

From Feast to Fast: Honoring the Human

Epiphany V

Scripture: Psalm 103:1-18; Matthew 11:2-19 Text: Psalm 103:14

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

Last week I, as I suppose many of you, watched the Super Bowl taking place in New Orleans. Because of 9-11, the game was moved back a week, consequently right into the center of *Mardi Gras*. And, as we have come to expect with television these days, it is a string of commercials interrupted occasionally by football. And then, even less frequently, there may be an interview of some interest, and with *Mardi Gras* being on in New Orleans, the capitol, and all of that in the midst of the Super Bowl celebration, one of the television journalists interviewed a local New Orleans person who talked about the celebration of *Mardi Gras* as he had experienced it growing up as a second or third or fourth generation New Orleans person. He made the point that it was a wonderful festival, a wonderful family time, that it was really a time for family and friends to enjoy each other and to celebrate together and he made the point that what the media camera catches about *Mardi Gras* is not really what it's all about. It is not, after all, he said, one big orgy. It is just a good, decent family celebration, and I'm sure that he is right, and I'm equally sure that the cameras will try to find whatever is at its naughtiest to bring us from New Orleans and the *Mardi Gras* celebration.

But, as the interview was going on, I thought to myself, "Native of New Orleans who celebrated many *Mardi Gras*, I wonder if you really know the deep background of *Mardi Gras*." He gave no indication of knowing that place out of which it arose, or the reason for it arising, which is the fact that, in the wisdom of the ancient Church, there was a recognition that it is necessary to have a certain rhythm and balance in life, and so the Christian Year is structured such that one moves from feast to fast to feast to fast. (C. S. Lewis, in his *Screwtape Letters*, has the old Devil commiserating about God's wisdom and giving people that rhythm, feast to fast to feast to fast, where it is always the same, yet always new.) In the interview, I didn't see any acknowledgment of that background, really, in the ancient Church where, on the threshold for example of moving into the solemn and sobering period of Lent of forty days, license was given to have a grand party, to pull out all the stops and to celebrate.

This morning we have a taste of it with some foot-tapping music and there are Paczkis, and you're invited to indulge to your heart's content, but in the real celebration of *Mardi Gras*, there is this full release of all that is a part of the human person, the human animal, the recognition that to honor the human is to give opportunity for the expression of the full gamut of that which constitutes us as human beings.

So, *Mardi Gras* was a party that started out as an opportunity to let go and to release and to get it all out of your system as you moved into the somber time of Lent which was marked in the tradition of the Church by self denial, which we have come to mark more in terms of the cultivation of some added dimension of our spiritual experience, not necessarily repression or self-denial, but spiritual enrichment. Nonetheless, in the ancient practice of the Church, there was this emphasis on self-denial and prior to it, on the threshold of it, a grand party, and there was wisdom in that, because we are, after all, creatures who are composed of body and soul, soul and spirit, material, physicality, sensuality, spirituality - all dwelling within our skin. But, of course, the Church has always also recognized the risk and has been squeamish about the expression of our humanity in such a fashion.

I was reminded of this in a book I read while I was gone, *Constantine's Sword*, by James Carroll. You'll probably be hearing me quote this thing a time or two every week for the next ten weeks or so. It has to be one of the ten best books I've ever read.

James Carroll was raised a very observant Roman Catholic. In his childhood and his adolescence, he had a very devout mother who led him on pilgrimages and exposed him to the finest and the richest of spiritual experience in the Catholic tradition, to the extent that he eventually became an ordained priest and even a member of the Jesuit Order. Eventually, James Carroll came to his own personal conviction that that was not what he was cut out for. He left the order. He is a writer, a journalist, married, with a son and a daughter. He continues, according to his own description of himself, as a faithful, if critical, Roman Catholic. The point of my story is this: the Church has always been squeamish about the expression of the human, particularly in its sensuality, its physicality, in its bodily expression, and James Carroll, wanting to bring his wife and his two children on a pilgrimage to Europe where he had grown up, where his father had been in the upper echelons of the military in Germany after the Second World War. They came eventually to St. Peter's itself, in Rome and, as they approached, the Vatican guard stopped them and would not let them enter because his little daughter, just a child, had her knees exposed, because she had a little mini-skirt on.

James Carroll, who was raised in the very heart and center of the Church, deeply traditioned, priest and Jesuit, and all the rest, says in this book that he saw his little daughter humiliated at the doors of St. Peter's. Suddenly it rushed over him – everything of which he had experienced a failure of the Catholic Church, that

failure being the denial of the human, that squeamishness before the full humanity and its expression.

I could identify a little bit with him because I had been turned down at St. Peter's myself for wearing Bermuda shorts and, taking many people there over the years, I always warned them to bring a scarf and have their shoulders covered, and fully covered kneecaps. Nonetheless, what he experienced was a moment of insight. He credited his non-Catholic wife with being more adept at dealing with situations like this than himself. The wife took the little girl off to the side and kind of skinned her little skirt down until it covered her knees, and then took her sweater and covered her bare midriff and they went through with flying colors. The story, of course, simply points to that which has marked so much of the Church, its moralism, its inability to deal with the flesh. Now, I started out by saying the *Mardi Gras* was particularly that opportunity to do that. But, on the other side of the coin, the Church has been so crimped and so cramped in the full expression of human being.

When I read Carroll's narration, I was reminded of a story of my own which happened over thirty years ago down in Williamsburg, Virginia, looking at some of those old Colonial buildings and taking a tour of Williamsburg. We came to this building, a lovely building, an upstairs hall, lots of windows, nice wooden floor, and over in the corner there were some wine vats and then some chairs stacked up. The tour guide said, just matter-of-factly, that in this hall on Saturday evenings the community would gather for a dance and enjoy a glass of wine together in this space. And then, on Sunday morning, the chairs would be set up and the community would return for divine worship.

As I heard that, there was an experience, a moment for me precisely like the moment for James Carroll at the door of St. Peter's. For at that advanced age of my life, wine had never touched my lips, nor had I ever danced one step or the two-step, or whatever they danced when I was growing up, out of religious and moral scruples. It wasn't just that I am clumsy, which I am, but I could not dance. It was one of the things I could not do. As I stood there that bright, summer morning in this hall flooded with light with its wine vats and its dance floor and the chairs that on Sunday were filled with worshipers, I had one of those "Aha" moments, one of those *Epiphany* moments when I realize that I was living a truncated existence, that there was a whole spectrum of life of which I was not a part, which was civil and decent and lovely and grand, and I had been so crimped that there was no balance in my life, no balance between Saturday night spent in an enjoyable fashion and Sunday morning spent in religious devotion. I didn't know those things could go together. And so, for me, it was also a moment of insight and I realized that there was something lacking in my own traditional experience and nurture, and frankly, in my ministry.

This morning, I tell these stories simply to make the point, as we are on the threshold of another Lent, that it is in the honoring of the full spectrum of our

humanity that we best honor God and best find our own human fulfillment, for we have in the Church not done a very good job of honoring that full spectrum.

The Psalmist speaks so profoundly in this regard when he speaks of the love of God. Certainly there is sin and transgression, but he says, as the heavens are high above the earth, so great is God's love for those who fear him, and as far as the east is from the west, so far has God removed our transgressions from us. And then he goes on in what I think is just so profound: "For God knows our frame; God remembers we are dust." And, of course, it is a reference to the Creation story where the Creator in the midst of a garden of delight, Eden, a garden of blessing, forms the human being out of the mud, the stuff, the earth, and then breathes in the breath of life so that that mud becomes a living being or a living soul. What the Jewish people have known and maintained in terms of balance so much better than we in the Christian Church is that the whole human being is made up of that physicality and spirituality, and that both must be honored and allowed to come to expression.

What happened in the New Testament, and you can take a line from Paul to Augustine to John Calvin, and you have a terrible distortion of the human being. Paul hinting at original sin. It was Augustine who formulated the doctrine of original sin, and of course, it was trumped by Calvin, as well, in the Reformation period. But, to take the Creation story which in its Jewish format is a story about the Creator creating a creature who has physicality and spirituality, who is put to a test, who fails the test, but who is tested again and fails again and tested again and fails again. There are about four falls in those early chapters of Genesis.

There is not a "Fall," as though there was an original couple that ate an ancient apple that marked forever the rest of the human race. To do that to the story is to miss the story and all of its profundity. But, that's what happened in the Christian Church so that, to be human became synonymous with being sinner, and so to be human was not something to be trumpeted, but rather almost something to be ashamed of, something that needed to be screwed down and restricted and repressed and, consequently, many of us have lived with a bad conscience about that shadow side, to use Jung's term, and have lived with the denial of much of our humanity that is simply a part of being a human being with physicality and spirituality.

Mardi Gras at its best was the attempt to allow people to kick over the traces and have a ball, to be just a little bit naughty, if you will, but to enjoy themselves fully, fully cognizant of the fact that they were entering into a period when they were called to more sober reflection and the pursuit of spirituality. If we would honor the image of God within us, if we would allow humanity in its wholesomeness and healthy fullness to come to expression, then we'd have to recognize that rhythm from feast to fast, from party and celebration to serious intention and disciplined spiritual experience, and to do this is to allow the fully human to come to expression.

It isn't easy. I think the Psalmist, as I said, expressed it as well as it could be expressed. God made us human. Why would God condemn what God created in the human that is physical and spiritual?

Jesus ran into it. John, good old John, fire and brimstone preacher looking for the end, all torn up by all of the degeneracy around him, John who had introduced Jesus now has questions. There was too much joy in Galilee for John's liking. There were stories about too much joy connected with Jesus' ministry for John's liking. He sent his disciples to ask, "Are you the one, or was I mistaken? Aren't you the real item?" And Jesus gave him a very ambiguous response. He didn't defend himself, just didn't define himself except by his deeds. He said, "Go tell John what you see - the blind see, the deaf hear, the lame are walking, the prisoners are released." And then he said a very interesting thing, "Happy is the one who is not offended in me."

There have been a lot of very sincere, devout, religious people who have been offended in other religious people who have had too much fun, who have enjoyed life to the fullest. And Jesus couldn't have affirmed John more than he did, but he said, "You know what, the one who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than great old John." And then he said to the people, acknowledging the fact that this is not an easy thing, "I don't know what to do with you, because it is like children in the marketplace saying, 'Hey, we wanted to play weddings and you didn't want to play weddings. You didn't want to be happy. So, we said, 'Well let's play funerals,' and you said, 'We don't want to be sad, either.'" He said, "I don't know what to do with you. John comes neither eating or drinking and you say he has a demon. I come eating and drinking and I'm possessed." It is not easy. Happy is the person who is not offended in another person's joy and expression of their spirituality in a celebration.

It is ironic that this morning between services one of my dear old friends came up to me and said, "I got a letter from a friend of mine telling me how awful is Christ Community and how terrible are you. You wouldn't believe it." I said, "Oh, yes, I would."

Happy is the person who is not offended in the joy and the celebration as we seek to give expression to the fullness of our human nature, after all, in the image of God.

Lent is coming, but in the meantime, have another Paczki.

References:

James Carroll. *Constantine's Sword: The Church and the Jews: A History*. New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2001.