

St. Paul's Episcopal Church, Fairfield, Connecticut
Week of January 5, 2007

Family Albums

I remember an elderly great aunt at a family reunion—this was about fifty years ago—with a photo album that was itself about fifty years old. It had some photos in it of my grandparents when they were young, photos I had never seen before. Seeing my grandmother as a twenty-something made me think about her in a whole new way, adding a dimension to someone I knew well, making me notice things about her I hadn't paid attention to before.

We are so familiar—those of us who go to church regularly—with the equivalent of a family photo album. We read from it at every Holy Eucharist. I mean the four Gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. We read through the first three, one per year, in a three-year cycle. John's Gospel appears from time to time in the three year cycle, and at special holy seasons like Christmas, Lent, and Easter.

The pictures we see there are the stories about Jesus and followers closest to him, his family, his disciples, his antagonists. We have heard—and seen by imagining—Jesus and the people who are part of his story so often that, I suspect, we don't continue to hear the story in its depths.

In 1945 an accidental discovery of thirteen manuscript bundles containing fifty-two treatises written in the Coptic language introduced a new photograph album, to continue my metaphor, into the world of New Testament scholars. In the last few years, these manuscripts, dating from the third and fourth centuries, have been translated and widely published. It is thus becoming possible for all Christians to see Jesus and his earliest followers as they were remembered by witnesses other than the four Gospels.

This is especially true of those “other gospels” that have been much in the news lately—Gospels attributed to Thomas, Mary Magdalene, and Judas. These have precipitated a best-selling, page-turner novel, *The DaVinci Code*, and much discussion in television shows, newspaper columns, and documentaries.

Some writers focus on the discomfort these other Gospels might present for Christians, suggesting that Matthew, Mark, Luke and John might be “wrong,” and the other Gospels “right.” That these other Gospels were suppressed during doctrinal conflicts of the fourth century makes even more appealing the conspiracy theory that because the Church suppressed them, they must contain embarrassing truths.

Well, perhaps they do. Or perhaps they (also) prompt us to see Jesus more clearly by calling attention to aspects of his story we hadn't thought about. Or maybe they invite us to see the people around him as more fully human—more like us—than we had before.

At the very least, they grab our attention the way those old photographs grabbed mine. We will have a rare and wonderful opportunity, beginning Sunday at 10:30, to hear an internationally regarded scholar and marvelous speaker—Professor Deirdre Good—take us on a tour of these old albums of our Christian family. She will be with us for the remaining Sundays of January. Come along, and bring a guest who might be interested.

—Rev. Ben Brockman

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Week of January 31, 2007

We All Dream in Italian

The New York Times reported this morning that the 70-year-old former prime minister of Italy, Silvio Berlusconi, had to take out an ad in the paper apologizing to his wife, Veronica Lario. She had published an open letter demanding the apology because she was outraged by Mr. Berlusconi's flirtatious behavior with other women.

What intrigued me about this amusing soap-operatic exchange was the comment attributed to Beppe Severgnini, "one of the most discerning commentators on Italian mores," according to Ian Fisher's article in The Times: Berlusconi "is a walking oxymoron, but it has not stopped him from working his way up. Why? Simple: because he embodies the Italian dream of being everything, of pleasing everyone (and indulging himself in everything), without giving up anything" (p. A4).

What I would like to know is, Why does this oxymoronic way of being in the world strike Beppe Severgnini as characteristically Italian? Or even, for that matter, as a distinctly male attitude?

My guess is, rather, that Mr. Berlusconi embodies a universally shared human desire. Indulge in everything without giving up anything? What's not to like about that?

Shakespeare has a wonderful character who could be described in precisely the terms Mr. Severgnini attaches to Mr. Berlusconi—Falstaff. He has endeared himself to dramatic audiences for centuries now, a lovable, cowardly, lordly, scheming, witty, clever, charming partyer—but finally a wretch of an old man-boy.

Falstaff hangs out with Prince Hal's endless fraternity party—until Hal decides to grow up and accept the responsibility of the kingly mantle that is his destiny as Henry V. Then Hal banishes Falstaff, and it's not funny any more. The sadness that was there all along is painfully present and clear.

Are we not all Falstaff, all Italians in the terms Severgnini uses, at some time in our lives, and at in fantasized moments throughout our lives? When complete freedom, absolute power, and no unwelcome consequences seem worth longing for?

But then we grow up as we realize that the price of being both mortal and self-consciously aware is to be responsible, to be ethical. Those are the conditions that distinguish us from God and from the animals. There are consequences. We know it, and it matters.

That's what it costs to be grown up. And it's possible not to be grown up even when you're 70. Sadly, and, sadly humorously.

—Rev. Ben Brockman