

The Snake Was Wrong

By: Penny Holste

April 7, 2013. Pastor Penny relates two stories today to help us understand the meaning of Easter: "The Snake," by Anne Herbert, and "The Birth of the Pointless People," by Daniel Erlander.

*** Transcript ***

We begin this morning in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Even if you're not a basketball enthusiast, you know probably that tomorrow is the final game in the NCAA tournament. And I'm sure that after the event is over, there will be a lot of analysis of it. And there will be talk about what it means, putting it in perspective, and where to go from here, so that the winning team will probably talk about how this is the high point of their lives and they've been working toward this goal for years. The winning coaches will feel validated in their strategies. And when they talk about where to go from there, they'll probably make some guesses as to which players will be drafted to the NBA, and what the teams will look like next year, and what coaches will get moved around. After any event, we always want to try to analyze it, put it in perspective, understand what does it mean and where do we go from here.

Well, we're one week away from the most important event in the Christian church, and that is the celebration of Easter. And Jesus, in today's gospel, was one week away from that event. And he gathered his disciples together to understand that event, to ask really what did it mean, and where do we go from here? Those are good questions for us a week out of Easter to ask: so what really did Easter mean, and where do we go from here?

I think before we tackle those questions though, we probably need to remind ourselves of why we needed Easter to begin with. And to do that, I'd like to tell you a story that I first heard in the seminary. It's a story written by a woman named Anne Herbert. It's her rendition of the Garden of Eden, not meant of course to displace the one in the Bible, but maybe to shed some light on it. She tells it in the first person, as one who was there. And her story is called "The Snake."

"In the beginning, God created more than two people. God created a whole bunch of us, because God wanted us to have fun. And God said, 'You can't have fun if you don't have a whole gang of people.' And then God put us in this playground, this park called Eden, and said, 'Enjoy!'"

"And at first we had the kind of fun that God expected us to: we rolled down the hills, and we waded through the streams, and we swung on the vines, and we frolicked in the forest. And there was a lot of laughing."

"But one day the snake said to us, 'You're not having real fun, because you're not keeping score.' We didn't know what keeping score meant, so he told us. That didn't sound fun, until he said, 'I think you should give an apple to the person who plays the best. And the only way you're going to know who plays the best is to keep score.' Well now that sounded like more fun, because we all knew that we were the best."

"But things began to be different after that. There was a lot of yelling. And we spent hours creating rules that we could score for our games. We had to give up on some games like frolicking, because we couldn't think of any rules for the game."

"And by the time that God noticed that we were playing differently, we were spending about 45 minutes a day playing and the rest of the time working on our scores. And God became angry. And God said, 'You have to leave my garden because you're not having fun.' We said, 'We are too having fun' — and we were having fun. And God shouldn't get angry with us just because we weren't having fun his way.

"But God didn't listen.

"God kicked us out of the garden. God said, 'You can't come back until you stop keeping score.' And then, just to get our attention, God said, 'You know, someday you're all going to die and these points aren't going to mean anything anyway.'

"But God was wrong. Right now my all-game cumulative is 15,548, and I feel very good about that. It means a lot to me. And if I work really hard before I die, I think I can get my score up to 20,000. And that will be quite an accomplishment. But even if I don't do that, my life has value because I have taught my children to be high scorers. And they certainly will get to 20,000 or maybe even 30,000.

"When you think of it, life in Eden wasn't very meaningful. I mean, fun is good in its place. But it doesn't mean anything if you can't keep score. God has a very superficial attitude toward life. I'm glad that my children aren't being influenced by God anymore — that we've left. And we're all very grateful to the snake."

Well, that's kind of a sad story. And it has unfortunately the ring of truth: that we so often take our accomplishments, which are important and necessary and good, and we make them into what is most valuable in our lives and what gives our lives meaning. Because we are naturally competitive and selfish, we tend to quantify everything we do. And I remember when I taught remedial reading, and already in first grade every child knew whether they were in the best reading group or not. We quantify, we measure, we compare grade points, how many friends we have on Facebook, how we look, how much money we make. And that's what gets our energy going, trying to get better in those areas. And we are so hard on ourselves, and we can become so depressed when we don't do well. And it's too bad, because God was trying to tell us that what we accomplish is not where we get our true value.

But back to Easter and what does Easter mean then, now that we see that we have a need for something here? I'd like to tell another story. It's a sequel to the first one. It was written by another person, a pastor named Daniel Erlander. And this story is called "The Birth of the Pointless People."

"When God looked at the old gang that used to have so much fun rolling down the hills and frolicking in the forest, and saw them tragically working hard to add up scores and condemning people who didn't have high scores, God became angry — so angry that God said, 'I am going to destroy them.'

"But then God wept and said, 'I can't destroy them.' And God repented.

"And so God tried different ways to move them back into a life without points. And finally God smiled and said, 'I have an idea. I will enter their world of point keepers, but I will do it very gently.'

"And so God entered the world of point keepers as Emmanuel, God with us. And this is how Emmanuel did it: he would tiptoe up to someone who had very few points, or no points at all, and whisper to them, 'You don't need points.' And they would smile and think maybe that's true. And then he would gather all these people together, and they would have a party and they would eat and drink and dance. And one

of them would say this is a pointless party, and they would all laugh. And people who weren't at the party would stand around on the sidelines, waiting to see what would happen. And Emmanuel would turn to them and say, 'Come to me, all you who are burdened by keeping score, and I will give you rest.'

"But the people who were in charge of the points were threatened by Emmanuel. So they put him in jail, and then they killed him. And Emmanuel's friends wept. And then they said, 'We knew it was too good to be true. The only thing left for us is to go back to keeping score.' And they buried him in a borrowed tomb, and they went back to Jerusalem to work.

"But God said, 'Aha! So the point keepers think it's back to normal, do they?' And God called out, 'Get up, Emmanuel. Get up.' And Emmanuel did. He got up, and he called his friends together. And he said, 'Let's continue with the party. Let's continue our work.' And at first they were hesitant. And then they joined hands and made a big circle, and started the party all over. And then Emmanuel breathed on them and said, 'Now I give you the power of my yoke, the power to care for each other, and to care for the world.' And then before Emmanuel left he said, 'And remember: the snake was wrong.' "

Well, the people in charge of keeping points in Jesus' day were probably the Pharisees. They had all kinds of rules for how you could become a child of God by what you did. And they too were threatened by Jesus. And of course, as we know, they had him tried and killed. But Jesus didn't stay down. I'm sure that the disciples felt just the way the people in the story did. And they thought after Jesus died, "Well we thought it was too good to be true." And that's why when he came out of the grave, as we heard in today's gospel, it was so hard for them to believe that he was really alive. When he came out of the grave Jesus showed that his way, not the way of the point keepers but his way, was the true way — that our value is already here, that he gives it to us, all the value we could ever want, that our points mean nothing compared to that, that we are children of God through Christ. The writer of John tried to tell us that at the end, where he says, "I put these words down so that you would believe in Jesus, and so that in believing in him you would have life."

The meaning of Easter is that we have this new life, this freedom from judging ourselves and others. But where do we go from here with this? Well, when Jesus got the people together he, like in the story, breathed on them and he said, "As the Father has sent me, so I am sending you." And that's really where we go from here. We are sent out with this freedom, this new joy, this sense of confidence to live out our lives wherever we are — on the playground, or on Facebook, or in the boardroom, in the kitchen, behind the wheel, in front of our friends. We are just simply called to live out this freedom and not to judge others. And as they see that, and as they see that we are working to make the world a place where people are not condemned for not having points, things will change. The meaning of Easter is simply that we have a new freedom, and we've been sent to share it. The meaning of Easter is that we can know beyond a shadow of a doubt what Jesus always knew, and that is that the snake was wrong.

Amen.

*** Keywords ***

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