

Who is My Family? Pentecost + 3B

As Juan Luis Segundo put it, "The real sin against the Holy Spirit is refusing to recognize, with 'theological' joy, some concrete liberation that is taking place before one's very eyes." God will not approach us as long as we insist on digging-into the positions and policies, the power structures and proclivities that have possessed us to this point. Jesus even goes so far as to say that our very families must be restructured to include only relationships that are based on compassion and charity towards ourselves and others. Jesus understands that in order to weave an alternative social fabric, the most basic conventions and constraints of kinship must be questioned by redefining family as "whoever does the will of God," a radical proposition in any cultural system.

Writes Ched Myers: "Radical is as unfashionable a word today as it was trendy back in the 1960s, but its etymology (for the Latin radix, "root") shows why we must not concede it to nostalgia. As Gore Vidal has said, 'If you want to get to the root of anything, by definition you must get radical. It is no accident that the word has been totally demonized by those in power; no one in politics dares even to use the word favorably, much less track any problem to its root.' In an age when the people to whom we have given power behave, not like leaders, but like self-righteous kings and despoilers of the land, we must expose the roots of our socio-political and historical pathologies and recover the roots of our tradition of discipleship."

However unsettling Jesus' metaphor of criminal breaking-and-entering may seem, the metaphorical tradition comparing the Lord's advent to a thief in the night was one of the most enduring in the early church, emerging as one of the gospels'

master metaphors. Later Jesus will break into the Jerusalem Temple, cast out the true thieves, and put a ban on the goods of that House. He will insist it cannot stand, and exhort his disciples to keep watch over the House as it awaits its true Lord.

For us this means refusing to be ground down by the insistent posturing of those who would comfort and aide the powerful and frighten and abuse the already-afflicted. It means refusing to be bullied or taken in by those who claim to be defending free speech and open discussion, but who aren't sincere, who don't really want the truth to be told, who don't really want ideas to be evaluated on their merits, regardless of politics, but who instead want ideas convenient to their side to receive (at least) equal time regardless of their intellectual quality. We have to keep in mind that their claims are made, not just in bad faith, but in the active pursuit of undue power. Jesus' vision of the Kingdom of God challenges both the domesticating family and the dominating State. No wonder radical discipleship remains marginal in our churches.

So what is our Strong Man? Whom must we bind? "Attribution biases" is Professor Jennifer Herdt's candidate. This is a social-scientific term for finger-pointing. Psychotherapists call it Co-Dependency. One of these biases is this: we have the tendency to attribute our successes to our own virtue and our failures to others' behavior or the situation itself. When our team wins, it's because we're good; when we lose, it's because of bad refereeing or our list of injuries.

This proclivity of ours, to externalize our disappointment and failure and internalize our successes and good luck, is a quality, not only of individuals, but of groups as well. Once we are part of a power structure, and our group is "in," we make

broad generalizations about “out” groups, based on very few observations, while avoiding such generalizations about ourselves.

This tendency should be discomfiting to us, it should pull us up short and lead us to question the confidence with which we pass judgements on ourselves and others.” It should lead us to the self-observation and strength we need to arrest such behaviors in ourselves and lead our communities away from the “Strong Men” of prejudice and discrimination, scapegoating and oppression. This is the only way we can become able to enter upon the quest for neighbor love, when the Strong Man is tied up, our hearts and homes will be plunderable by love.

As in the story we just heard from the Book of Samuel, as long as we espouse any other cause and serve any other king, we will remain enslaved. We must learn from our ancestors, the Israelites to direct our attention and allegiance only to true righteousness if we are to survive. We have seen how kings behave, both crowned and self-styled ones, without concern for the people. They become tyrannical. These kings must be bound up and silenced. It isn’t easy to accept our part in the making of false kings. It is often painful. It may even be costly to open one’s heart and community to transformation and dialogue amongst those who disagree. But it is worthwhile.

As Paul so beautifully explains, “every slight affliction is preparing us for glory beyond all measure. We look not at what can be seen but at what cannot be seen; for what can be seen is temporary, but what cannot be seen is eternal. Even though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day. The earthly tent we live in is destroyed, but we have

a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. So we do not lose heart.”

And it follows that the only thing God doesn't know how to forgive is the denial of the possibility of forgiveness, transformation and spiritual accountability. In contrast, we must return again and again to the rigorous, joyful terrifying practice of naming and repenting of our biases if we would embrace the discipline of loving our enemies as Jesus admonishes.

There is a marvelous new film series called *800 Words*, wherein a man moves his teenager daughter and son off on a seemingly foolhardy adventure, in order to bind the Strong Man of grief that has gripped them since his wife's, their mother's sudden death. The story takes place in an absolutely beautiful setting, and there is much hilarity in the family's interactions with their new neighbors, but the poignancy of their struggle to reinvent themselves in the face of mistakes, failures and loss is the real story.

Our own struggles with our own Strong Men, whether they be personal shortcomings or communal pathologies, is full of beauty too, along with the trouble and anguish. There's no reason not to whistle while we work, nothing stopping us from liking what we do. There's plenty of hilarity if you are aware of it. But the real story, the concrete liberation taking place before our very eyes, the real thriller is beneath the surface, in the hearts of those of us who would love.