

Blob Tag Faith

Isaiah 42:1-9

Acts 10:34-43

Matthew 3:13-17

Psalm 29

In my former life, running an equestrian camp, we used to play a lot of games on horseback. One of our students' favorites was called Blob Tag. We'd have about fifteen people on horseback in an arena and one of them would be designated as "it". That person would ride around attempting to tag the others. Every time someone was tagged, they became part of the blob. As the blob grew, it became increasingly difficult to avoid being tagged because the blob would work together to corner and tag others. The one who avoided being tagged the longest would then become "it" and we'd begin another round. It was fun! One of the most notable things about this game was that, unlike games where you pick the most proficient people to be on your team, in Blob Tag, proximity is the key. You're after getting the largest numbers, not the best players. In fact, you tend to ignore the better riders because they are better at evasion, and the game moves faster if you just tag whoever is closest. Today's readings reminded me of Blob Tag.

God's love is viral. It continually grows. Everyone who is touched by it is changed and then that love through them, touches others. We humans are tribal creatures. We believe that we understand who is and who is not included in God's love. Especially for modern Christians who have lived with canonized and bound copies of The Holy Scriptures and prayer books for centuries, we think we have a solid understanding of who God loves and by what criteria that is measured. Which is why it is interesting how often the Scriptures speak of the divine voice heralding, like in Isaiah, "new things I now declare". The idea of God's expanding, unfolding, new way of pouring out love, is found all over Scripture, so it's kind of ironic that once we fixed the confines of Christianity, we also jumped to the conclusion that God's modus operandi had also suddenly ground to a halt.

God's pattern has always been unfolding salvation, for everyone who will accept God's love. In Acts, Peter says God shows no partiality. The criteria for becoming part of God's people are beyond all human boundary lines. Peter says God's love is for those who fear God and do what is right. Fearing God is ancient language that means to take God with ultimate seriousness. And doing what is right is not speaking of good behavior but bringing about right-ness. Churchy language calls this righteousness, but it means people who act to make the world right, the way God intended at creation. It means to work towards healing and repair brokenness. In other words, according to Peter, salvation is for everyone who experiences God's love and lives to help others experience it.

Peter goes on to talk about the responsibility of those who have experienced God's love to testify to others about their experiences. Once we've known God's love it is our responsibility to make it known. To Peter, God's kingdom is like a game of Blob Tag.

But here's where Christians tend to get confused. We expect and want Peter to say something a little different. We expect him to say "God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right by believing and behaving according to our ideological, religious, political, social, cultural, etc... understandings and practices is acceptable to him". He does not say that. We impose that. We think we understand where the boundaries around God's inclusion lie. But Peter existed before Christianity was formalized. At the time of his speech, Jews who lived according to Jewish Law were the only ones permitted access to God. Peter was speaking to Cornelius, a gentile man, and his household. Earlier in this chapter Cornelius (a non-Jew, a Roman soldier) is named as a man who feared God, prayed diligently, and gave alms. God was doing something new. God was tagging people from beyond the previously drawn religious lines.

Peter does not say what we expect. Perhaps one of the most significant things about what Peter's speech does not say is that it mentions nothing about doctrine. It specifies nothing about what a person must intellectually believe in order to be part of God's tribe. At the end of this passage in Acts, Peter mentions forgiveness exists for "everyone who believes in" Jesus. This word for belief is not about what exists between a person's ears. Rather, it indicates allegiance and trust, and it is an active word. It more literally means to lean the weight of your life towards someone. According to Peter, belief in Jesus is about an ongoing experience of trusting Jesus' way of life and continually finding him to be trustworthy.

Peter said, Jesus' way of life was marked by "doing good and healing all those oppressed by the devil". In the world of Acts, the devil was understood as a real personal force, opposed to God's purposes. But people did not neatly separate spiritual oppression from physical or social suffering. To be healed by Jesus was to be freed in body, mind, and community, from all oppression. In today's passage from Isaiah, God describes this type of total healing. God says it will be a light for the nations, not just the people they thought would be included. And the one appointed to bring it about is called God's Servant. God did not choose a powerful or prestigious figure, but a lowly servant, an everyman, nobody special. God is always choosing and using the ones humans overlook and push away.

Today is the Feast Day for the Baptism of our Lord. John the Baptist was a Jew, but he was an outsider. He was a seriously weird guy, and he violated the religious expectations of his day. Not only that, but he critiqued and confronted Israel's religious systems. John was a controversial figure precisely because the baptism he offered indicated that the religiously observant people of his day were somehow still failing to follow the heart of God. John invited people into repentance. One of the reasons Jesus' baptism was so profound was because the sinless Jesus humbled himself to identify alongside normal people. God's will was for Jesus to fully participate with human sinners, submitting to their imperfect

religious practices and even their acts of resistance that demonstrated a desire to do better. Jesus' alignment with humanity in that way was the incarnational behavior we are now invited to emulate.

Jesus went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil. But before he did any of that, before his life illustrated the power of the Holy Spirit that rested on him as he emerged from the baptismal waters, he first humbled himself to be among his fellow humans. He observed his religious practice. He also went outside the religious centers to be among misfits and mavericks who couldn't or wouldn't adhere to his religious norms.

All of us hold certain religious and ethical values. All of us have boundary lines. We all believe we are right; our knowledge and experiences prove it. And we can find justifications for our mistrust, disdain, and even hatred for those who exist outside of or violate our standards. It is hard enough to get in a vehicle and drive down the street without feeling violated by the imperfect behavior of others. It's harder still to stay informed regarding the daily news cycle without being inflamed with outrage. That person, those people, they... there is always someone or something deserving of our ire. But friends, God's wrath against our sin did not prevent Jesus from coming to rescue us in it.

God's heart breaks at all that is not right in the world. That is why Jesus lived and died as one of us. God sent Jesus to begin the work of healing our brokenness. We are now invited to be as Jesus, healers working with God to repair this broken world. The book of Acts teaches us to look for God's activity in the places we least expect it. But we cannot do that when our hearts are filled with violence. The good news is that when we feel incensed and grieved at the world's pain, we can be certain God feels it more keenly and is more dedicated to seeing it restored. Only God's love can heal this world. When we believe God with our feet and hands, not just our minds, and we humble ourselves as servants to be among the rogues and misfits, we will always find God's power available to do the work of healing.

May we be a people willing to let God's love flow through us, confident in God's power to transform the most unlikely folks, as we reach out to tag others into the kingdom.