

“The Word Becomes Flesh”

December 26, 2021

Scripture: John 1:1-14

The other day I read an article about a painting that was stolen recently from the Catholic Union of America law school in Washington, D.C. The painting was titled “Mama...” and it was a depiction of Mary, the mother of Jesus, holding an adult Jesus in her arms after he’s taken down from the cross. It’s what’s known as a “pieta.” That’s a common art form in paintings and sculptures. Probably the most famous is Michelangelo’s sculpture in Rome. What made this particular painting unique was it depicted Mary and Jesus as Black and Jesus resembles George Floyd who was murdered by an on-duty police officer in Minneapolis on Memorial Day in 2020.

There was a very negative response to the painting on the part of a conservative group that prompted a lot of threatening emails from various people toward the school and the artist. The artist is a man named Kelly Latimore in St. Louis. He’s white and was raised in a white evangelical church, but was moved by the coverage of Floyd’s murder who, as he lay dying, was calling out for his mother. In that moment the artist saw something deeper than just another Black man murdered. As he said in an interview with Religion News Service, “I believe Christ is in that image, just as much as it would be in “normal” Pietà — the European version of Christ.... In Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus asks us to find him in all people, especially those who suffer as George Floyd did.” For that insight he received what he characterized as “white supremacist, racist” threats.

I still find that kind of reaction astonishing. It seems to me anyone who truly embraces the claim that in Christ God’s Word becomes flesh would want to see that depicted in all sorts of ways. If we can’t see the Word become flesh in George Floyd, then where do we see it? And what do we actually mean when we make that claim?

John’s gospel tells the story of Jesus’ origin very differently than Luke or Matthew. John offers the image of Jesus as God’s Word, present at the moment of creation. “In the beginning was the Word. And the Word was with God and the Word was God.” That claim catapults Jesus far beyond anything the other gospel writers had in mind. They may have talked about Jesus being one with God by virtue of his ministry of healing and willingness to go to the cross or through his suffering through the passion, but probably not as a pre-existent relationship. John alone of the gospel writers emphasizes the significance of the Word becoming flesh, God’s Word becomes flesh. As one ancient Celtic theologian says, “[Christ] possessed our nature, so as to make us participants in his nature.”

If we affirm that, then the idea that a depiction of Jesus could look like someone unjustly killed makes all kinds of sense. In fact, maybe there is no resemblance that’s off limits. From advocates for battered women there are images of Jesus depicted as a woman crucified on a cross. The other day I was struck by the images out of Afghanistan of children who are starving. Because the Word, God’s Word, becomes flesh, we can imagine such a child, ravaged from starvation, lying in a manger.

During this season that's so filled with goodwill and generosity and cheer, we can easily forget amidst all that, what it means that the Word becomes flesh and lives among us. We prefer to keep Christmas magical, or a fantasy. But God enters a real world in Christ, a world of flesh and blood. There's nothing magical about that. It's messy and full of pain. But it's also an affirmation of who we are because God meets us as we are. We can't confine how God is present to a skin color or a gender or an age. Because the Word becomes flesh, God becomes every one of us. As that same ancient Celtic theologian put it: "He, who from God made himself a human being, makes gods from human beings."

Incarnation includes us all. God is manifest in us at every moment, through every joy and sorrow we endure. There is no part of us, no condition we are in that is off limits to God's Word become flesh. For some of us that may feel intimidating. The psalmist might be feeling a little desperate when she sings, "Where can I go from your spirit, or where can I flee from your presence?" We cannot escape God's Word become flesh any more than we can escape ourselves, no matter how hard we might try or want to deny our true selves. God takes us on, takes on our flesh as we are.

And if we can fully embrace that and accept it, then maybe the hatred and bigotry that leads to violence and callousness toward others can finally be overcome. Whatever it is in ourselves we want to eradicate by lashing out at others because God's Word becomes flesh, we are free to accept and love ourselves as we are. And we're free, finally, to see God's Word made flesh in others; to embrace God in them even as God embraces us.

There is no other more radical claim our faith makes than that in Christ, God, the very maker of heaven and earth, becomes flesh and dwells among us. And not just in some far-off place in some misty time long ago, but right here and right now. Once done, it cannot be undone. The Word becomes flesh over and over in every person, every one of us, no matter what our condition or how removed we might feel from God. God has taken possession of us to make us participants in God. Try as we might to escape that, to shake God's image from ourselves, we can't do it. In Christ God is inextricably bound to us. And that means we can find Christ in every other person we see, whether it's our own child or a child starving halfway around the world; whether it's a Supreme Court justice or a person unjustly killed. The Word becomes flesh for all of us and we are made one in God.

Amen