

WINGS OF THE DOVE  
COMING TO OUR SELF

Texts on Sunday, October 21, 2012

*Isaiah 61: 1-9; Luke 15: 11-32*

“When he came to himself,” reads the critical sentence in the story of the prodigal son, the young man who had turned from his family and his future could now begin to act for himself and for others. When he came to himself, he began to live his life; until that time, his life had been living him. I think it no exaggeration to say of the human drama throughout history that all our evil works and all our blessed, blessed experiences of pleasure pale when compared with the moments of coming to our self, and witnessing such births in others.

Twelve years ago this fall, I joined in a weekly conversation with prison residents at Attica Correctional Facility which had been ongoing since the rebellion there in 1971. About a dozen men in greens gather in a circle with a few volunteers to talk through whatever has come up in their lives. The volunteers take part not as experts aiming to bring the residents toward some desired improvement, but just as human beings who need to think and feel their way through life. To the residents, the volunteers prove that somewhere in the world outside, people remember that the people in prison are people.

Most of the participants have been inside ten years or more, but soon after I began attending, a young man came to the group who was new to the prison. Call him J. He was talking fast about getting back to the streets and to his girl. He was sure he would not make the same mistakes again.

An older man—call him Bos—asked the younger if he might put a question. “Are you more interested in the streets and pistols or in your girlfriend?” Feeling challenged, J. showered denials at Bos. He really loved his girlfriend; he had the fast life under control. Bos waited through this downpour, then spoke again. “I’ve been listening to you carefully, to what you actually talk about. You talk about pistols much more than your girlfriend. Unless you learn to ask where your tongue is taking you, you will come right back to prison as soon as you get out.”

He continued. “When I was 18, I used to go around to my uncle’s house and I talked about guns. After a while, he found me the gun that I used to put myself in here. But you know, if I had gone around to my uncle’s talking about girls, not guns, I think he’d have found me a girl to talk to. That’s why I listen to how a man speaks.” Bos was speaking about inner freedom. He had come to himself.

Now, standing by itself, this story seems to warm all hearts. The conservative is glad that men are taking responsibility for their crimes, leaving him to his safe domain; the liberal is glad that the least are not forgotten and not

despised. But such a story might be just a bedtime story—a way of getting back to sleep and never coming to our self—if we do not see it in context, as one scene in a nightmare of incarceration which has bound the political will of America almost as severely as America has bound its prisoners.

When Bos went to prison in 1975, he numbered among 300,000 in state and federal prisons. When released in 2003, he left about 1.5 million behind the bars. Today the number is even larger. We are spending over \$60 billion a year to warehouse 2.4 million men and women, of whom not one-third are convicted of violent crimes. Two of every three who leave prison return, most for violations by their parole officers, who are watching over another 5 million men and women outside prison walls. Numerous studies have shown that higher education in the prisons was the one very effective stratagem for reducing the numbers who return to prison, but since 1994, the United States has refused to spend one dime on the Pell grants that used to help prisoners think and get a college education and go free.

We are incarceration nation, apparently so full of hatred for certain people that, like crazed animals, we severely damage our whole tribe with this giant prison industry that fosters the very corrupt and violent behaviors it purports to control. Like a dragon waiting inside a cave to devour the next generation of young black and brown men, we do not see that our mouth-parts are fastened on our own body. Yet hardly any political leader of any stature or color, and hardly any religious leaders are ever heard to say of our (very) criminal justice system that we have a problem—all of us; that we have caused this appalling damage together; or that we can solve this together. Why? Why do we “squander our property in dissolute living?” Why are we only now discovering that our “country is in a severe famine, and we have begun to be in need?” Because we have not come to our self.

In our beloved scriptures, Jesus jumps into his ministry by reading from Isaiah 61, proclaiming that prophecy fulfilled: bringing sight to the blind, liberty to the captive, opening the prisons, proclaiming jubilee. How else but for deep, willed, moral stupor can we account for a nation so in love with Jesus yet so opposed to his work? Let us look at this soberly. Church prison ministries typically fall within the shadow of what the formerly incarcerated Rev. Vivian Nixon calls “well-intentioned but disempowering ministries of feeding and fixing people.” On the one hand, conservative Christians actually go into the dark prisons—but only to fix, only to convert the heathen to Christ. Liberal Christians, uncomfortable with conversion as the prime paradigm of personal possibility, are less happy to enter the prisons. They prefer to pass resolutions, hear pastors preach, perhaps pen a letter to a politician, and certainly to feed any former prisoner who has the guts to enter their halls. But if we intend to awake, we will submit these preferred practices to searching, critical light.

Wherever an evil condition spreads like ice across a culture, adherents of

its dominant religion must ask, or must be asked, whether their basic theories about God and humanity are not in part self-serving means for preserving power and privilege. Those who claim that personal responsibility and Christian conversion are the central human goods need to see how neatly this theory insulates them from taking personal responsibility for the decay and ruin of whole communities about which they know nothing and toward whose development they offer nothing. Those whose want to help people less fortunate than themselves, with no religious strings attached, may be found to have a ten-foot 2" x 4" attached—a firm, self-satisfying separation between the helper and the needy. Might that relationship have the bizarre and tragic character, that the helper actually needs the needy to remain needy, to help her identify as the good guy? Ethicist Richard Couto says churches of whatever stripe lean toward strategies of “psycho-symbolic empowerment,” which strengthen a person’s ability to survive oppression, but do nothing to end it. Are these practices preferred precisely because they do *not* shake the foundations of power? Because the Spirit of the Lord need not apply? Because no year of jubilee is sought, nor comfort to all who mourn, nor rebuilding of the ruins of our cities, nor any end of shame and dishonor, nor love for justice? Is this because we have not come to our self?

When I first began going into Attica, I myself was coming from one of those prisons of the mind we build around our self, made of chattering, confusing thoughts about injuries done to and by our self. But for some time, I had been discovering that those prison bars can be bent aside through mindful observation of how the energy of our attentions is subject to direction; how we need never remain prisoner to our fears and hurts. In the first weeks of the Attica conversations, I found myself saying—seeing—“*I’m a criminal.*” How peculiarly light was the insight—not that the state should take an interest in my crimes, but that, seen clearly, the kinds of fears and needs that had moved me to my crimes differed not at all from those that had moved the men inside to theirs. In this, we are brothers, I came to see. Ethicist Miroslav Volf expands the idea:

From a distance, the world [looks] neatly divided into guilty perpetrators and innocent victims. The closer we get, however, the more the line between the guilty and the innocent blurs and we see an intractable maze of small and large hatreds, dishonesties, manipulations and brutalities, each reinforcing the other.

To see this openly is like coming to our self. It is seeing in the way the father sees the son in the story of the prodigal. Even from a long way off, the father sees the son—and is filled with compassion. Now, we may have treasured this story as an earnest of our hope that God so loves us that God condemns us not for our sin, but receives and saves us. But that was only a childish dream of God’s goodness—until we came to our self and saw that God receives us so that we in turn might see others from far off—and receive them and share power with them, just as we ourselves have been received and have been given power. Until God’s blessing spreads, it is not yet God’s.

See this. Here in the middle of our story is the prodigal, launched like an anxious beggar into his long-rehearsed speech of self-accusation and self-hatred. “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat—” And the father interrupts him. He will not hear the spiel. “Bring out the robe. Put a ring on his finger. Kill the fatted calf.” See what the father sees! He sees the being of the young man—the being, not his doing. Nearly every voice in society is so tuned either to crow or to crack over what a person has done that all of us are much hardened to the idea that we matter or matter not at all entirely according to what we have done and not done. Even our churchy sin-talk is so driven, and so useless for transformation. In your doing is not where the good news first lands, but in your being. And what is true for you whom prison has not touched is so a thousandfold for those who sit behind bars, or under any of our society’s grievous oppression. Liberation begins in being. Psycho-symbolic empowerment (Couto) is absolutely where liberation starts. But liberation must not be made to stop where it starts, lest it never spread in the blessing of God.

Liberation moves on this way. When we are coming to our self, we affirm anew the goodness of our own being. I can’t explain how we come to that. It’s not that we earned it, or deserve it. Call it a gift of God, a pure grace—but the fact is, humans who are already more free can help open this space of being for those who are not free. This the father does for the prodigal son. Then, those who have being can experience their own thought. Being is necessary for free thought, and thought is the first and true expression of freedom. Those who can think freely find language for their new situation. Language is then the building block of community. And only communities—individuals, never—have the tools to act upon history, to change structures of evil. The incarceration nation will only be dismantled by a mass movement of communities who are freely speaking languages of truth. This is how liberation moves.

What does it mean for you, O church? It means that a sermon is literally no good if it is but an exciting bedtime story, after which we slip back into dreams of a better day. It means that church habits and practices can thwart God’s good will on earth, just by failing to disciple us all in taking time with our brothers and sisters to bring forth new thought and new language, to form communities ready to take new actions to take apart evil systems and build living networks. This, the father makes possible for the prodigal, after he has come to himself. This, God, your father and mother, now draws forth from you, so that you may go do God’s will on earth, as it is in heaven, opening the prisons, proclaiming liberty to the captives. For when we are coming to our self, we see even while it is still far off, who we really are and the future that God is sending.