

“And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God is its light, and its lamp is the Lamb. The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it.” Revelation 21: 23-24

What is the glory of the nations, that glory that the rulers of the earth will bring into the new city that is coming down out of heaven? What is the glory of our nation? We usually think about glory in terms of light or set alongside of power and pride. The glory of our nation is its liberties, its generosity, its economic strength, the constitutionally enshrined rights guaranteed to its people. The glory of America is its mission to bring liberty and justice to all.

But another aspect of glory is reputation. Human reputation is always a function of an other, some judgment by others of what we should be. Throughout the world our recent behavior in the service of security is being judged by others. Indoctrination tactics Americans have learned from, and taught to, other security states are coming home to roost in Iraq and our national reputation is suffering.

But Jesus in John’s gospel says, “I do not seek glory (reputation) from others . . . I seek only the glory (reputation) that comes from God.” What is the nature of this glory of this light that shines in the darkness without reference to sun, moon and stars? And how can we seek it? How can we receive it?

What goes for nations also goes for churches and other institutions as well, and for us as individuals. Jesus says to us, “You are the light of the world.” We are known by our works. Our works illumine the world. “A city built on a hill cannot be hid.” When we hand baptismal candles to the newly baptized, we say, “Receive the light of Christ and let your light so shine that the world may see your good works and give glory to God.” This is more than pious liturgical language. Both giving and receiving this light is at the essence of what it means to be a member of the church.

With that candle we bestow as a gift the identity and reputation that comes from God. It’s a tangible sign of the Blessing with which God blesses us. Of course the candle is extinguished, carried home with the best of intentions to light it on the anniversary of the baptism, and probably forgotten until the drawer is cleaned out next when we wonder what it is. But something else is going on. We are

reminding ourselves that we derive our identity not from the world but from the glory that comes from God.

And for the newly baptized it is true enough that like the candle is extinguished, so our true identity is dimmed, as a hurricane lamp is dimmed with soot, forgotten and too often laid aside in favor of the one that is supplied by the glory that comes from the world. Hopefully at the time of our confirmation we rediscover and claim that true identity for ourselves, and sometimes it's at some cost because our friends and our parents can be more comfortable with the one supplied by our interactions in the world.

Questions like "Do you go to church; you don't really believe all that stuff, do you?" And we can even reject that identity ourselves, yearning for the world's glory, addicted to the favor of our friends, the approval of our parents, employers, etc., and yet hiding from the love of God. I remember a conversation I had as a young youth minister with the father whose son had been elected president of the youth group. He said, "I want my son to go to Dartmouth, not become an evangelist."

Or even on into adulthood, having once or never received one's sense of self, one's "I," as a gift from a personal experience of blessing from the creator God, we can become either an evident failure in the eyes of the world or a great success at grasping our self our "I" ultimately over against others who are in rivalry with us.

Perhaps a familiar parable of Jesus will serve to flesh this out some. The Prodigal Son, as it is known, though it is more accurately described as the parable of the Loving Father, tells of two sons the younger of which publicly dishonors his father by claiming his inheritance as if the old man were dead and then immediately selling it for cash and taking off for a far country. His headstrong rebellious business venture goes from bad to worse. He's lost his father's legacy to "gentile pigs," and now he's literally living with pigs and starving.

You know the story. There in the pigsty a plan comes to him: he will return to his father and after making apologetic gestures, the younger son will propose he be hired on as one of the farm hands. The legacy he has squandered is his true identity as a son of the father and the reputation he has earned is one of shame before his family and community. It's important to recognize that nothing has happened or occurred to him in the far country that is not merely yet another version of his attempt to grasp his identity. He does not repent until he returns home.

In fact he only reaches the outskirts of town before his father sees him in the distance and does something only a mother would do. No father in that culture would expose himself to the shame and ridicule of being seen running down the street for any reason let alone to lavishly greet his disgraceful son. Nevertheless, before the boy has a chance to regale him with his prepared speech the father falls on his neck kisses him. Before he can manipulate him into taking him back as a hire, his father tells the servant who has run out into the public street with him to go and get the best robe, the ring for his finger, and to kill the fatted calf for a feast with the entire town. He restores him to his place in the family.

It is here as a gift that the younger son receives back his true identity, his “I”. This experience causes him to repent. He is so overcome that his proposal is silenced by the extravagant, reconciling, self-offering love of his father. His older brother shows by his resentment that though his identity is a “good,” it is grasped from the world in rivalry. Yet the father’s costly reconciling love extends to him as well. Standing outside with him, refusing to go into the party, the father reminds him that everything he has belongs to the older son. We’re left wondering if it isn’t harder for the good to receive the gift of God’s grace than for those whose lives have failed to measure up to the world’s glory.

Jesus promises in today’s gospel, “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives.” It is the promise of forgiveness and reconciliation delivered by the Holy Spirit through us standing here in the church greeting each other at the Peace and greeting the newcomer at the door. Our greeting repeats God’s blessing and reveals our true identity as children of God. The Church stands in for the heavenly city welcoming everyone home. Having received the light that emanates from the lamb that was slain, having an identity that is “gift” rather than struggle, we can now offer to others the reconciling peace of the father and join with all around the tree of life. Each of us reflecting this light which is the glory of God that comes from the lamb that was slain will mean that our nation may more truly walk by that light.

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