

BEING TAKEN

Texts on Sunday, August 21, 2011

Genesis 24 (selection);

1 Corinthians 13

“The thing comes from the Lord, we cannot speak to you evil or good.”

Fourteen times in this short story, the action verb in a sentence is *taking*. There is taking of gifts, of a veil, the not-taking of “my son back there,” and the taking of a wife. Taking is at the heart of everything we do—and not just us, but all the animals. Plants, by contrast, with a few weird exceptions, do not take from the world; they *accept* light and water and the attention of birds and bees. But to take something—this is a marvel: first, a creature must perceive an object, then desire it, then move toward it, and only then, take it. Our often enraptured awe at a television nature program is coiled up in the drama of seeing how animals take what they need. We are watching a basic narrative of our own nature. It is our own story.

For humans, though, taking gets complicated. We have an eye that sees not only from behind our own need, but also from above; like a great Self witnessing our self and our will, an Eye within the “I” testifying that our eye is but one among many, neither more nor less. We teach our children to see with this witness of conscience; you’ve seen it a thousand times. In a park the other day, I saw a little child a little bigger than another take a ball from the smaller, who instantly started bawling. A parent instantly rose and bore down on the taker . . . and took the ball back for the littler one. How ordinary, yet how complex. Like all the animals, we must be takers, but we spend our life learning how to take in a human way—as if God were my witness, and not my self alone. We’re not very good at this, but we know that the game of life depends on how we take things.

Sometimes the “things” we take are people. The crimes most hated—murder, rape, kidnaping, assault—are awful *mistakes*; a human inhumanly mistaking another. The crimes most hidden behind the propriety of wealth and power—economic rape and ecological rape, wars, mass incarceration—are also inhuman mis-takes; the assaults are not face-to-face, but whole communities taken up by their roots for the love of money and power. The prophet Micah told it long ago: “They covet fields and houses and take them away; they oppress householder and house . . . because it is in their power to do it.” (Micah 2:1-2) Can it be that God does not grieve our mis-takes?

And yet, the taking of humans, far from being crime, also belongs to the most thrilling, fruitful, and satisfying adventures of our lives. There is taking a liking to a person. Taking a lover. Taking a new employee. Taking an apprentice under our wing. Taking a child in our arms. There is “Will you take this woman to be your loving and faithful wife, so long as you both shall live?” There is, “This—my body: broken for you. Now take and eat, remembering me.” Our life depends on how we take things.

The pathos of the story of Rebekah lies in the taking. All the animal elements are present. There is perception and desire: “The maiden was exceedingly beautiful to look at.” There is the necessary move: “Go to my land and my kindred.” There is the action: “Then Isaac brought her in to the tent, and took Rebekah and she became his wife.” As we put it, all the animal elements are present. Yet these do not make the story human. In fact, Isaac’s role in these stories is ordinary; he never really chooses to do anything. Watching him feels not much different from observing a gazelle or a rhinoceros through a telephoto lens. What makes this a human story is the mystery in the drama of consent in the will of the one to be taken, in Rebekah. “Perhaps the woman will not be willing . . .” say the family. “And if she is not willing . . .” “Let us call the maiden and ask,” they say. “Will you go with this man?” “I will go,” she says. The human story turns not just on taking rightly, but on being taken rightly, too. In self-giving that participates freely with taking beats the heart of human being.

These Genesis stories come vividly to our inward eye, as we have said, not because they happened, but because they are happening. We are watching real life in play—our own life, both personal and public. On the story’s own terms, the history of the world is hanging on Rebekah’s answer to the question, “Will you go?” By preserving this story just this way, Israel has bid the generations remember—better: cherish—as divine the human practice of asking a person—not telling her!—whether she or he will partake in the taking. When it is time for a human being to be taken up into the roles and energies and potentials of adulthood, the family who care for that one must ask, “Will you go?” This is Rebekah’s story and ours. Have there not come moments in your life when the question came to you—or: will come to you—whether you will go, whether you will jump in and partake in the risk of history. From those moments, our life depends. We did not always do this well, but it was always a question of taking—and being taken—well.

When our thoughts are tamely in their cages, we suppose that taking is mostly the male thing and that being taken—or receiving—is the female thing. This notion may be valid, but it is not true—if by valid we might mean that some evidence obviously supports it; and if by untrue we might mean

that an idea offers no great guidance for humans, because more is in play than what is merely evident. The tradition of Genesis bids us accept as true that deep beneath the evidence, we humans all together are playing in the image of God, male and female. This can mean that in the polarities of physical nature— male/female—we see our true nature and our right relationship to the Divine. That is, in the ordinary pattern of taking and being taken, we can perceive the essential character the divine action which gives us that life that has no end: God sees you, God desires you, before you know it, already God has moved toward you to ask for you, to take you. God takes to Godself what is human—yet only the one who is willingly being taken. This is thrilling, powerful, subversive, erotic, dark and light, creative, for life—provided the human consent!

For those who have felt taken by Jesus Christ, and who have taken him as Lord, just exactly this story is in play. “For God so loved the world . . .” that he took his son, his only son, whom he loved, to offer him, an offering for the life of the world. Though the story of God the Father’s will-to-take encloses mysteries within mysteries, the essential mate in that divine/human drama plays there too for all to see: the Son’s good will in being taken. In this play, the whole palette of love is set before the eye of all beholders.

We have called the Genesis stories “lessons in the beginning” because they reveal what members of a spiritual community can do to move beyond the conditions that threaten their existence into a real future divinely given. Put another way, these stories offer not just heroic models, but directions, signs for all to see in times of trouble. In today’s lesson, just as the family asked of Rebekah, “Will you be taken? Will you go?” and all time and movement hung upon her answer, so it is to this spiritual family, this body, the church, to learn the practice of actually asking you the individual, at the right time, “Will you be taken? Will you go?” When your heart is broken in compassion for some of God’s children who suffer grievously at the hands of heedless and greedy men, will you be taken into a community of action and resistance? Though you and I, like all the creatures, are wired with instincts to protect what is ours—our body, time, money, things—at the right time, will be taken by the spirit of abundance and generosity to let life flow *through* these things and on toward the oceans of God? If you are on the younger side of choosing, will you be taken into the deep question of your vocation to work? To love? To gentle children into life? If in middle years, will you heed the call to rest from your labors now and again, as Jesus continually called his friends to come away with him to a deserted place? Will you be taken, as was the poet Yeats, in this moment recorded from eternity?

My fiftieth year had come and gone,
I sat, a solitary man,
In a crowded London shop,
An open book and empty cup
On the marble table-top.
While on the shop and street I gazed
My body of a sudden blazed;
And twenty minutes more or less
It seemed, so great my happiness,
That I was blessed and could bless.

(Vacillation, !V)

And If you have numbered long years of choosing and making, of giving and taking, will you at the right time be taken by the great letting go? Will you ready to show all us children that you know it is safe to come and to go from this place? Will you go?

On your answer, all time and movement hang, for your God does not want an unwilling partner. You are the Body of Christ. You, the bread—taken, blessed, broken, given for the world. Make love for God so burn in your heart that you become a willing human, being taken for all.

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