

Monastic Scribe IV: June 11, 2021

Fear of God ... and Hell

I am grateful that I grew up in a loving home where I felt safe, secure and much loved. Then I attended, first public school, and then on to the newly opened Catholic school in our town. The Dominican Sisters there were good women and good educators. I never, in all my years there, ever saw one of them strike a student. I know this is not the case for all who have attended Catholic Schools. My mother, who must have been quite a cut-up, more than once recounted her experience of Sister Tarcisius rapping her on the knuckles for some unacceptable behavior. She never got over it! I have heard some harrowing tales of Sisters or Brothers who were unkind, demanding and sometimes physically abusive. Their former students carry scarred memories, sometimes enduring into adulthood. Of course, there are even the worse incidents of sexual abuse and other acts that left a child traumatized. Much work is needed to find one's healing for trauma. But, even for lesser scars, it is necessary to face the truth, and tell the truth, in order to move beyond it.

Today I want to focus on just one area of hurt that needs healing. That is our image of God. So many people have carried a fear of God and a fear of hell around in their psyches. Sadly, the state, as well as the church and some parents have contributed to an image of a punishing, fearful God in order to discipline and socialize a young child. Going to hell for missing Mass or eating meat on Friday. God as a judge, a policeman, a menacing father - these have all been images that have been passed on to children in their religious education. In our own time we have been witnessing religion being used to bolster political and cultural views.

Jesus would have none of this. God to him was a loving Abba whom he heard saying, "This is my beloved son in whom I am well pleased." AIDS, COVID-19, the death of a loved one – none of these are punishments from God. Jesus on the cross was not being punished for us but showing his love by identifying with all people who suffer, even terrible deaths. When we were born God looked at us in delight and smiled and laughed at our little antics of new life. When we grew and made mistakes, God continued to look at us with love and compassion, sometimes with sadness to see us mess up our lives. But there is always forgiveness and redemption. Always, God looks upon us and says, "This is my beloved son/daughter in whom I am well pleased."

Honestly now, admit whether you know God loves you, that you feel God's love! God will never stop loving you. Black, white, brown, gay – God loves you! Perhaps

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you need to change your image of God. Maybe “compassionate mother” would help some people. I like the psalm calling God “my rock.” And there is this lovely verse in Psalm 91 which reads: “Say to the lord, ‘my refuge, my stronghold, my God in whom I trust’ ...When you call I shall answer: ‘I am with you, I will save you in distress and give you glory.” But we must begin our healing by admitting our failures, our denials, our mistakes, our hurts. Let God get in through the light of the holes in your psyche. God can only love you as you are, not as you think you should be or want to be.

The irony is that to really come to know God, we must really know ourselves, warts and all. We must know we are lovable despite these warts. I have used the following quotation from Saint Thérèse of Lisieux in a homily more than once. I have this saying posted on my desk and have to be reminded often of the truth behind it – “If you are willing to bear serenely the trial of being displeasing to yourself, then you will be for Jesus a pleasant place of shelter.”

Pray to God, talk to God, listen to God as a God who loves you.

Ultimate and full healing will be the mystical union with God which starts in this life. Share God’s unconditional love with others.

What do you think? Drop me a line at joycet@glastonburyabbey.org

God loves you; so do I.

Fr. Timothy Joyce, OSB, STL

Please note that I do not speak on behalf of Glastonbury Abbey, the Archdiocese of Boston or the Catholic Church, though I hope my faith is in harmony with all these. Any error in judgment should be credited to me and not anyone else.