart. Even though our outer nature is wasting away, (and all of us are getting older), our inner nature is being renewed day by day.” (4:16) And from this morning’s reading, Paul says, “If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see everything has become new!” (5:17)

Paul actually believed in New Age religion. He believed that everyone actually could have a new level of awareness and consciousness if we open ourselves to being moved and transformed in the deepest parts of our souls, our heart. He said, “Have the same mind or consciousness which was also in Christ Jesus,” You can have the same mind or consciousness which was in Christ. (Phil. 2)

As we during Lent welcome or pray for God’s Spirit actually to change our consciousness – to work *in* our consciousness so that the world-wide community of what Paul called those who were “in the Spirit,” (his description of those who are being transformed by God’s Spirit) could together as a community could find solutions to intractable problems. Paul believed that if we have this new consciousness, what he called in this morning’s lesson a consciousness of “reconciliation,” where we realize that we all are brothers and sisters in a new family, including our brother Glen Beck, that we will evaluate no one any longer by human standards. Rather we will evaluate one another by God’s standards – the same God who holds no one’s trespasses against them, or, what Paul called, “Being Reconciled to God.” Then when we do that we will be knowing what Einstein was referring to and that is having a new consciousness to solve the intractable problems of our age.

Marilyn McCord Adams is an acclaimed theologian from this Diocese. She calls this process a complete restructuring of our personalities. She says that Jesus underwent this personality restructuring during his forty days in the desert and even beyond. That is what made him Divine – this process of His personality being reconstructed. And nothing less is available to you and me in our times of testing.

The Eastern Orthodox branch of Christianity weighs in on this. A central theological argument in Orthodox Christianity is the theology of “Theosis,” the divinization of humanity. The argument runs that God became human in Christ so that we can become divine in the Spirit or Energy of Jesus.

I believe that was what Jesus was getting at ultimately in this classic parable we have just heard read, often referred to as The Prodigal Son. I think that name is a misnomer because it is a parable or a story about two levels of consciousness expressed in this Father's two sons. Neither consciousness has the power to solve life's problems. Only the consciousness illustrated by the parent in the story has the power to find solutions to intractable problems.

There is no need to describe at length the consciousness of the two sons other than to say that the younger son takes his freedom, his freedom *from* instead of freedom *for*, his freedom to spend, to do violence to himself and others, and then he winds up economically and morally bankrupt.

The older son "could no more handle his freedom than could the younger son" argues William Sloane Coffin. He said that "the older brother had a "brand of moralism and legalism born and nourished in anxiety (in the house of fear) and instead of trusting his father's love and becoming himself loving, he sought instead to become virtuous." And all of us know about people who seek ultimately to be virtuous. Coffin says, "those who seek virtue no longer seek God or neighbor. For the search for virtue is too self-enclosing, too self-seeking, too self-justifying to be loving. The older brother has clearly decided about what evil is in this world, and as a result he won't have to come to grips with what is good in this world." (William Sloane Coffin, *The Collected Sermons of William Sloane Coffin; The Riverside Years*, Volume 1, p. 81)

The point for us during this Lenten season is to open ourselves to receive the consciousness of the Father in this parable – the consciousness of love. When the younger brother asked for the division of his father's assets, prior to his father's death, the father could have said "no" and kept him at home. But that is not what love does. "Love doesn't keep us at home, love risks our leaving home. Because love is the name of life's game, God releases us into the storms of freedom." (Ibid.)

And when the son came to himself, after he had rehearsed his confession, prior to his even making the confession, which tells you that forgiveness is not contingent on your confession, this loving parent stood and saw his son coming and the scriptures say he was deeply moved at the level of the gut – deep affect is that which has the power to transform us and our consciousness.

The story shows that the destiny of every human being is to be reconciled with every other human being in the world and with God. Our destiny is a party, a reconciliation celebration. Our destiny is to eradicate all those things that degrade and dehumanize. And both Paul and Jesus tell us this morning that you and I can have, it is possible to have, we are called to have that consciousness.

I think that just as in every dream that you and I have that every character in the dream, though he or she be dressed up in the face or the clothing of someone else, all of the characters in the dream are a part of the community of selves that resides within our soul. And so in this parable it is instructive to think that each of us has within us all three characters in the story – the libertine, the virtuous person, and the one who can overcome all divisions with love and compassion. "An individual is not one who separates himself from others. An individual is one

who unites everything within him or herself. One who has an undivided within.” That is who Jesus was. From the outer periphery to the inner core and back again, Jesus was all of a piece. (Ibid., p. 83)

I want to close by illustrating from our time someone with the consciousness that can solve intractable problems. The story is taken from reports of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa, which Archbishop Desmond Tutu chaired. It was a body established after the abolition of apartheid to bring apartheid’s violence to light and give both victims and perpetrators, the younger brother and the older brother, a chance to be heard.

The Commission brought an elderly black woman face to face with the white man with the name of Mr. Van de Broek, and this white man confessed to the savage torture and murder of her son and her husband a few years earlier. The old woman had been called to witness, had been actually forced to witness her husband’s death by this man. And the last words she heard her husband speak before he finally died were “Father, forgive them.”

One of the members of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission turned to this lady and asked, “How do you believe justice should be done to this man who has inflicted such suffering on you and so brutally destroyed your family?”

The old woman replied, “I want three things. I want first to be taken to the place where my husband’s body was burned so that I can gather up the dust and give his remains a decent burial.” She stopped, collected herself, and then went on. “My husband and my son were my only family. I want, secondly, therefore, for Mr. Van de Broek to become my son. I would like for him to come twice a month to the ghetto where I live and spend a day with me so that I can pour out to him whatever love I have still remaining within me. And finally, I want a third thing. I would like Mr. Van de Broek to know that I offer him my forgiveness because Jesus Christ died to forgive. This was also the wish of my husband. And so, I would kindly ask someone now to come to my side and lead me across the courtroom so that I can take Mr. Van de Broek in my arms, embrace him, and let him know that he is truly forgiven.”

The assistant came to help the old black woman across the room. Mr. Van de Broek, overwhelmed by what he had just heard, fainted. And as he did, those in the courtroom – friends, family, neighbors, all victims of decades of oppression and injustice began to sing *Amazing Grace*. (Andrew Harvey, *The Hope*)

To have the consciousness, to have the soul, to have the heart of that sister of ours, of our brother Jesus, of our brother Paul, of the Father in this morning’s parable is our work this Lent. These forty days and throughout our life what problems do you see in your life they cannot be solved with the same level of consciousness that created them. You and I can have a new consciousness. We can become the very holiness and the very justice of God. If we open ourselves to have our consciousness literally transformed, we *will* be instruments of bringing the new life of Easter to the world.

Amen.