

Wordplay -- Epiphany 3C

“The dream of a liberator, and the dream of peace, are not merely dreams. The liberator is already present, we can follow him, even today making visible something of the liberty and righteousness of the kingdom that he will complete. It is no longer impossible. The power to bring peace is already among us.” So wrote theologian Jürgen Moltmann. Our task, our vocation, and our salvation, explains Jesus in his first public message, is to align ourselves with and channel this power.

Paul explains in today’s reading there are lots of ways to do this. In the Nehemiah passage, Ezra reminds the people of the divine instruction for life they have been given by the Creator. After a long time in exile, they have a new start, but they will never be truly free unless they align themselves with the good. The psalmist declares that all nature points to the law. The law is perfect, whole, complete and blameless. The law sets our boundaries for us. These boundaries apply universally, to the whole of humankind, and they apply to each of us, as deeply individual wellsprings of wisdom, if we will tap them. So we must pray to remove our hidden faults, especially the presumptuous ones where we think we’re doing good. If anything we feel, say or do conflicts with the law in any way, we have to pursue change, or humanity will perish.

We seem to be enslaved to our conflicts, however, and Jesus’ announcement that his being frees us from them is met with skepticism, to say the least. After all, the Pharisees

themselves, the people with whom Jesus and his followers are going to worship in the synagogue, existed as a movement to free the Jews from corrupt leadership and the chains of oppression, to keep them on track as per Ezra's admonitions. Pharisee comes from the Hebrew *Perushim*, the separate ones, the reformers.

Jesus differs from the Pharisees in two fundamental ways, which are both the core and the manifestation of his teaching: he bids us to acceptance of the Other, that is to say, "All are Always Welcome, and he rejects the stipulations of purity for participation in the good grace of God's community. The law is pure, yes but us, no. We must aim for perfection in the sense of completeness and wholeness as, like, and with God, but always well-knowing that we will stumble along the way and still be welcome in the arms of God and one another if we acknowledge our faults and seek forgiveness. All are welcome, and all can be forgiven.

Jesus delivers his message and conducts his ministry in the context of existing structures and modes of thinking, because our transformation must occur locally and individually in order to go global. It is not a matter, merely of thinking harder, but of thinking differently. The millennia have led humanity to a survival mindset; as the Fulani say: "Me and my clan against the world; me and my family against the clan; me and my brother against the family; me against my brother." Then there is the law of *Omerta* – don't talk with outsiders about anything. Today we see a culture in which it is thought commendable by some public figures to lie to anyone who disagrees with

you. But it is not by means of isolation, mendacity, and manipulation that we come to understand the nature of Jesus, but by seeing, hearing and imitating him. By living together in Christ, we come to know God, ourselves and our fellow humanity.

Paul, in his letter to the Ephesians, bids us to subject ourselves to this process as to a radically different kind of captivity, beholdenness to one another: “I therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of your calling, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, but each of us is given grace according to the measure of Christ’s gift. Therefore it is said, “When he ascended on high he made captivity itself a captive; he gave gifts to his people.” Accordingly, we are the body of Christ, both physically and spiritually. We are one whole and also individually members of it, not just a body of Christians clumped together. The claim Paul makes in his extended, visceral human body metaphor today is metaphysical, not metaphorical. His picture is a mystical anagogy, as the scholars put it, with parallel meaning and purpose not merely a colorful analogy with parallel appearance.

So who are the captive, the blind, the oppressed to be set free of their afflictions? Luke’s Greek word for ‘poor’ is *ptochos*, derived from the bent, cringing posture that beggars take in seeking alms. Thus, as with so much of what we are bidden to undertake, we encounter a complexity. Whoever is bent or cringing will be our people,

our neediest cases, whether they be bent by poverty, failure, ignorance or misfortune, and whoever is blind, whether to daylight or to truth. C. S. Lewis wrote. "Our souls are curiously shaped because each is the key to unlock one of the doors in the house with many mansions." Oppression, likewise, takes many forms, external and internal. In God's eyes, those who have power over others and lack compassion for them are, if anything more deprived than those who have no power at all.

Just as the word passion means both joy and pain. Our experience of the passion of Christ must embrace the whole spectrum of life. Likewise, suffering is not only undergoing hardship, but also allowing everyone to flourish. We must do that with each other, cultivate an ecology of suffering and rejoicing. The Greek words we translate as resurrection are two, with distinct meanings: *Anistemi*, to get up and *Ageiro*, to get together. The two merged in resurrection theology: being raised up to become the body of Christ. When we talk about Jesus' resurrection, our assertion that death did not have the last word in Jesus' story is proven by the evidence that we have been raised up to be Christ's new body. When we say we believe in the resurrection of the dead, we proclaim that, no matter how much a person has given in to destructive tendencies, new life is always possible.

"Here's the prophecy," says Jesus, "And get this: I'm it. I'm here to wage a cosmic campaign to help humanity know that God is here with you. The law created some human boundaries for y'all -- invisible fences (we didn't even electrify them) and within those, you will thrive most

on your diversity: of art, of opinion, of companionship. You just have to remember that the rules say not to hurt anybody else, physically, economically, spiritually, especially to advance yourself. You are all in this together.

“Gradually,” Jesus insists, “the most observant among you will realize what I am saying is true, and that my word is the elixir or life, the saving grace of humankind. It is a process that can only work from the bottom, up; from the inside, out. You will come to pay attention to those among you who know that diversity means being your individual selves, yes, individuality, but not the egocentric variety. Individuality as individuation; full and joyous use of your single gifts is the nourishment, celebration and completion of humankind. You are responsible for yourselves, and at the same time, responsible for humankind. You can handle it, but will you?”

Here’s James Russell Lowell:

True Love is but a humble, low-born thing,
And hath its food served up in earthen ware;
It is a thing to walk with, hand in hand,
Through the every-dayness of this workday world,
Baring its tender feet to every roughness,
Yet letting not one heart-beat go astray