

A WINDOW ON THE WORLD HOUSE

Texts on Sunday, October 6, 2013

Lamentations 1: 1-6; Luke 17: 1-6

Last Sunday, leaning in close to the prayer of Psalm 91, we felt after an answer to the question, how God protects, how God saves. Our thought hung close to the personal experience. We said little of our self in relation to any community, or to larger joined purposes in the world. Yet now, hearing the words of Lamentations—*How lonely sits the city that once was full of people!*—we are exposed to grief of a most public kind, the destruction of a nation's home and purpose. If for many generations, Americans of a certain class have been spared such absolute, public grief, America has not spared other nations from feeling this. Need we name them?

In the psalms and the prophets, salvation—the hope for it, the need of it—was always this public personal thing; never only a personal promise, but peace on earth. When today a Jew is puzzled by the Christian claim that the Messiah has already come, mostly the puzzlement is that the world still suffers, and do we not see? Where is the Messiah's "peace on all my holy mountain?" Do we Christians prefer to shun, starve, or destroy the world's billions in order to lay claim to salvation as a personal prize? We need that Jewish judgment on the meaning of salvation. After all, it is Jesus' judgment, too.



Next Friday, the recipient of the 2013 Nobel peace prize will be announced. On hearing of that fact, I was reminded of Dr. Martin Luther King's Nobel prize lecture from 1964, a speech which is sometimes called "The World House." King opened by imagining a theme for a novel scrawled on a scrap among the papers of a deceased author: "A widely separated family inherits a house in which they have to live together." King continued.

"This is the great new problem of humanity. We have inherited a large house, a great 'world house' in which we have to live together—black and white, East and West, Gentile and Jew, Catholic and Protestant, Muslim and Hindu—a family unduly separated in ideas, culture, and interest, who . . . must learn somehow to live with each other in peace." (*Where Do We Go from Here*, p. 167, Beacon Press, 1967)

The Nobel lecture rehearses all the themes of the speech Dr. King delivered here in 1967, called *Beyond Vietnam*. The "giant triplets" of social evil are there in fulsome review—racism, poverty, and war—as well as the call for "a true revolution of values" and the sounding of an alarm still ringing by the nation's sleeping head, that we must confront "the fierce urgency of now." All that is in the 1964 speech, and this too: the words "we must" urged again and again upon the hearer. "We must narrow the gap. . . we must pursue peaceful ends . . . we must put an end to war . . ." Could there

be a weaker word than “we must” when applied to the human will? My homiletics professor cautioned us against its use, or its uselessness. Yet what other word do we have to wake us to our crisis, than that we inhabit a great world house, and we must live in it in peace? The next question comes like the dawn: How—how put an end to lamentations over peoples and purposes destroyed? God forbid we should supply a quick or easy answer.

Consider this. In Lamentations, the first cry that tells just what has happened goes up in v. 3. “Judah has gone into exile with suffering; now she lives among the nations, and finds no resting place.” She lives among the nations! How similar this sounds to King’s call to all to acknowledge that we *must* live together—among the nations! Why is the one a bitter lament, and the other an upward call? To be sure, the modern world presents demands quite different from those of the ancient world—but that is not all the story.

Felt as a lament, “to live among the nations and find no rest” means that, when all around us swirl world views and values we do not understand, it just becomes too hard for many to maintain our identity, our values, our inner peace. This happens right here in Riverside Church. Right here is a window on the world house, and often it does not look like living together in peace. Human organizations need organizing principles, and when tribes try to live close, but have not much spiritual fortitude, they bang into each other’s values and break the protective wall of identity and self-regard and thus set the self-system on fire, ready for a fight, or flight—and no peace. At the bottom of that mess in Washington DC, what but that a lot of white men fear they have “gone into exile and live now among the nations and find no rest?”

All this is not in fact “the great new problem of humanity,” but rather our great old problem. How can we meet and touch real differences in the world house, and change as change we must, yet dwell in our depth, true, unharmed, knowing that no evil shall befall us? How? There is only one resolution to the bitter conflicts in those who are feeling ever threatened in their persons and their values and ever overmastered by their foes. After many “musts,” Dr. King comes to it in the speeches, and gives it one name. After many “musts,” Jesus comes to the same in his teachings, and he calls it by another name. King calls it the study of nonviolence. Jesus says, “Forgive.” King says, “It is not enough to say, ‘We must not wage war.’ It is necessary to love peace and sacrifice for it.” Jesus says, “Whoever saves his life will lose it; whoever loses her life for my sake and the gospel will gain it . . . Forgive, forgive. Seventy times seven, forgive.” Do you want to look through a window on that world house we pray for? Then you must learn to forgive, for no peace can come—not in a family, not in a church, not in a city or in the wide world house—except it grow in you.

Therefore, we need an inkling for why it is so hard to forgive. Obviously, it is not enough to say, “You must forgive.” The world has stood for thousands of years under that word, and still we do not forgive. What is blocking? What is missing? Jesus’ answer is short. He tells disciples that when we shrink from forgiving, it is faith gone missing. “Had you faith the size of a mustard seed, you would say to this tree, ‘Be uprooted and planted in the sea,’ and it would obey you.” But what can *this* word mean? Told we have little faith, we might feel stung or guilty, but not inspired; and then the old fears fly up, but not love, for no resolution comes to the world’s war when we feel judged. What is missing when faith is fruitless, and we do not forgive?

In Christian language, what’s missing from the unforgiving is eternal life; that is, our seeing who we are in the eye of the Divine, and our living in that light. When I lived in Buffalo, I had, with hundreds of others, the joy of working with a Franciscan nun named Sister Karen. Sr. Karen established and lived in a home for men coming out of prison, called HOPE House. In 2003, she expanded the mission by moving it into a large Catholic rectory which had been vacated after a priest named Fr. Bissonnette was murdered there. On Good Friday, 2006, Sr. Karen was herself also murdered there by one of the men of her shelter. On the day after Easter, our whole city learned of it. At her memorial service, our city learned that far back in 1991, soon after Sr. Karen founded HOPE House, she had written in her journal this:

Dear Brother, I don’t know what the circumstances are that will lead you to hurt me or to destroy my physical body. No, I don’t want it to happen. I would much rather enjoy the beauties of this earth, experience the laughter, the fears, and the tears of those I love so deeply!! God has been so gentle with me, so loving . . . But now my life is changed, and you, my brother, were the instrument of that change. I forgive you for what you have done, and I will always watch over you, help you in whatever way I can . . . Continue living always mindful of God’s presence, God’s love, and God’s joy as sources of life itself. Then my life will have been worth being changed through you — God bless. (*Peaceprints*, pp. 60-61)

Let us no more attend to what is missing when we do not forgive. Give attention rather to what is present when we do. It is the experience, as we said last Sunday, of a light within you, perfect and unextinguishable. It is the certainty that I am alive, now and always, and, though I hurt (*small i*), I (*everlasting I*) am not harmed. This is the key to forgiveness. To forgive is not to kindly reprieve one who has hurt you; to forgive is to correct the false impression that you—Christ in you—have been harmed, or ever can be. This is the door to peace. Here is the window on the world house. With that faith and that certainty—that though you feel hurt, you are not harmed—the fire stick of your fear-filled self is quenched in living waters, and you become peace in this world. Then are you free. Then can you love. Then can you live and forgive and let go. Then can you give your life for the world’s need,

as your master asks, and rightly oppose the evils God reveals to you. Then opens one more window on the world house where we can learn at last to live among the nations in peace.

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in the City of New York*