

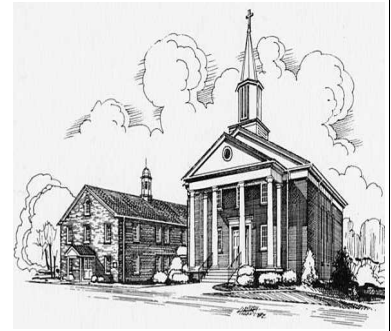
The Lessons Appointed for Use on the

Sunday closest to August 17

Proper 15

Year B

RCL



Too Late Wise

1 Kings 2:10-12; 3:3-14

Psalm 111

John 6:51-58

The Collect

Almighty God, you have given your only Son to be for us a sacrifice for sin, and also an example of godly life: Give us grace to receive thankfully the fruits of his redeeming work, and to follow daily in the blessed steps of his most holy life; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

SERMON

Joseph Campbell was a scholar, a wicked good story teller, and the preeminent authority on a subject that gets a very bad rap in current culture. Joseph Campbell was a mythologist. He studied myth.

When we talk about myth, we mean made-up stories told by primitive people to explain lightning bolts. Myths, in our post-Enlightenment rationalism, are not to be treated seriously. A thing either is, and can be demonstrated to be or have been, or it is thrown unceremoniously on the slag heap of superstition, never to be visited seriously again.

If you feel that way, Joseph Campbell would like to have a word with you, and I'd urge you to pick up one of his books and permit him to do so. In Campbell's view, the sharing of myth is the way that human beings understand the important things about life. We've walked off and left it, somewhere in the 18th Century rush to Enlightenment. I'm afraid that we're too soon smart and too late wise.

When Campbell speaks of myth he means an account that informs us about our place in the basic, unknown force from which everything came, within which everything currently exists, and into which everything will return. The language of myth tells us how to live in a creation that owes its beginning and its continuing existence to a God who tells us:

“For my thoughts are not your thoughts,
neither are your ways my ways,”
declares the LORD.
“As the heavens are higher than the earth,
so are my ways higher than your ways
and my thoughts than your thoughts.”¹

That's the world we live in, church – a world created and sustained by a God whose thoughts are not our thoughts; whose ways are not our ways. We too often forget about that “sustained by” bit. It is critical. How are we supposed to live in God's creation and

¹ Isaiah 55:8-9

not be crushed by our own stupidity?

My faith background, Disciples of Christ, emphasizes rational thought and I honor that tradition, but I don't swallow it whole. Rational thought can certainly puzzle out important things, but however rationally we apply ourselves, we are never going to rationally raise our thoughts to God's level. There is always going to be a point beyond which we simply can't go. Here are Campbell's words:

One of our problems today is that we are not well acquainted with the literature of the spirit. We're interested in the news of the day and the problems of the hour. . .Greek and Latin and biblical literature used to be part of everyone's education. Now, when these were dropped, a whole tradition of Occidental mythological information was lost. . .

The literature of the spirit. This is the wisdom that we have left behind in our rush to scan the geography of Pluto. The story of Jesus' life and death is given to us as a way to live out that which we cannot understand. We have lost the literature of the spirit with which we might understand what is being told us, yet, for three millennia, people have understood the important things in life by story because story is as close to the transcendent as we can come. It is not the business of the church to advocate that there were dinosaurs on Noah's Ark. It is the business of the church to re-introduce us to the power of myth as Campbell speaks of it, as an account that informs us about our place in the basic force from which everything came, within which everything currently exists, and into which everything will return.

The reason I bring up Joseph Campbell is because it was Campbell who first unpacked the word "atonement" for me into "at-one-ment". I had always thought of atonement as something one did to apologize for something one did wrong. I broke my mother's lamp, so I said I was sorry and brought her flowers from the yard to atone for what I did. Campbell points out that atonement means becoming "at one" with another. The two stories we have today tell us something very important about at-one-ment. Solomon prays for what will bring him into at-one-ment with the position God has

placed him in; Jesus offers his life as the path to at-one-ment.

The text this week tells us

At Gibeon the LORD appeared to Solomon in a dream by night; and God said, "Ask what I should give you."

Not, "What do you want?" Not even, "What do you need?" God puts a powerful test to Solomon: "Ask what I should give you." To pass the test, Solomon must answer wisely. Well, what should God give Solomon? Of all the things God could give Solomon, what should God give Solomon in order that God and Solomon can walk together in at-one-ment? God is asking Solomon to name that thing Solomon needs to come to atonement with God.

Solomon answers well.

And Solomon said, "... I am only a little child; I do not know how to go out or come in. ... Give your servant therefore an understanding mind to govern your people, able to discern between good and evil ... "

Solomon's answer to God's question was, in essence, "Give me the thing I need to accomplish the task you have given me, for to do Your Will is my greatest, highest and only purpose." If you truly seek for ways to at-one-ment with God, remember the story of Solomon's answer to God's question. Campbell tells us how vital it is to keep these stories in our mind, as wise guideposts of our own actions and attitudes.

It used to be that these stories were in the minds of people. When the story is in your mind, then you see its relevance to something happening in your own life. It gives you perspective on what's happening to you.

By contrast, in 21st Century thinking, it is thought to be enough to be able to look up what you need to know. If you need to know how many hectares are in a hogshead, Google will look it up for you. Campbell says that this is not enough. We're too soon smart, too late wise. What we need is the wisdom of myth within us, as close as our own thoughts, as close as our food and drink or the next breath we take.

When we pray, we need Solomon's prayer in our minds, always. Are we praying for God to remake His creation into something we'd prefer, or are we praying "Give me the thing I need to accomplish the task you have given me, for to do Your Will is my greatest, highest and only purpose." If this is not our prayer, what business do we have addressing Him who spoke all of Creation into existence with a mere word?

In the life of Jesus we see the story of how a human being can go through his life at-one with God. It is our task to hold this story as close to ourselves as the very food that we eat and the drink that sustains us.

Jesus said, "I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh." The Jews then disputed among themselves, saying, "How can this man give us his flesh to eat?" So Jesus said to them, "Very truly, I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day; for my flesh is true food and my blood is true drink. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them.

Think about this, church. There are a limited number of atoms in the atmosphere. We breathe and re-breathe them. With every breath you take, to a mathematical certainty, there are some atoms which were breathed by Jesus, perhaps some that were in his last breath. You are breathing, at this instant, the breath of Jesus! THAT'S how closely you must carry the empowering heart song of God's love, represented by the life of Jesus, with you.

As Christians, God is constantly commanding us, "Ask me what I should give you", and we are obligated to answer always, "Give me the life and death of Jesus of Nazareth as my heart-song, as near as my next breath. Give to me that which I need to accomplish the tasks you have laid for me, for to serve your Will is my highest, best and only purpose."

AMEN

BENEDICTION

Six hundred years ago, in Norwich, England, a lady named Julian lived. We know her as Julian of Norwich. She wrote a tiny book containing perhaps the most beautiful prayer ever composed. She wrote:

“O God, please give me three wounds; the wound of contrition and the wound of compassion and the wound of longing after God. This I ask without condition.”

She wasn't dickering with God. She wanted three things and they were all for God's glory: “I ask this without condition, Father; do what I ask and then send me the bill. Anything that it costs will be all right with me.”²

Until we meet again,

May the love of God the Father
The grace of God the Son
and the communion of God the Holy Spirit go with you.

2 A.W. Tozer

Optional parts of the readings are set off in square brackets.

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