

Supernatural

Rev. Joe Connolly

“From now on, therefore, we regard no one from what might be called a human point of view, mere human judgment. Even if we did once regard Christ in these terms, that is not how we know Christ now.” — 2 Corinthians 5:16.

Last week I started off my comments with these words: “Many of you know this. I’ve probably said it hundreds of times.” I then referred to being a proud graduate of Bangor Theological Seminary.

What I want to say this week you have also heard me say probably hundreds of times. The faith tradition of my youth was Roman Catholic.

My first 10 years of schooling— First Grade through Sophomore year in High School— were all spent in parochial schools, Catholic Schools. The first six years of that schooling were in the same grade school, one connected with the local parish church my family attended.

It’s the name of the parish church, hence, it’s the name of the grade school, I want to mention. The church, the grade school, had what many would see as a horrible even somewhat frightening name: Fourteen Holy Martyrs— Fourteen Holy Martyrs grade school, Fourteen Holy Martyrs church.

Goggle that name— Fourteen Holy Martyrs— and the church and school show up. This group of saints, a grouping which dates from the 14th century in the Rhineland, was just that— a grouping.

These saints did not live in the 14th Century. This grouping of saints were not even alive at the same time. All of them also, by far, predated the 14th Century but got grouped together in that era.

They were grouped together and venerated because people were encouraged to pray for the intercession of these saints with God. The influence of that intercession was believed to be effective in multiple forms of healing. And the healing being sought in the 14th Century was quite specific: healing from bubonic plague, the Black Death.

Now, when you look up these 14 saints what you find out is in Germany, in the Rhineland, they were *not* known as Fourteen Holy Martyrs. They were called Fourteen Holy Helpers.

And each of them were connected to a specific healing, each saint connected to a different healing— fever, diseases of the eye, etc, etc. In short, in terms of Catholic tradition, the intercession of these saints on behalf of people helped cure various diseases. I suppose since the bubonic plague was so horrific, any kind of healing would do.

That having been said, one does have to wonder what in the American psyche translated the name of these fourteen saints from “Helpers” to “Martyrs.” This is especially true since, in the legends of these saints— and these saints are not particularly traceable to real people but were legends— in the legends of these saints none of them appear to have actually suffered a martyr’s death.

To be clear, I labeled that Fourteen Holy Martyrs name as horrible since I sometimes still wonder what kind of effect a name like that had on impressionable youngsters attending a grade school thusly named. Did that name somehow traumatize them for life? Did that name mean some of the students might think that they, themselves, were also headed for martyrdom?

Some probably did think that. Not I. If one takes theology seriously one does not indulge in that kind of transference and early on I already took theology seriously.

I make that statement about taking theology seriously because what I am about to say happened when I was in the Fourth Grade, or at least that's what my memory says. Even if that memory is slightly inaccurate, I know it happened when I was still attending Fourteen Holy Martyrs since I also know in the Seventh Grade I switched schools and started to attend Saint Ignatius Loyola Grade School. So this happened no later than the Sixth Grade; I think earlier.

In any case, around that point in time I got into a deep theological discussion with my parents. I stated the premise that the grace of God is not natural, not normal. The grace of God is outside what is natural, outside of what is normal.

Further, that the grace of God is, itself, a gift from God is not normal either. Why? Grace is a free gift and there is nothing normal about a free gift. So if the grace of God is not natural it is, thereby... supernatural. Natural is what we humans do; supernatural is the work of God, said I. (Slight pause.)

We find these words in the work known as Second Corinthians: "From now on, therefore, we regard no one from what might be called a human point of view, mere human judgment. Even if we did once regard Christ in these terms, that is not how we know Christ now." (Slight pause.)

In the Roman Catholic tradition two kinds of grace are identified— Actual Grace and Sanctifying Grace. I won't get into the differences here. Neither I nor you have that kind of time today.

So, let's get right to the point. What is grace? The Roman definition, that is the Roman Catholic definition says grace is the supernatural help of God granted in and through the reality of the Christ. [1]

This is not to say the grace of God only happened after the birth of Christ. The grace of God can be found all over Scripture.

Indeed, the Roman church, itself, says the grace of God was available before Christ. God is, after all, God. Rule one— do not put God in a box. Rule 2— see rule one: do not put God in a box.

But that very thought— not placing God in a box— brings us to Paul's writing. Something common in all the lectionary readings assigned for today, but especially in the Corinthians and in the parables found in Luke, is that joy is available in the restorative love of God.

I need to be clear: joy is not happiness. We get happiness from having fun or doing something we like. Joy is found only in deep, lasting, full relationships, especially a deep, lasting, full relationship with God.

The reality of that joy happens because the Christ has opened up a new way of knowing, says Paul. The Christ has opened up a new way to see a new world.

Further, in the Christ the reconciling love of God is clearly revealed. And then Paul pushes this idea still one more step.

Paul's claim is that because of the grace of God we— *we*— are commissioned to be engaged in the ministry of reconciliation, ambassadors for God in the ministry of reconciliation. This is not natural. This not what humans do normally. This is supernatural. (Slight pause.)

One of my commentaries on this reading says (quote:) “Nothing may be more difficult for Christians in North America than adopting the new way of discernment inherent in the gospel.” Why? (Quote:) “To be reconciled to God means to be an agent of reconciliation... for the world.”

Please note: the words from this commentary were not ripped from recent headlines. This commentary is many, many years old. (Slight pause.)

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a German pastor, theologian, an anti-Nazi dissident. The writings of Bonhoeffer on the role of Christianity have become widely influential.

The book *The Cost of Discipleship* has been described as a modern classic. Bonhoeffer died in a Nazi concentration camp on April 9, 1945, just before the end of WWII. Hence, Bonhoeffer *was* a martyr, a martyr of the Christian faith.

In a sermon on Second Corinthians Bonhoeffer said this (quote:) “Christendom adjusts itself far too easily to the worship of power. Christians should give more offense, shock the world far more than they are doing now. Christians should take a stronger stand in favor of the weak rather than considering first the possible right of the strong.” (Slight pause.)

What was Bonhoeffer getting at? What was Paul getting at? I may be wrong but I think they are getting at... the supernatural. (Quote:) “...through Christ, the world was fully reconciled to God, who did not hold our transgressions against us— *who did not hold our transgressions against us*— but instead entrusted us with this message of reconciliation.”

If that does not turn the world as we know it upside down, I do not know what does. That is not natural. That is supernatural.

For we humans that we are empowered by God, entrusted by God to be a part of reconciliation is supernatural. It is a gift of God, the work of God. Question: are we willing to participate in the work God sets before us? Amen.

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ENDPIECE: It is the practice of the Pastor to speak after the Closing Hymn, but before the Choral Response and Benediction. This is an précis of what was said: “This saying has been going around. I think it applies. ‘Our job is not to judge others. Our job is not to figure out if someone is deserving of something. Our job is to lift those who are fallen. Our job is to restore those who are broken. Our job is to heal those who are hurting.’ Simply striving to do that it is supernatural and will, by the power of acting in that way, turn the world as we know it upside down. Here’s another way to put it. As theologians we need to understand theology is not a hammer. Hammers are only good at hitting nails. Our theology is not a hammer. Our theology needs to be glue which mends the world and holds it together.”

BENEDICTION: Let us seek to love as we have been loved by God, welcoming our brothers and sisters. Let us rejoice in God’s goodness and steadfast love. Let us follow where God leads. Let us go on our way with Christ as our companion. And may the steadfast love of God and the peace of Christ, which surpasses understanding, keep our minds and hearts in the companionship and will of the Holy Spirit, this day and forever more. Amen.

[1]

<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/06689x.htm>