



“The Cathedral and The Stranger”

Sunday, August 16, 2020 – Pentecost 11

My favorite author of all time is a writer by the name of James Lee Burke. James Lee was born and raised in Louisiana and now lives in Montana. James Lee is a visual artist that uses the written word to place you intimately inside the places that he writes about. You hear the sounds, smell the smells, see the sky and are wrapped in the physical presence of the story. When you read James Lee, all of your senses are active. As yet another testament that “it is indeed a small world,” one evening I was deeply imbedded in a James Lee story, and Mona saw the author’s picture on the back of the book. “Hey, I know that guy,” she said. I was skeptical at best, and on deeper inquiry Mona shared that James Lee Burke was a “regular” at the Western Bar in Helena and was one of her best customers at the Keno Cage. Strange...and then we learned that James Lee’s daughter Alafair and my daughter Alise were classmates at Reed College in Portland. Strangers? Not really, not when you look a little deeper. Today’s Gospel Story is about a realization that Jesus has. An “ah ha” moment catalyzed by his meeting and interaction with a Canaanite Woman “the other” someone different...a stranger, “one of those people.”

James Lee Burke talks about such a spiritual awakening moment in his newest book, *A Private Cathedral*:

“I’m talking about one of those moments when you spiritually strip your gears, and you get lost inside the immensity of creation and see too deeply into our ephemerality and our penchant for our tribalism, greed and war and our willingness to destroy our Big Blue Marble, and you scare yourself so badly that you seem to hang between life and death an ache to hold on to the earth and eternity at the same time, regretting all those days and nights you deconstructed your life piece by piece and hurt the ones you loved and the ones you didn’t even know, realizing none of them deserved it. After you are through with this “long night of the soul” or after it is through with you, you’re never the same. Earthly fears disappear like a great weight removed from a scale. You have no inclination to hold grudges; reticence becomes a way of life. You are now an occupant in the Great Cathedral, where you can hear the people’s heartbeats along with yours echoing off the walls.”

Some geneticists tell us that our penchant for tribalism, for clans, for seeing “strangers” or those who are different as dangerous could actually be a primitive defense mechanism. An

inbred wariness of other harkens back to a time when the “others” come and steal your food and your wood and hides. Is our tendency to always see the “otherness” perhaps a genetic artifact of this time? Maybe...but in the ongoing battle between “Nature and Nurture,” the ongoing battle between primitive brainstem responses and learned responses of a higher order, The Jesus Way asks us—no, requires us--to shed our “otherness,” our fear, our old instinctive tribal ways in favor of an open, welcoming and inclusive existence.

Saints, this is not an easy thing to do. It is easy to slide back into our more primitive, tribal, autonomic ways. Especially in today’s polarized social climate. Sometimes, we forget and fail to see the Face of Jesus in all of those around us. Many times we forget that we are all related...made in the image and likeness of our God. It is so easy to revert back to our primitive “us” and “them” dichotomy. It is so easy to forget that sometimes we need someone to remind us “who we are” and shine the light on “who we have perhaps become.” Someone different than we were, someone harder, quicker to take offense, holding on to grudges like a walking stick. Shooting word-bullets in person or on social media into the torso of “the others.” Isolating ourselves within our clannish club houses where we all think alike, act alike and look alike. We need someone to “shake us up” to help us back into the Great Cathedral on our Big Blue Marble...to help us remember that Divine Spark that resides in us and in all.

I believe this is what happened with Jesus and the Canaanite woman. In this story Jesus’ humanity is showing his ‘tribalism’ is front and center. He pretty much says to the Canaanite Woman, “I didn’t come for you,” you aren’t part of this...this is not for you...not your place...not your story. I believe that Spirit is working hard through the blessing of the Canaanite Woman’s strength and delicate finesse to be a catalyst for Jesus to get his head right, get back on point, to remember his vision quest and his mission. Yes, it is true...I come for all...that of God in Everyone. Yes Saints, sometimes it takes a stranger to help us find our way back to the Cathedral whereas James Lee Burke writes so eloquently

“Where you can hear the people’s heartbeats along with yours echoing off the walls.”