Fifth Sunday of Lent, Cycle B

St. Mary’s Riverside, 2021

In today’s gospel a group of visiting Greeks – probably Gentiles –

 Posed a question to the apostle Philip,

who had a Greek name

could have spoken Greek

and may have been perceived as the go-to-Greek

When it came to Jesus and his inner circle.

 The question they posed is flatly translated as

 “Sir, we would like to see Jesus.”

 but they are not looking for a quick selfie,

 or a Jesus autograph on a scrap of papyrus,

 But more an opportunity to talk,

 to dialogue

 to engage …

 Like 1st century precursors of Oprah

 It sounds like they want to interview Jesus

Chat over lunch

Or have a leisurely dinner and ask the real questions.

You may have run across a similar question

 that has been asked of celebrities and friends

 Shown up in college applications and job interviews

 And been floating around for decades:

 If you could have lunch with anyone, who would it be?

 Or, in its more elaborate form,

 If you could throw a dinner party

 And invite any 6 people, living or dead,

whom would you invite?

I spent far too much time

going doing that rabbit hole on the internet

but the results were fascinating.

Frequently named guests were

 Abraham Lincoln

 Albert Einstein

 Nelson Mandela

 Thomas Jefferson

And, not surprisingly, Jesus.

 Some took a more challenging turn

 Like inviting some of the world’s most notorious criminals

 One populating a dinner party

with Jessie James, Al Capone and Adolf Hitler.

 Others opted for a circle of artists such as Russian Novelists

 Or celebrated musicians from Mozart to Hendrix.

 Most of the lists I could find online were dominated by males

 Though occasionally a Michelle Obama or Elizabeth I

 Made the short list.

While it is of little value for me to disclose my own list …

 Trying to upstage every other dinner party

 with my mythical gathering of luminaries

 What intrigues me more is the “why” behind the lists.

 Is the gathering for entertainment?

 If so, I’d invite Mark Twain.

 Is it to solve mysteries?

 If so, I’d be sitting next to Amelia Earhart.

 Or maybe it just a serene wisdom moment

 With Jesus, Buddha, Mohammed, Gamaliel & me

 Quietly enjoying a Japanese tea ceremony.

Today the word does not simply ask us if we would like to see Jesus

 To have him autograph our baptismal certificate

 give us communion

 Or maybe have a home Mass with our families.

 Rather the always impertinent Word of God wants to know why?

 What would be the outcome of such a meeting?

 A euphoric high documented by a few great photos?

 The interview of a life-time sure to garner a Pulitzer prize?

 Or the prophetic gift of Jeremiah announced in the 1st reading:
 a radically envisioned life of covenant,

 A transformed way of being

 And a divinely inspirited heart transplant?

In my imagination, the prophet Jeremiah is one of those folks

 I’d rather read about than live with.

 He must have been one incredibly tough truth teller

 Not only announcing when my wardrobe was out of style

 My manners on the wane

And even my hygiene slipping

 But also, when my spirituality was beyond pathetic

And on the verge of being eternally embarrassing.

 He was that kind of truthtellers for God’s first Chosen People

 Reminding them how

they had violated their covenant with their Creator,

 Especially because of their worship of other gods

 But also, as reiterated by other theologians of the period,

 Because of the way they had oppressed the poor.

 Sound familiar? Love of God AND neighbor?

 So pious yet assertive Jeremiah pushes the covenant envelope

 And announces a second chance - a fresh covenant

 Not one with new content …

 But rather one with new geography …

 Not an external set of stone tablets

 Useful for whacking us

 When we get out of line

 But an a more visceral set … inscribed on hearts

 On internal flesh

 On the very center of our being

 That does not shame us with commandments

 But fires us with love.

In attempting to imagine what a heart inscribed covenant might be

 I am helped by imaginative bloggers and believers.

 One of them, Baptist Minister Stacy Simpson

 Offers this reflection entitled “Branded by God”[[1]](#endnote-1)

She writes: T*he image of God writing on the heart of the people is a compelling one, it also has a frightening aspect to it.*

*Think of a tattoo. Better yet, think of getting branded. Now that tattoos have gone mainstream, those who stay ahead of trends are getting branded. I met a guy who did this. He said it "hurt like hell" for a very longtime. Now it’s a scar and he is "branded for life."*

*Pain, indelibility, identity are the central aspects of what it means to be marked. If it didn’t involve pain, it wouldn’t be indelible: marks that don’t hurt are the ones that wash off. If it were not indelible, what it revealed about a person’s identity wouldn’t be so critical. Literature on tattoos and brands warns potential customers to be sure that they want the mark they are getting and to consider it permanent. Tattoo your arm with "Roseanne" in your 20s, and you better still be married to her 30 years later.*

That’s an interesting reflection, at least for this Roman Catholic,

 Who learned at an early age

 Through endless catechism classes

 That baptism left an indelible mark on our souls?

 Translation: at baptism a covenant was inscribed on us

 Our very hearts were tattooed by God

 In the image of the only begotten.

Over the past few weeks,

 I’ve been listening to a most amazing book

 *Sapiens: A Brief history of Humanity[[2]](#endnote-2)* by Yuval Noah Harari

 While there are multiple aspects of this book that intrigue me

 One that resonated with today’s gospel is in chapter 5

 In which this Israeli scholar and Oxford grad

 Discusses the power of wheat …

 Harari begins this discussion, imbedded in what he calls

 The agricultural revolution

 By reminding us that 10,000 years ago wheat was just wild grass

 Confined to a small range in the Middle East.

 But within a few short millennia

 It was growing all over the world, becoming what he calls

 One of the most successful plants in the history of the earth.

 So, world-wide wheat covers 2.25 million square kilometers

 10 times the size of Britain.

 In explaining this phenomenon

 Harari notes that we lived largely as hunter-gatherers

 Until 10,000 or so years ago

 But then our forebears began investing more and more effort

 Into cultivating wheat

 Living a much more difficult life than hunger-gatherers

 Who only worked about 4-6 hours a day to feed themselves.

 Now homo sapiens spent 10 hours a day

 Clearing fields of rocks

 Eradicating weeds and insects and foraging animals

 Digging irrigation ditches in the scorching sun.

 The traditional language is that we “domesticated” wheat

 But the world domestication comes from

 The Latin word “domus” which means “home.”

 And, as Harari points, out,

 The wheat is not living in “homes”

 It’s homo sapiens who had to create dwellings

 Right next to the fields to care and protect them.

 His conclusion is that we did not domesticate wheat;

Instead, it domesticated us.

Jesus, was no wheat farmer, but he lived close to the ground,

 Figuratively and literally as a 1st century Palestinian Jew.

 And while no agriculturalist

 He understood something about domestication

 Whether it was sheep or fig trees

 Prodigal sons or fishermen apostles.

 Jesus’ domesticating stories are unusual

 Particularly in one respect.

 Harari narrates wheat’s power to domesticate

 Because the wheat promises life.

 Jesus as God’s first grain of wheat, however,

 Invites a domestication

 That presumes homo sapiens build huts

 Remove stones and pebbles

 Eradicates pests and pestilence

 Not so the wheat can thrive

 But so that it can die ...

 So that it can give up its life

 To seed justice and care

 To seed respect and dignity

 To seed a love of neighbor equal to a love of God.

Just when the end of Lent seems within reach

Easter is looming on the horizon

astronomical spring dawning across the land

and vaccinations are ramping up across the country

This could be a somewhat discouraging, even troubling message

Not only because it reminds us

 That Good Friday is the gateway to Easter

 But that our own self-sacrificing vocation

 To be wheat for others,

 Tattooed on our hearts at baptism

 Is yet to be fully realized.

Sister Dorothy, a member of the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur, spent most of her ministry in Brazil working to give the poor of the Amazon Region a voice. Sister Dorothy was martyred in 2005 - shot 6 times - for standing up for the rights of the poor, as well as refusing to be intimidated because of land disputes which resulted in mass deforestation in Brazil’s Amazon forest.

In 2009 HBO released a documentary, “They Killed sister Dorothy,”[[3]](#endnote-3) chronicling Sister Dorothy’s life and death as well as the trial that brought to justice not only the shooters, but the landholders who were behind the murder.

Premiered in Dayton Ohio, Sr. Dorothy’s hometown, after the movie, there was time for comments and questions with the producer of the movie, as well as Sister Dorothy’s brother, David - also a missionary, who was integral in the making of this movie. David recounted events which had caused him to believe that “Dot” knew that her life may be ended by those she had angered by her unrelenting dedication to her Gospel beliefs.

One of Sister Dorothy’s colleagues commented about how Sr. Dorothy’s was buried on the land she loved so much. Then, after a pause, she stated that “Sr. Dorothy was not buried, she was planted. Her work continues to grow, change is happening.” The audience sat in stunned silenced after these words, and then erupted in applause for this “planting” of Sr. Dorothy

 Dorothy planted in Brazil

 Jesus planted on Calvary

and Christians, planted deep in a baptismal pool

 Where we rehearse transformation … we learn to germinate

 We practice dying,

so that not only we

 But others who have suffered through

too many broken covenants

too much oppression

too much marginalization

 Can also find life … in this world and the next

 Through Christ our Lord.

1. https://www.christiancentury.org/article/branded-god [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. https://www.ynharari.com/book/sapiens-2/ [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. https://www.imdb.com/title/tt1183701/ [↑](#endnote-ref-3)