



The Cathedral of St. Andrew - Honolulu

Sermon: Year C – Fifth Sunday of Easter – May 19, 2019: Arthur

I love this reading from Acts. It's very special to me, because the reading is also the reading for the Feast of Cornelius the Centurion, February 4th, the day I was ordained. And for my first Eucharist I used the reading and preached on it in the chapel at Seabury Hall in Makawao in Upcountry Maui—over thirteen years ago now. I love the line that reads:

But a second time the voice answered from heaven, "What God has made clean, you must not call profane."

You know, I'm a baptized child of God. That happened almost 54 years ago in a small Episcopal church in Guam, overlooking the Philippine Sea. In the waters of baptism I was claimed by Christ, marked as Christ's own forever, bringing to mind that line from the gospel when referring to Jesus, but also applying to me, "You are my beloved. With you I am well pleased." It that sense God called me clean, made me clean."

And then life went on for this skinny, nonathletic kid with glasses who liked to read books and study—always getting picked last when choosing teams for kickball, dodge ball, whatever. And the names that came along with that made me feel anything but clean. I won't give you the litany. I'll leave that to your imagination. I don't want to bring any of that back to life.

One of the biggest culprits in the name-calling was a kid whom I'll call Arthur this morning—the class bully, if you will. I could never figure out why he liked to pick on me so much until I figured out that all he wanted was a friend. And how did I figure that out?

Another classmate, a popular kid who had come to Guam from Japan, had a birthday party and all the boys in the class were invited—even me—all the boys in the class were invited, except Arthur, Arthur the meanie, Arthur the tormentor, Arthur the bully, Arthur who was also baptized, Arthur who was a child of God, Arthur who was marked as Christ's own, Arthur whom God made clean.

And on the day of the party all the boys in the class were excited and Arthur was left out and so he very quietly went up to the birthday boy and quietly begged, "Can I please come to your party? Please?"

And the answer was, "No. You can't come." And the birthday boy continued nonchalantly, "You can't come into my house, because you are dirty." And something told me that was not the first time Arthur had heard that, even though the words may have been different the message was the same. What'd the difference, really? You're dirty. You're bad. You're nasty. You're worthless. You're useless. You're ugly. You're mean. And who wouldn't be? I found out many years later that Arthur's father used to get drunk and beat him. He showed me the scars from his father's belt lashes one day. The reading from Acts says:

What God has made clean, you must not call profane.

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It seems a sin to me when a parent does that to a child, to the goodness of God’s creation and turning them mean. That’s a sin. So let’s remember not to do it to each other.

Anyhow, all the boys went off to the party that afternoon and Arthur went home on the bus—a good three miles away from the party, which was great fun—lots of games, wonderful birthday cake, great food. And then we were all outside waiting for our rides home and one of the boys said, “Hey! Look!”

And Arthur was hiding behind a car. He’d snuck away from home and walked three miles and hid out behind a car parked in the street so that he could vicariously be part of the celebration, invited or not. And then the boys went after him, as if to chase him away. And Arthur stopped, reached into his pocket and pulled out five quarters, offering to pay the birthday boy to be let in to all the fun. I bet it was all the money in the world he had that day.

What God has made clean, you must not call profane.

In that moment, in his pain, in his yearning, Arthur was pure. And then the birthday boy’s mother intervened. She asked him to come in, gave him cake and ice cream, and made him put his money away, reminding me today that Christ comes to us in many disguises. And Arthur mellowed out after that party and he and I actually became friends, because that’s what he actually wanted. And I began to see the good in him—the soft side, the kind side, the generous side, the side desperate to connect with another human being.

And then, of course, we grew up and went our separate ways. And then his niece found me on Facebook and friended me. And I found out that Arthur was in a bad car accident several years back and now spends his life in a wheelchair. He’s had a hard life, so thank God there was a Christ in his midst that day many years ago, the birthday boy’s mother, a Christ in Arthur’s midst who showed me, who taught me that:

What God has made clean, you must not call profane.

And that woman wasn’t even a Christian. She was a Buddhist. What strikes me about this today is how many times I hear different words to call profane what God has made clean. Think of the words we use to make people other, different from us. Think of the divisions we create when we do that:

local/haole
female/male
gay/ straight
rich/poor
old/young
Christian/Muslim
Democrat/Republican

And the list goes on and on and on.

Not to mention the names and insults that we hurl at each other: I don’t even want to give energy to them by giving us any examples.

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And naïve as it sounded to me at the time, it makes me think of Rodney King, caught by the Los Angeles police after a high-speed chase on March 3, 1991. The officers pulled him out of the car and beat him brutally, while amateur cameraman George Holliday caught it all on videotape. The four L.A.P.D. officers involved were indicted on charges of assault with a deadly weapon and excessive use of force by a police officer. However, after a three-month trial, a predominantly white jury acquitted the officers, inflaming citizens and sparking the violent 1992 Los Angeles riots.

Finally, Rodney King got on CNN and asked, “Why can’t we all just get along?”

Today I realize that question isn’t naïve at all. It’s profound. And why can’t we all just get along? I think we actually can, if we really strive to do the right thing. As a little kid I came to a point where I got along with a kid who used to bully me. But that’s because I had someone show me the way, the mother of the birthday boy.

And really, when we think about it, it’s all summed up in the last line of today’s gospel reading:

I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.

But in order to do that, we can’t call others unclean. Instead we have to empty ourselves of the desire to set ourselves above others, apart from others, away from others—and that’s not always easy to do because we often give into our fears. But it’s our call—to embrace our differences instead of disdaining them, to find connecting points instead of creating barriers and walls.

What God has made clean, you must not call profane.

Indeed, we must not call profane what God has made clean. We are, after all, one bread, one body. And so we’re called to reach out in love. And we can. And we will. Supported by this community, uplifted by our prayers, empowered by this Eucharist. We can. And we will. This is what we believe, because we are an Easter people of promise and an Easter people of hope.

What God has made clean, you must not call profane.

Amen.