

## The Radical Ordinary

Psalm 23

Radical Christianity is our subject. Radical Christianity is about ordinary, small achievements. It is not about winning the big battle. It is not about selecting a social issue and bending the nation to our will. What will happen when the Supreme Court undoes *Roe vs. Wade*? Do you really think the law will change our sexual habits? Sixteen states are prepared to enact laws that permit no exception for abortion. Not rape. Not incest. Not assault. No exception. The Catholic Church can't enforce celibacy. Do you think they can control the sexual appetites of the men who are nowhere to be found in all this legislation about abortion? The oddness is that 64% of Catholics favor maintaining *Roe Wade*. 77% of evangelicals want to overturn it. The law here is an attempt to do something after the fact. No one dares to interfere with the sacred rite of heterosexual behavior based on "Boys will be boys" and "Let him." We lack the courage to face this issue, so we hide behind protests, and we agitate for laws. No one who has nuanced positions on abortion is allowed to have a say. You will be labeled a "baby killer." If the answer here is for our nation to make a new commitment to what it means to have families of all kinds, then why are we making it a legal fight? Christianity is about much more than abortion. And why does this one issue create such a fuss? This has always been a political football. In the 1980's evangelicals tried to rewrite their history by claiming that abortion creation the moral majority. As Randall Balmer, American historian, has shown, the evangelicals were energized earlier by the attempt to maintain segregation. Racism was not going to win elections, but they discovered that abortion was an emotional issue where they could pretend they had a moral high ground. Christianity has never been defined by a single issue and it is not defined by abortion.

I want to gesture toward a radical Christianity which moves beyond the mess of our politics with all its emotional baggage, a Christianity in which the inexhaustible complexities of life forever call forth new efforts of attention, nurture, and struggle that exceed the elements of blindness that accompany even our best words and deeds.

We have a major image, a controlling trope, to guide us: A shepherd tending to the needs of the sheep. Tending is the word I bring you. This is the nature of radical Christianity. I think Christians have forgotten how radical our practices are. And also have accumulated some new practices that are not Christian. It is through concrete practices of tending to one another that we are best able to show the world the nature of Christianity. Confession and forgiveness are the big 2. Start there by tending to one another's deepest feelings. People have been hurt by the church since the church started back in A.D. 30 or so. Tend to people's feelings.

Radical Christianity occurs when we tend to each other in our commonalities and differences away from the megastate and corporate power; and transform these powers to make them responsive to the pressures of people cultivating knowledge, power, and hope through relationships of everyday attention. In the concrete practices of tending to one another we will be renewed (*The Radical Ordinary*).

Our nation is currently dominated by two minorities – the left wing and the right wing. This is not a hopeful place for our conversations to be held hostage. What is this business of thinking that the only radicals in our country are the “wings”? I am confused by all this emphasis on wings. One of the joys of growing up in the rural South has to be the food. As James Autrey put it, “Seasons came with food not the other way around” (*Nights Under a Tin Roof*, 13), Our seasons were identified by the foods that we raised. Planting potatoes, butterbeans, tomatoes, squash, cucumbers, watermelons, corn, purple-hull peas – rites of passage from spring to summer to fall. And there’s the meat. That’s where fried chicken takes over the kitchen. The chicken was so revered in the South that we called it the “gospel bird.”

I reminisce about fried chicken for one serious reason. Fried chicken, at least until someone invented nuggets and assorted pieces, came as breast, thigh, leg, and wing. The most valued piece at our table was the breast. Lucky was the person who managed to get two chicken breasts at dinner. The poor wings were the last pieces to leave the platter.

Now that politics has become a junk food mall, the chicken has been reduced to one more fast-food item: Chick Fil A, Kentucky Fried Chicken, Popeye’s, Raising Cane, and so many others. Joshua Gunn says that “one could argue in a peculiar, perverse sense, that our junk food habit is homologous to our piquant political diet these days” (*Political Perversion*, 2). The allure of junk food matches the allure of our politics – simple, cheap, fast, superficial, but somewhat tasty. Junk food addicts care nothing for nutritional value and good taste. Political junk food addicts care nothing for rational deliberation and good manners.

In our current political malaise, the wings are the stars of the show. Politics has become one giant “Buffalo Wings.” The left wing and the right wing are the media darlings. The more outrageous you are, the more coverage you get. Democrats are now identified with AOC and Republicans with MTG – two women, one from the left wing and one from the right wing – flapping on the air. The wings come at us in waves of tweets, quips, slogans, and conspiracy theories.

A famous African American preacher once prayed: “God is not for the right wing or the left wing. God loves the whole bird.” We are not tending to the entire body, because we are obsessed with the wings. We need the wings because a one-winged bird can’t fly.

Psalm 23 paints a picture of God the good shepherd tending to the sheep. This is what it means to be a radical Christian.

**There is a primary result of having God as shepherd: I shall not want. This is the nature of radical Christianity – a community that eliminates want. This** is a stunning claim because wanting is what we do, what we have been trained to do. There’s one word that makes it hard for us to say, “I shall not want”: STUFF. The meaning of life is having a place to put our stuff. Our house is nothing but a place to put our stuff, a place to keep our stuff with a roof over it and central air and heat. George Carlin, “That’s what your house is, a place to keep your stuff while you go out and get...more stuff!” And now, it is a requirement that you have a storage unit for your extra stuff that you pay other people to guard. When we wake up and see an empty

space in our home, we have to go out and buy more stuff. And we are very, very territorial about our stuff: I don't want you touching my stuff. As we get closer to retirement, we have to get another place to put stuff.

Our world is not organized to meet all the wants and needs of the world. It is organized to make us want more and need more and that makes us anxious and greedy and angry, because there's never enough. There's a street in Dayton, OH – Needmore Street. That's our street.

The good news is that we have been given a relationship with the good shepherd who makes it possible for us to recognize that although we may be consumed by wanting more through confession and repentance we can be forgiven. The shepherd gives us the gift of abundance that turns our lives of entitlement into lives of humility and gratitude.

That is the alternative to a world based on wanting more – a people capable of sharing and giving generously. We make available to others not what is ours, but what was God's before we had a use for it. Therefore, we can now honestly say, "I shall not want."

The ordinary turns out to be the radical. Do you have in you to be a radical Christian? My prayer is that you will say Yes.