

THE JESUS GAME

Texts on Sunday, January 23, 2011

Isaiah 9: 1-4, 1 Corinthians 1: 4-18

In a certain sense, I did not choose this reading from 1 Corinthians. *For it has been reported to me that there are quarrels among you, my brothers and sisters?* Look, don't blame me. It's in the book! The so-called Revised Common Lectionary delivers this up for this day. Full disclosure, however, requires that I tell you that my sermons do not often follow that lectionary. So, of course I chose the text. But before I saw the lectionary list, I had already settled on the word most needful now—to ask how we of the Riverside Church hang together. Who are we? What is our identity? How can we know what does and does not belong here? What scripture could be more fitting. *"I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same purpose."* Goodness. That great carillon couldn't sound more clearly a call to come together. Of course I was delighted for the lectionary suggestion.

So to Corinth, A.D. 50. What news? Bad news. The church of Christ has been behaving badly from the beginning. In over their head, we might say. There is a good news side to this bad news. The very fact that we can tell the story that throughout history our churches have failed to grasp their purpose proves that some ships have been righted from grave wrongs and sailed on through the storms, guarding their treasures and handing them on for the living. That, and only that, is what is worthy in a tradition.

But what changed in the church at Corinth, say—or in Isaiah's Jerusalem, or in any spiritual community who feel enabled to hear the promise, "There will be no gloom for those who were in anguish"? What changes? I say it was not Paul's powerful epistolary style that saved that church. No appeal from a poet or a prophet or a preacher or a president has ever stopped organizational disintegration—any more than warmly worded warnings from your doctor arrest the error of your bad habits. The solution to the future for a body stuck in its times will never more come, if ever it did, from heroes at the heights. No, the people perform this work, in the power of God. Or not. And no, not all of them. Some always stay grumpy and hurt. But yes, again and again, enough of the people are renewed in their hope of God so that as one body they hear the Lord's command, *Rise! Take up your pallet and walk!* And they walk—or wheel—co-ordinating left and right. They are one. You know this power and this possibility. And you see that the way forward hangs on practices that shape your action and nourish your being. That is to say, the peace and unity of a church depends on things spiritual and behavioral—things you will do and things you will not do. Discerning these things together, and learning to find in God the power to live them, is the whole purpose of Christian community.

Now, that sounds like some serious fun, functioning individually and together toward the limit of our God-given capacities, which are an ever-expanding universe. And I am glad to see it that way, because this is hard, like running a race is hard. But what runner gifted and skilled for the race wants to be found anywhere more than in the press of utmost exertion? Yet so many of the mainline churches and their people appear rather to be straggling and struggling, year upon year, with failing resources of spirit and time and money. The latest denominational pamphlet proposes another technique for attracting young families or raising stewardship levels. Exhausted leaders read this stuff and feel the weight of a *another bar across their shoulders, the rod of their oppressor*—for failing to pull together a team able to execute these new plans. How sad to see ecclesiastical machines in towns little and large so ravenous and human-energy inefficient, so consuming their people and their staff materially that these have neither time nor knowledge to take sustenance spiritually. No wonder the apostle hears that there are quarrels among you. No wonder the grown children turn away. These are all signs of lost identity.

In the book *A Failure of Nerve*, the late Ed Friedman, a genius thinker on how organizations fail and thrive, reports results of a biological study:

In 1970, an experiment was conducted in a French laboratory in which two organisms from the same species that had not developed immune systems were moved closer and closer toward one another. At a certain [point], the smaller one began to disintegrate, and within twenty-four hours it had lost all the principles of its organization. The researchers tried to ascertain what the larger one had done to the smaller one, but in the end found that it had done nothing at all except exist; it had not secreted some substance, nor destroyed it in a hostile way. The smaller one simply began to disintegrate in response to the loss of distance . . . The researchers concluded . . . that they had induced auto-destruction in one member of a species by bringing it into proximity with a larger member of the same species." (p. 180)

So deft an analysis of the failure of the liberal mainline church I have found nowhere else. I suggest to you that the biological phenomenon described here is not a metaphor, but a natural, lawful process of organization and disorganization which cannot be nullified: The smaller of two similar organisms, side by side, will disintegrate if its immune system is not working. See the parallels. Mainline churches are of the same species as the wider culture. Our churches have the same values, the same fears and anxieties, the same prejudices, the same fantasies of being saved by heroes, the same types of compassion and annoyance, and the same patterns of fighting as those of the wider society. Also, like the organisms in that experiment, the churches have for decades had no immune system—that is, no clarity or skill for identifying and developing the behaviors and practices they need; no membrane to admit what does belong and exclude what does not.

Now, alas, our churches have shrunk so much smaller than we were in our heyday. Now, like the organism in the experiment, the mainline church is just too near to its immense cousin, ordinary America. In the words of the researchers, "auto-destruction was induced in the smaller member by bringing it into proximity with a larger member of the same species." The liberal mainline church has been disintegrating because so many leaders and lay people have not laid hold of their essential identity. What is that essential?

The apostle is awfully straightforward here. He calls it "the message about the cross." This is what is giving life to the church. To those who are disintegrating, this message looks like foolishness. What is *the* message about the cross? That in the power of God, and *not* in your own power, you can let go, as your Lord let go. You can choose to lose a fight with your wife, or with your life, as Jesus commends you—and receive life like his. The message of the cross is the Christian essential. It is what has gone missing wherever a church is in disarray. The message of the cross is the practice of real, voluntary relinquishment of power and position, offered under that sign of hope for the life we are given, not the one we were hanging on to. There is more to be said of the unique character of The Riverside Church than "the message of the cross"—but there cannot be less. There is no way forward for any church except through things spiritual and behavioral—things you will do and things you will not do—which have the shape of the Cross.

In that same book, Ed Friedman writes, "Leadership is the immune system of organization." In other words, effective leadership helps every member, every cell, of the body practice the essential: incorporating what builds up the body and rejecting what tears it down. This body is built on a mystery: Die to yourself. How are you doing? In a meeting? In your daily thoughts? Funny thing: if you answer, *Great!*—you are not great. If you answer, *Not well!*—then you are able to be made well, for then you die to yourself a little. It is the Christian essential. ♪You lay down your burden down by the riverside; you ain't gonna study war no more. No more.

Now, let us be sober-minded psychologists of the spirit. It is hard to change at the level needed, deep and inward and personal. Commands and appeals from authorities don't help much, because obedience to authority is so often motivated by fear—and fears tend to strengthen our grip on our old self. In the middle of a meeting when our passions are rising, it is hard to step away, even a little, from

our total attachment to our feelings and our opinions, our fears that we ourselves are threatened by an opponent. It is hard. We are often no more master of our nature than is a hungry hyena or a frightened fawn. But is it true—that you are in danger, that you are threatened, that you can be harmed by the opinions and positions, or even the unkindness of others, in this church, at work, in your family?

Well, I suppose the answer depends on who “you” are. If you are just old you, afraid of losing at every turn, certainly you have still more to lose. But if you are serious about being the body of Christ, and individually members of him, then you must try out this hypothesis, that *neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation can separate you from the love of God which you have seen in Christ Jesus our Lord.* (Rom 8:38) You—real you, eternal you—cannot be harmed. Do you believe it? This is the hope to which you have laid claim in your baptism. This is the condition which makes possible every worthy exertion of your will. So it is time to get on the court and play the game, hard.

For a game to be good, three things are needed: it must be voluntary, it must be for pleasure, and the rules are the rules, no matter how strange. Remove any of those elements from play and you will not have a good game. You know it has to be voluntary; just ask a teenager who feels forced into church if this is a good game. As to pleasure, following the rules of a game is appealing because it demands sharpened awareness, and this human organism is built for heightened attention to what is really going on. Take away our awareness and we are just like the animals; but heightened awareness is the highest pleasure. Playing the Jesus game is the most intense form of pleasure because it requires the highest awareness God gives us—the love-your-enemy engine, the power for peace, the forgiveness function. And when we’re tired and we’re weak and we’re worn, this game’s odd rules guide us not down into guilt but up into the grace of God, for wisdom and strength to try in wholly new ways how to die to ourselves.

To live like Jesus means to choose (that’s the voluntary element) to give your attention wherever it is needed, regardless the cost (those are the odd rules) whenever you become aware (that’s the high pleasure) that your attention will help another. Another person. Another people. Another step in your soul’s growth. Another animal. Another threatened wilderness. An Other. That is the Jesus game. It is not the way the world plays. It’s a different field. It requires maximum attention. It brings maximum pleasure. You’re going to get called out—right out of a meeting if we learn to play this game right, when there’s cruelty and unkindness—but knowing the rules, you also know the Ruler, and you know you will not be thrown out of the game just for breaking the rules. You want your fellow players’ help to show you what to do, and to come back in the game to keep practicing life and love.

It is a weird game, the message of the Cross. But without it, there are no boundaries, and we have no identity, and no reason to be here. The message of the cross, and the practices it requires, are the only way forward for those who were in anguish in the former times. A line in the hymn we’re about to sing says “. . . when sensing beauty or in love’s embrace, whether we suffer or sing rejoicing—we are the Lord’s.” That’s it. In the court of King Jesus, playing his game. Always. We don’t have to worry whether we play the game well; that’s for Another to judge. It’s just the only game worth playing all the time. Just do it.

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