

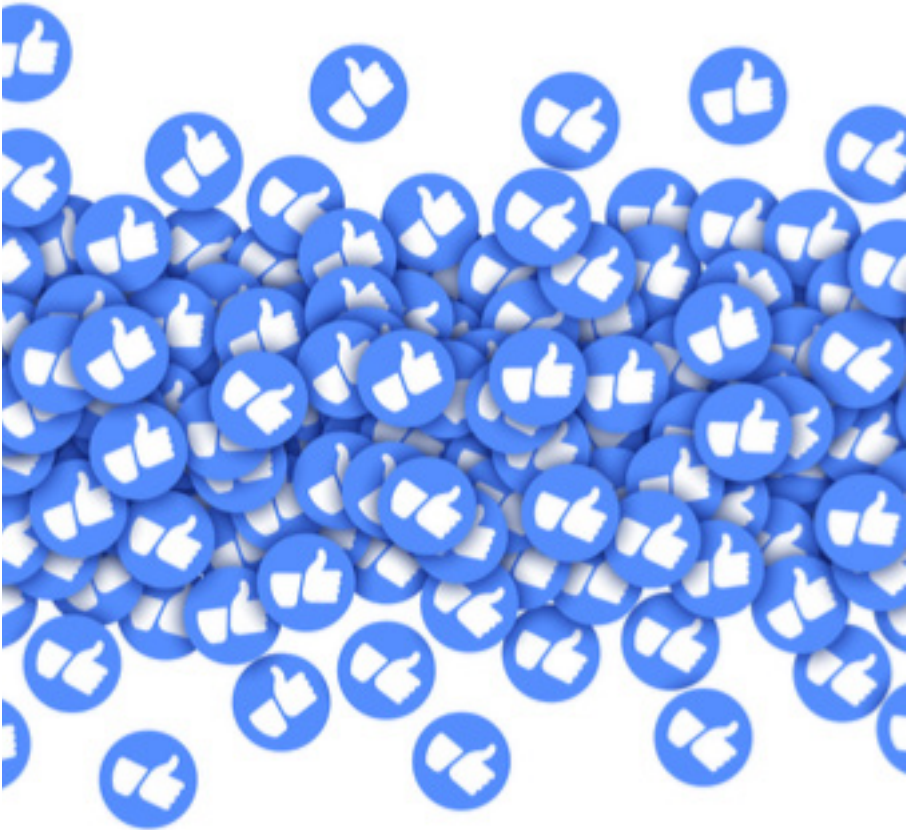
February 18, 2024

The First Sunday of Lent

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St. Anne's in-the-Fields Episcopal Church

Mark 1:9-15

“The Divine Like”



The insidious quest for “likes” in our social media age, I think it is safe to say, has reached bizarre and even deadly proportions. Take, for example, the college student in Mexico who, in a poorly reasoned attempt for “likes” photographed herself doing “extreme yoga poses” on her 80th-floor balcony, posting her selfies to social media. When one of the poses went awry and she fell off the balcony, the young woman very fortunately did not die but merely broke both legs, along with fractures to her arms, hip, and head. In a similarly ill-conceived quest for others’ attention and approval, a Twitter user in 2020 announced that she would drink the contents of a snow globe and “update [her] followers on how it goes.” It did not go well. Her follow-up post featured a single word: “hospital.” A final example comes from the world of TikTok where one can find innumerable instances of people—mostly younger folks—doing really risky things for social approval, including the infamous “Tide Pod Challenge,” in which TikTok-ers recorded themselves chomping down on a pod of Tide laundry detergent. To date, at least ten people have died and nearly 40 have suffered significant self-poisoning from this desperate attempt for viewers, applause, approval, and “likes”—a quest for attention based in large part upon the false notion that my self-worth depends upon others’ approval.

But this is nothing new. While previous eras haven’t revolved around social-media “likes” per se, for millennia we humans have persistently shaped our behavior, and have tried to shape the behavior of others, through a carrot-and-stick system. The carrot-and-stick system is the dominant way our world knows to guide the behavior of others: if other people (our family members, colleagues, neighbors, friends) do something “good”—something we “like”—we give them a carrot to positively reinforce that behavior. By contrast, if they do something we consider “bad,” something we dislike, negative reinforcement ensues: everything from a frown to a timeout to the silent treatment, or worse. We tend, in other words, to operate in a framework where praise/approval is earned. Positive regard is believed to follow performance—both for ourselves and in how we regard and treat others.

But today’s gospel passage stands against the entire carrot-and-stick system in an extremely countercultural way. This passage essentially records Act 1 Scene 1 of Jesus’ ministry: Jesus going to get baptized before he does any preaching or teaching or healing. And what happens here in the waters of the Jordan before he has

“performed” in any meaningful way? Jesus comes up out of the water, and a “voice from heaven”—literally, God Almighty—says “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.” Jesus receives God’s loving approval, before Jesus actually has done anything. It’s only the 11th verse of Mark: Jesus has not spoken even a single word yet, and apart from allowing himself to be baptized, he’s done literally nothing. And in this context of having accomplished absolutely zilch so far, God publicly pronounces—for all to hear—how profoundly Jesus is loved, how deeply Jesus’ existence “pleases” and delights God’s heart.

This passage reveals, in other words, that in God’s kingdom, approval and love precede conduct/behavior/“performance” because God’s acceptance of you and me is intended not as the carrot that God waves in front of us (a la “if you’re really really good, I’ll be happy with you”) but rather as the very fuel that empowers one’s daily life. “I act a certain way not in order to get God’s love but because I already have God’s love,” just as God’s public approval of Jesus does not follow his ministry work but is the fountainhead from which Jesus’ ministry is launched, nourished, and empowered.

And—even more to the point of my homily this morning—not only do you already have God’s love, but if God were running FaceBook, the very instant you created an account, your profile would already be overflowing with an infinite number of likes. Because not only does God’s love for you precede your conduct, but God’s divine and eternal “like” for you appeared within your soul the moment you were conceived in your mother’s womb. The “love of God” is a phrase so terribly overused that it has grown rather trite and, I dare say, lacks the necessary luster and punch for accurately conveying God’s immense delight over each one of us. So what if we rephrase things a bit: shifting from talking about the love of God for you to the “like of God” for you—the experience of not just being unconditionally loved by God but unconditionally liked by God? Through this phrase, I’m not saying that God likes or approves of everything you or I do, but that God unconditionally likes you, as a person, regardless of what you do or do not do. A liking without carrots or sticks.

The contemporary Catholic theologian James Alison picks up on the power of being liked by God in his important book, appropriately titled “On Being Liked.” Alison argues that Christians miss out on a crucially important opportunity and invitation

when our faith traditions—especially in this season of Lent—grow overly centered upon questions and issues of sin: How does Jesus’ death affect our sin? Did Jesus “have to” die in order for our sin to be forgiven? What if Jesus hadn’t died on the cross, or what about those who don’t “believe in” Jesus? Does God still hold their sins against them? Alison argues that Christians’ sin obsession, and the framing of Christian faith and life around sin, blinds us to the much more joyful invitation of God to participate with God in God’s ongoing acts of Creation: creating, renewing, revitalizing, extending hope, and justice, and healing, and peace, and love. Alison invites us, in other words, to reimagine the central axis of our faith not as “How does God deal with sin?” but instead as “How can we take up God’s invitation to share in the act of Creation?” “What would life be like, not if I finally got myself together and overcame all my gnawing temptations, but what would life be like if I viewed it as a daily, even moment-by-moment opportunity to collaborate with God in the healing, the recreating, the flourishing of my neighborhood, my family, my community?”

Even more to the point of today’s gospel reading, Alison then observes that when the focus of Christian faith shifts from “avoiding punishment for sin” to “playing in the global sandbox, co-creating Life with God,” then faith itself shifts from a set of obligations and requirements to a spiritual posture of—in Alison’s words—“relaxing.” Rather than thinking of Christianity as a set of beliefs we are required to hold, or actions we must or must not do, Christianity as co-creating Life with God intrinsically and fundamentally relaxes us, because the starting point of relating to God is not our sin, God’s judgment, and the depths of my unworthiness, but instead God’s acceptance, God’s love for each one of us.

Who is someone that you know who accepts you just as you are? Try to bring that person to mind. For me, among several individuals including my parents and brother, I think of my wife, Shoko, who in our 14+ years of marriage has been with me in my best and my worst, with whom I have weathered a lot of storms, and whose acceptance of me as a person is beyond any doubt. And therefore, how do I act in her presence? Am I uptight and concerned about how Shoko might regard me or judge me? Not at all: most fundamentally, my heart in Shoko’s presence is not striving, or anxious, or unworthy, or uncertain. Most fundamentally, my heart is relaxed with Shoko—and so too

with God. I really hope that each one of us here this morning has at least one person in our lives from whom we feel unconditional love, no-questions-asked acceptance. When you're with that person, you know that you can simply relax: you're not trying to prove or earn anything; in fact you know deep, deep down that you do not need to earn anything, because you already have the very thing you most desire, that other person's unquestioning acceptance. Alison dares to make the bold claim that this message—God's unconditional acceptance, God's eternal "like" of you (not necessarily all your actions but you as a person)—this message, and not one about the complexities of Christ's bloody atonement for human sin, this message of God's liking of you is the real message at the heart of Christianity.

So, to connect Alison's insights back to our gospel passage, when Jesus comes up out of the water of his baptism and publicly receives God's personal approval, God is turning upside-down humanity's dominant way of thinking about love, and like, and performance. God effectively says, "Jesus, you're just at the very beginning of your ministry. But here before you do anything, I'm publicly announcing my love and my approval—my "liking," if you will—of you, personally you. Because that's how my Kingdom operates: not with a carrot and a stick, but with Me, Almighty God, stating at the very beginning my unconditional acceptance, approval, liking, and loving of you. Because it's that love, and the way that that love is given—at the outset, not predicated upon performance—that is going to overturn and radically transform a world so weighed down by its obsession with carrots and sticks."

And God is still here, God is still loving and liking, God is still working through human beings like you and me to challenge the world's oppressively iron-bound performance-based system. So what could it look like in your family or your community or your school or your workplace to let God's radically accepting love flow through you? Who specifically might God be nudging you to unconditionally love—and maybe even like—today?

In closing, let me emphasize that this divine approval without carrots or sticks is not, first of all, a blueprint for raising kids. There may well be a place for rewards and punishments in helping a toddler to grow up. Unconditional acceptance is about the person, not the person's behavior. Nor, secondly, does this divine acceptance mean suddenly becoming totally naïve. If I'm walking around Harvard Square, it doesn't mean that I just unthinkingly

shower cash upon people who are obviously struggling with substance abuse. There's a reason we possess critical reasoning skills.

But at the same time, may we not allow our "reason" and our "wisdom" to obstruct the radically generous, no-questions-asked, utterly unconditional love of God through us, because it is the very unreasonableness of that otherworldly love—and liking the essence of the Other—that literally has the power to change the world.

Like Jesus on Day 1 of his ministry, you—before anything else—are loved by God, and perhaps even more amazingly, you in your essence, you as a person, are liked by God. As we go forth from this church, today and this week, we will surely encounter many people—at work, in the supermarket, maybe even at home—whose conduct, whose personality makes them unlovable and unlikeable in the judgment of the world. But already secure in God's love and God's like for us, may we each let that divine approval flow through us, blessing the unlovable, brightening the unlikeable, transforming the world. Amen.

