

Oct. 31, 2016

Is. 53: 1-3

A reading from Isaiah:

¹Who has believed what we have heard?

And to whom has the arm of the LORD been revealed?

²For he grew up before him like a young plant,
and like a root out of dry ground;

he had no form or majesty that we should look at him,
nothing in his appearance that we should desire him.

³He was despised and rejected by others;
a man of suffering and acquainted with infirmity;
and as one from whom others hide their faces
he was despised, and we held him of no account.

The Word of the Lord.

In May of 1992 the cover of Time magazine asked, “Can we all get along?” This was a quotation from Rodney King, an African-American taxi driver whose beating at the hands of Los Angeles police officers after a high-speed chase was captured on video and sent to the media, which soon aired it around the world. The police officers were acquitted and a riot ensued in LA, during which a battered King asked his now famous question, “Can we all get along?”

In so many ways, this question has become *the* question for modern American society, as we try to grapple with our many differences. The question first arose in response to racial differences and tensions, but we can expand it to include differences of religion, politics, gender, sexuality, and so on. In so many ways, we are still trying to figure out how to get along.

I would say the same is true of Valpo. In the midst of our many differences, we, too, are trying to figure out how we can have a peaceful and good life together. As we have been asking ourselves this question, and as we have been taking steps to try to answer it, I have been asking myself an additional question: how might our Lutheran-Christian identity shape the way we deal with King's question? Are there resources in our religious identity for our life together that are not available to colleges and schools that have no officially espoused religious identity? If so, do these resources put us in a better place than our secular counterparts for living together peaceably? I'd like to think that there are such resources. If there aren't, that is, if our Lutheran-Christian identity really has nothing compelling to say to the can-we-get-along question, then I think we would have to conclude that this identity is really not especially relevant to our common life right now, for our life together is currently marked by a great expenditure of time, money, and effort to find ways for us all to get along.

So here is a proposal. I think that any institution of higher learning that claims the name "Christian" for itself, or "Lutheran-Christian," or even just "Lutheran," must have at its center Jesus Christ. After all, Lutheran theology is deeply Christocentric. This does not mean that all who teach or study at such institutions must be Christians; it means that the institution itself makes its devotion to Christ clear to all and then seeks to welcome all,

or rather, it seeks to allow Christ Himself to welcome all. Christ becomes the host at the table to which all are welcomed and invited. And Christ is host in two Latin senses of the word “host”: the one who invites and welcomes all as His honored guests, and the one who sacrifices Himself for them, taking up the towel to serve them, regardless of their relationship to Him—He even dies for them, including those who want nothing to do with Him.

It is not clear to me who the host of Valpo’s table is right now; I think it should be Christ Himself.

I want to make it clear which Christ I have in mind here, for you might be saying to yourself, “how does making Christ the host help us all get along, since there are different relationships to Christ represented on this campus?” I am not thinking of the Christus Rex, which depicts Christ in all of His resurrection glory. Rather, I have in mind “homeless Jesus,” the man of sorrows who lies on a bench outside the chapel, exposed to the elements, and wrapped in a ragged garment that exposes His wounded hands and feet. He is right here on our campus on the lawn in front of the Christopher Center; perhaps you have seen Him, perhaps not—it is easy to pass Him by. This Christ dons what Mother Teresa called a “distressing disguise,” identifying with all who are poor, rejected, destitute, and homeless, which, if we are willing to accept it, basically encompasses all of us, although in different ways. I want homeless Jesus to be the host of Valpo’s common table, for I think He is a Jesus whom we could all embrace, again, in different ways. Perhaps more to the point, I think He will embrace all of us. I imagine homeless Jesus getting up from His bench and walking over to our common table to sit at its head, where He serves, inspires, unites, and challenges us.

Homeless Jesus is a Lutheran Jesus. At the center of Martin Luther's theology was the conviction that Almighty God has come to us in the distressing disguise of Christ's suffering humanity on the cross, the last place we would expect to find God. Homeless Jesus does not capture all that Luther's theology of the cross entails, nor all that a practicing Christian would want to say about her Lord, but He is still a fitting icon for our university, especially at this point in its history. This icon conveys very effectively just how radical, how broad, and how scandalous God's love for humanity truly is. Homeless Jesus also confronts us with how we ignore this love and its call on our lives as we daily pass by those who are marginalized, hiding our faces from them.

A common life together that draws its inspiration and orientation from homeless Jesus and all that He tells us about who God is, what God calls us to be and do in the world, and how we are to regard and treat one another, especially the most vulnerable in our midst—that's my proposal for how Valpo might answer to the most pressing question of our day, "Can we all get along?" "Yes, with homeless Jesus as our guide, we can!"