

Dinner Parties

James 3:13-18, 4:1-3, 7-8a; Mark 9:30-37

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I like the letter of James. It was Martin Luther who had a problem with it. He called it an “epistle of straw” — which I suppose is true enough. He claimed there was too little of Christ crucified in it — which I suppose is true enough. Words of wisdom, words of common sense: okay, it’s not profound, but it is useful. Placed more in the Old Testament tradition of Proverbs and Ecclesiastes, the Letter of James “was to enforce the practical duties of Christian life,” Wikipedia tells us. And it does so quite well, beautifully, in fact. Preacher Will Willimon has said that reading the book of Proverbs is like taking a long road trip with your grandmother. If so, then the letter of James is as if your grandmother were a Waldorf method preschool teacher.

Actually, it sort of reminds me of a new book, *Religion for Atheists*. Alain de Botton, a Swiss-born, now Englishman and self-proclaimed atheist, wrote it. I’ll admit I haven’t read the book, but I did read the opinion piece he wrote for the *Wall Street Journal* and the book review Aengus Woods wrote for National Public Radio.

De Botton’s central thesis is that secular modernism has resulted in a loss of a sense of community, which he believes is something the great religions of the world managed to create very well. So he means, by his own admission and in his own words, to “steal” from religions the practices that create community. While leaving behind the belief systems that he finds absurd and that he assumes most people guided by common sense would also find absurd, de Botton would like to see a flowering of Agape restaurants, for example, wherein people who are strangers might eat together so to become friends. Rich and poor, young and old, smart and simple, senator and janitor: all would be welcome, would sit shoulder to shoulder, and would feast.

Incidentally, this is quite a switch from what I’m used to hearing: that people want spirituality without all that religion. Here’s someone who wants all that religion but without the silly spirituality. De Botton is going to let common sense be the guide for building a commonly held sense of community.

But, the problem, which the NPR book review points out very well, is that common sense isn’t so common. Everyone thinks they’ve got it and that some other people might have it as well, “yet most of us can usually identify large chunks of the population who conspicuously lack it,” writes Woods. “To make matters worse, in any projected breakdown of global common-sense distribution, we can’t even agree on which folk constitute the haves and [which] the have-nots. However, one thing is always certain: I myself possess it. Definitely. Absolutely. No question.”

Woods continues, “This conundrum of common sense is what makes a writer such as Alain de Botton so attractive and so infuriating. He is a master of the well-heeled, chatty, and above all reasonable tone.... But scratch the veneer, and one quickly finds myriad competing common senses screaming to break free.”

Here is one of the competing common senses that screams in my mind to break free: when I gather with strangers at an agape meal, whose voice is authoritative? Whose sense and sensibility will we adopt in common? Alain de Botton’s—so reasonable, so calmly assertive? Well, then I’m not interested. I’ve met educated white guys

with a calmly overdeveloped sense of reason. They make me want to run screaming to my nearest women's studies class.

But about one thing he might be right, though not as sweepingly so as his sweeping statement suggests. He writes, "Insofar as modern society ever promises us access to a community, it is one centered on the worship of professional success. We sense that we are brushing up against its gates when the first question we are asked at a party is 'What do you do?' our answer to which will determine whether we are warmly welcomed or conclusively abandoned." And this reminds me of what the disciples were arguing about as they walked along the way.

It's surprising that they fall into this argument, isn't it? An argument over greatness, over what is greatness, and over who among them will be deemed greatest. That this is where their conversation goes is surprising given that what comes before is Jesus teaching them about his own suffering and death. "The Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands," or more accurately translated, "is to be handed over, and the humans will kill him, and three days after being killed, he will rise again."

This is one of three times that Jesus mentions his fate on the cross. Sometimes it's said that he foretells it—his own crucifixion; this time it's said that he teaches it. It's a distinction that I'll now perhaps make too much of. To foretell it is to tell me about something that's to happen to him; to teach it is to tell me about something that I should try to do as well. As a follower of Christ, as a disciple to be disciplined in the way of Christ, I should live a cruciform life; I should form my living in the shape of the cross—self-giving, self-emptying.

And it *is* a discipline. It *is* something that needs to be taught to me, that I need reminding of and practice in—because it isn't the human's natural predisposition, or at least not the human's only natural predisposition. We like power, and the power to be found in vulnerability is a little counterintuitive. We like glory, and the glory to be found in giving love is not as self-evident as the glory to be found in wearing pretty clothes or living in a fancy home where you can throw parties that everyone wants an invitation to or holding a job that pays you millions of dollars and where you get to employ lots of people and fire a few too.

The bitter envy, the selfish ambition that James mentions in this open letter, these are so common! It might not be so, as James writes, that we want something and do not have it, so we commit murder. It might not even be so that we desire something and cannot attain it and so we engage in disputes and conflicts. No, the reactions to such feelings might not be ours in such extremes. But certainly these feelings, so familiar to me, are familiar to each of us, and certainly they do pose a threat to our relating, to our participating in community. Otherwise why write an open letter? If envy, if ambition, if competition weren't so commonly at work within us, if these are evils that afflict only a couple of people, then why not just write that one guy who has this thing called envy that seems to spoil his relationships; otherwise, why not just write that one girl who is out of the norm because of her ambition?

The disciples didn't understand the teaching. They didn't understand what Jesus was saying, and I can relate. Every time I'm to preach on one of these occasions when Jesus has spoken of what awaits him—something I'm to do a lot, since three times in the three synoptic gospels, he speaks of his own coming suffering, which means that three times a year outside of Holy Week, the cross is there for us to wrestle with again—my initial thought is, "Oh, I've done this before; I'll whip this sermon out."

But then I sit with the text and with the formula to which it testifies—that the cross is God’s revelation of good news for us, that the crucifixion is made a means of God’s grace, God’s amazing grace—and I realize that once again I don’t get it, that I need to start from scratch and figure it out anew. Why is the crucifixion good news? Why does the cross save; how and why and from what does it save us?

The cross is good news because it means humans, even at our worst, are little match for God’s goodness—God’s love, God’s forgiveness, God’s peace. The cross is good news because it reveals that God’s glory is in weakness, God’s strength is in vulnerability, God’s might is in self-giving, God’s victory is in self-emptying. And God’s Christ is that guy—not some superstar, but just some guy; some gentle, forceful, regular, exceptional guy for whom there is no place in this world of powers and principalities and death-dealing dynamics and might-makes-right, and so who must be expelled from it, yet only to return and to say for starters not this, “I’m back, and I’m pissed, and you’re gonna get yours,” but this, “Peace be with you.” And the crucifixion saves because it reveals to us humans the power dynamics to which we are enthralled, a revelation that in turn gives us some measure of self-understanding and therefore hope for stepping out of such a downward spiraling. The crucifixion saves because it lays bare the lie by which we largely live, that violence can and will save us from violence, which in turn gives us some measure of unblindness and unforgetting and therefore hope of ending cycles of violence. Finally, the crucifixion saves because in it and through it and in spite of it, God has done something—something wonderful, something new (behold!), something miraculous—that plants in the earth a seed of peace, a seed of hope, a seed by which God’s Kingdom will grow even here.

Liz Garrigan-Byerly, our once member and then seminarian and now pastor of a UCC congregation in Pennsylvania, and I used to play with this question: the salvation that comes through the cross, does it come because of what we do in response to what we’ve learned in witnessing the cross and resurrection; or is it something God did, has done, continues to do, in the mystery of the cross? And at her ecclesiastical council, when those gathered, having read her ordination paper, might then question her on certain aspects of it, I asked the inevitable atonement question. There’s always one in every council, someone who asks the dread atonement question. “How does the cross save us? It’s not that the blood of Christ is what God required in order to slake God’s wrath. That was our answer once—for about 1,000 years; but now we know better. So, does the salvation come of what we do in response to what we’ve seen and heard? Or is it something God has accomplished in Christ and the Church?” I asked it, and she smiled back at me knowingly: this was coming. Her answer: “Yes.”

Okay, so the disciples didn’t understand. Clearly, the more things change, the more they stay the same. But they at least had the chance to ask follow-up questions; they at least could have asked Christ, “Could you say again, and this time slower?” That they didn’t out of fear softens my judgment in their regard. That they didn’t ask because they were afraid to ask has me feeling some compassion for them. I’ve been there. A math teacher stands at the chalkboard and says, “ $A^2 + B^2 = C^2$,” and I sit at my desk and nod my head because, you know, whatever. Fear comes because I know I have no hope of understanding, and the test is coming up, and this is probably going to be on it.

Jesus, for his part, seeing that the disciples haven’t learned from his teaching, arguing as they were moments later about greatness, decides to give it another go.

“Show, don’t tell” is some common wisdom, and so he does, taking a little child and putting it among them—this powerless, voiceless, vulnerable scrap, probably dirty, perhaps disowned. Here is the guest of honor.

It makes a huge difference to me at least in whose name I join a group—in whose name and by what spirit. It matters, probably more than it should, in whose name and by what spirit I join in. Alain de Botton has invited us to a meal; so has Jesus. I’ve been to meals of the sort de Botton has in mind. They do nothing to address the cravings that are always at war within me, and (I sort of hope) are always at war within and among us all. (I don’t want to be singularly crazed.) They, in fact, tend further to stoke such internal conflict: to tell the funniest story or to listen graciously while awaiting your turn, to amuse and sparkle in conversation or to try to blend in with the wallpaper, to impress or to come across as someone who really couldn’t care less. I’ve also been to the meal Jesus had in mind—been to it in sanctuaries of stone and stained glass, been to it kneeling at an altar and sitting in a pew and standing at the table myself breaking the bread, been to it in conference rooms at annual meetings and in this plain room of restrained beauty. It always addresses that which is at war within me and us—the things James’ letter means to address and Jesus’ self-giving and servanthood does clearly address. It addresses it by spelling out and laying bare just exactly who I am (frail, foolish, in need of confession) and having me at table anyway. It addresses it by saying, implicitly if not outright, “Come as you are; serve as you can; eat as you need; taste and see that the Lord is good.”

If you can get that self-emptying spirit into a restaurant dedicated to a secular agape meal, then God bless it. Take it away, Alain. But if you can’t, then we’re here. Just look for the sign of the cross and you’ll find us.

Thanks be to God.