

LESSONS IN THE BEGINNING
PEACE OR JUSTICE
(Original title: "FACE TO FACE")

Text on Sunday, September 11, 2011

Genesis 33: 1-11, 15-17

Twenty years ago, a member of my congregation who was living with AIDS asked me to come to the house to talk a matter through. In those days, that diagnosis was a death sentence that could not be lifted, and Michael knew that his time was at hand. A deep vexation gripped him, but not as you might suppose. He anguished that at his funeral, there would come cousins and uncles and aunts who had hated him and hurt him from the day they learned that he was gay. Now he wanted them to not be there at his funeral, to be barred from being there, maybe to be hounded away from there. His powerlessness to make his cry of some effect appalled him.

Michael was new to the Christian church, having long before abandoned this religion for all its usual cruelties and punishments. But though he was new to the church, he was not a tentative Christian. He intended that his faith matter now, and so he asked for a spiritual conversation with me. *I am so angry, he said, and my time is so short. I want to write every one of them that they cannot come. But I must not waste my time. What should I do?*

Though I rarely presume to know what a person should do, with God as my witness, I have walked the field of choices enough to notice how its limits are marked. I said this to Michael. *I do not know how you should use your precious hours, but note this. You seek justice and you seek peace. Very often, it will be one or the other, not both: peace or justice. Very often, they do not come together in time. Sometimes you must fight with all your might for justice. Your integrity is at stake, and to counsel peace would itself be unjust. But sometimes, peace is all in all, the alpha and the omega, and its pursuit the very crown of justice. You must work this out for yourself.*

In the week before he died, Michael told me how he chose. He had written to each of his kindred—there was no e-mail back then—and he had invited them to come celebrate his life at his funeral. Leaving justice to another judge, he chose peace. Now, I hope it is clear that I do not tell you this story to claim that Michael's choice was "the Christian thing to do." I hate that phrase for mangling the meaning of being *Christian*. I do not tell the story to persuade you to follow Michael's choice in the situation you face. I tell you this story to affirm that choosing peace before justice is a real possibility with real consequence and must never be dismissed as an illusion or a weakness. And I tell the story because it's in the book. Peace, not

justice, is what Esau has chosen for his brother Jacob. And in the grace of God, the people of Israel remembered to tell the story this way, that Esau, father of the enemy to the east, that hated other, chose peace, not justice. It is possible. Our life has hung on the possibility. Need I say that I tell this story also because peace before justice is the path Jesus chose at the cross-road of decision? And I tell it because today marks ten years since that unutterably gruesome destruction of lives and loves and security we numbly name "nine/one one." We need time with the question, *Peace or justice?*

It is a spiritual question, by which I mean this: To arrive at a genuine answer, unscripted by manipulators, two different values must be discerned and distinguished, and then one chosen as now needing all your heart, all your soul, all your strength. To seek justice first is to use your natural powers to defend what matters, what exists, what is threatened. Justice is the natural, material concern to preserve what is. To seek peace now, not justice, is to let go of the material concern, to let go of defending what is. Peace is the concern to be shown what light might yet shine where darkness is, the care for what *may* be. *Peace or justice?* This question cannot have a spiritual function if we fix ourselves to one pole always. The question works spiritually only if it reminds us that our nature is both spiritual and material, interdependent; and that we have freedom which we must use to choose which most needs our energy now; for we have both flesh and spirit, both a past and a future. What is good is worth defending. But if the future we hope for is only this present arrangement extended through time, there is no justice in our justice; our vision of peace is a lie; and we are already in hell. Shall it be peace or justice? Sometimes, says the story of Esau and Jacob, we were saved when one whom we feared dealt us peace first, not justice.

Nine / one one is no longer solely an event inscribed as a moment of evil in time, though it is that, and never less than that. However, 9/11 refers also now to ten years of decisions and consequences in the drama of choosing peace or justice. Let us be clear. A nation as a whole never lets go of the justice concern, that effort to defend what is. I say this, not to defend as just all that the United States has done in pursuit of justice since 9/11, but rather to prepare those who hunger and thirst for righteousness with sober mind, for nations are given to the sword, and seek peace only in defeat, however it may come. From this fact, most of history's tragedies are written.

Claiming justice as our cause, these United States have caused ten times, maybe a hundred times, as many lives to be crushed in violence than were destroyed on that awful day. Politicians trading in fear gained immense power, leading us to borrow and gamble a trillion dollars or more to pay for wars they chose and ruin our economies, sundering us ever more grievously

into rich and poor. Roads and schools and water systems fail. The prisons are stocked full, more than those of any nation on earth—a showcase of justice run amok. We will not proceed with this litany—but it has to be said: As a nation, our response to terrorism has thus far failed spectacularly.

But it began in nobility. It began in thrilling strength of purpose, especially in the heart and will of those who laid down their lives for others: in the final act of citizens in that doomed plane over Pennsylvania, in the last climb of firemen in the doomed towers over Manhattan, and in the hundreds of workers who for months breathed to their hurt the evil vapors of Ground Zero so that that ground might one day be consecrated to a future not like the past. Although so much of what we did as a nation in the years that followed their sacrifices does not honor their offering, still it is their instant choice for others that radiates across this decade and makes tears to stream from our eyes and clear them to see. For you see, their instant decision to save the stranger, not themselves—that is the decision for peace first, leaving justice to another judge. We are riveted by their decision, by their abundant gift, because it calls us so sharply to attention, to see the wonder of our substance: spirit and flesh, temporary and eternal, with power to choose.

Let us therefore accept, even be at peace with, the fact that a nation as a whole is incapable of risking peace before justice. A nation contains too many competing forces to be able to pursue any ideal before justice, and it is that question of deciding true justice which gives factions no peace. This is the theme of Reinhold Niebuhr's realism in *Moral Man and Immoral Society*. Only spiritual communities, not nations, can hold the question, Peace or justice? And as we have said, the question is genuine only if its answer is discovered, not prescribed. Throughout this past summer, we have studied many stories from Genesis with an eye to learning what we have called "lessons in the beginning," what the stories teach of how a community threatened with extinction comes to life not by resorting to its natural forces, but through spiritual gifts—sudden openings to the possibility that God reveals. A spiritual community lives by its lessons, or withers when in fear it too closely guards what it is and what it has been.

Today's lesson is powerfully plain for any people humble enough to see themselves at the beginning of God's time. First, let God have at you by the river Jabbok, in the desolations of uncertainty and decision of your life. Go undefended into that encounter, and, as the poet Rilke set it down, you will know that "Whoever was beaten by this Angel . . . / Went away proud and strengthened / And great from that harsh hand." Then, you will be ready to write on the page of history the lesson set for us today, when Jacob, knowing from the dark night something of the face of God, is able to receive from

much-feared Esau the gift of peace, not justice. Then Jacob can with authority and integrity and humility declare his utmost blessing: “To see your face is like seeing the face of God.”

Friends, only spiritual communities carry as their first purpose the intention that women and men find out for themselves what it is to face God. For this reason, spiritual communities can—by no means do all succeed—can learn and teach the practice of finding and seeing the face of the once-hated brother or sister as ultimate devotion to God. Note that the story says this experience does not take place within the walls of safety, the walls of my church or my people, but in the open country, in the open city, in the open book of your daily life: there, you who are pure in heart, you shall see God, face to face. This is the experience of God which will lift your countenance from the terrain of terror and the floor of fear to face the future of God. This is the experience which will loose your tongue from petty complaints to begin speaking justice in the joy of God’s peace. Face to face with the stranger who was once far off, and is now made near—who once was “them” and is now us all—this experience of God will gird our loins for the work before us, that God’s justice may show forth in peace. Face to face.

Now, in the words of Jelaluddin Rumi, that great mystic lover of God and of all that is God’s —

*Come, come, whoever you are, Wanderer, worshiper, lover of leaving.
Ours is not a caravan of despair. Even if you have broken your vows a
thousand times It doesn't matter Come, come yet again, come.*

Shalom. Salaam aleikum. Peace be with you. Amen.

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