

## CURSE AND BLESSING

Texts on Sunday, February 12, 2017

Job 7: 7-21; Luke 6:17-23

In the days before the recent inauguration of the U.S. president, I viewed a four-hour documentary on PBS. Called “The Divided States of America,” it examined how Americans grew far apart while Barack Obama was President. Grief gripped me as I watched. Frame after frame revealed in countless Americans an unrestrained hatred for the former president. No policies of his lay at the base of their animus; the hatred was there the instant he stepped on the national stage, before any policy was enunciated. It was there in the so-called “birther” attack. From year to year of that administration, it hung in the air like the stench around a slaughterhouse. What is the source of such a river of hatred? In what wilderness does it rise?

Hatred is always twinned with fear. When hatred is felt for those who do violence and injustice, its source hardly needs searching out. After evil drops its victims in the pit, the electricity of hatred may feel like the last sign of life, the only weight one can lay in the scale against injustice.

But sometimes, hate can point to no wrong done or planned, not to them or to any. That was the sort of hatred the PBS film showed. When hatred has no source in injustice, it is rising from inside the person who hates. To search out its source, we need to leave the fields of sociology and politics and look instead at the needs most basic to human being.

We humans are a strange creature. Like all living things, we are a thing which will be erased from the earth—a memory for a while, then nothing at all. Yet we seem to ourselves also the very center of the universe. We hardly know how to set our value. Thomas Jefferson, in masterful confusion, called it “self-evident . . . that all [people] are created equal.” But if it were self-evident, he’d have freed his slaves, all slaves. No, what is self-evident is that all people are completely different; in every measure whatsoever, we are unlike and not equal. This one is stronger, that one smarter, she is wiser, that child kinder, another funnier . . . and on and on. We are in no way obviously equal—except in this: it is self-evident that all will fail, all die, all stink,

all forgotten. Yes, every one is equal—equal in dust and ashes from which we came and to which we shall return.

And yet . . . we know this! As Pascal put it: “The human is only a reed, but he is a thinking reed.” The psalmist cries, “What is man that thou art mindful of him, yet thou has made him little less than God.” Yet how do we come to that sense of wonder for our being? Is it self-evident? If so, all humanity would long since have been at peace, in love. But no, what is evident is that reason cannot take our measure. What is of infinite and eternal value in us is not self-evident. It is revealed. To dismiss dust is self-evident, but to see that all are made and held in the eye of the Eternal—that is a gift, that is revelation itself. And not everyone can see what is revealed. Why, Thomas Jefferson self-evidently could not see the truth revealed in his own words. Yes, all humans are created equal—but we can only see this when we acknowledge it is God Holy Spirit breathing through our dust.

On these two equations hang the whole human predicament. We are all equal in nothing, in death and dust. And we are equal in the eye of God. Between the zero and the infinite, every other assessment we make of humans measures inequalities: material, finite, useful, satisfying, repulsive. At their foundations, the great religious traditions focus all attention on our getting the math right on the zero and the infinite equations for getting this wrong is the beginning of all wrong.

Listen to Job: “Remember that my life is a breath; my eye will never again see good.” You can feel his agony, resisting the devil of dust trying to erase the Eternal from his sight. Listen to Jesus. To a great crowd of people poor and sick, abused by their lords and beaten by police, Jesus brings healing. First, healing for the body, this vessel which thrills us and shames us and confuses us with its weakness and short life. The servant of God must treat the body of the wretched with awe and honor, if he would save them.

Then, the second healing. He stands on a level place, he stands with them, and says—*Blessed, you poor; blessed, you wretched; blessed, you, hungry, you, mourning, you, hated.* In hearts wavering, wondering, weakened and worn by the hatred and mismeasure of men comes the word of God to confirm that you are real, you are children of God, seen in the eye Eternal in the heavens. In his little book, *Jesus and the Disinherited*, Howard Thurman says “This idea,

that God is mindful of the individual, is of tremendous import in dealing with fear as a disease.” (p. 49)

This is our theme today. When we fear we are nothing, the disease of it pours from us as hatred. When we hear we are children of the Eternal, healing loves pour forth from us a fragrant offering. But for so many whose egos are more fragile than birds’ eggs, whose estimate of the meaning of their lives swings wildly between negative and positive poles, fear has sway. American culture constantly washes the unhappy imagination in the thought that his worth is measured in money. Everything desperate in the “American way of life” is driven by the tragic effort to read the meaning of our life from material success or failure. All that hatred which has lain in the stomach of white America through hundreds of years has its source in this obscure fear of being nothing at all, and hearing no word of God to bless.

Thurman tells a story of a young German woman who had escaped the Nazis. “She described for me,” he writes, “the powerful magnet that Hitler was to German youth. The youth had lost their sense of belonging. They did not count; there was no center of hope for their marginal egos. According to my friend, Hitler told them, ‘No one loves you—I love you; no one will give you work—I will give you work; no one wants you—I want you’ . . . [In this way,] Hitler stabilized the ego of the German youth.” (p. 50)

How it chills the heart to hear now this account of a ruthless man who climbed on top of the world by promising “I alone can save you” to millions of crushed egos with no knowledge of the blessing of God, in whom fear curdled into hatred for people thrust beneath their feet. The source of the rivers of hatred flowing through our American people is the same: fear that one is nothing, a curse; and turning that rage inward or outward, in self-abuse or violent injustice on others.

Why, it is not too simple to say of the whole human enterprise through thousands of years that at any moment, only one of two things is happening. Either we are cursing and struggling to be seen and loved, even stomping anyone under our feet to step up higher in some small measure. Or we are blessing and being peace, lifting anyone up we can, because we have received the gift to see as God sees—the infinite, the unending, the whole. Every one of us knows the fear and its curse on the one hand. Every one also knows something of the love

and its blessing. In a nation so divided by fear and hatred, so given to violence and mismeasure, the real concern is to find out, What is the work of love?

Here on the anniversary of Abraham Lincoln's birth, who looked out over the worst crisis of hatred and fear this nation has faced; here in the second week of "Black History Month," I want to leave you with the thought that generation after generation, our African American brothers and sisters have revealed the work of love. Even as their bodies were maimed, abused, lynched, shot down, shut up, and despised, they have set the curse of hatred below, and received and shared the blessing of the Eternal above.

In his new book, *Tears We Cannot Stop*, Michael Eric Dyson writes, "Black humanity has been the only salvation white American humanity has. Democracy might well be a wounded bird incapable of flight without the poultice of black forgiveness pressed to its wings . . . We have given this country the spiritual will and the moral maturity it lost in the bitter divorce of principle and practice." (p. 142) I think that is right, and a thorough guide to our way forward in love, for as we whites have been so forgivingly treated for our trespasses against freedom and justice, so can we learn to treat with those who now trammel our democracy with unjust bonds and lies. Here is how Howard Thurman put it in his little volume on how the religion of Jesus can avail for those whose backs are against the wall:

They will know for themselves that there is a Spirit at work in life and in the hearts of humans which is committed to overcoming the world. It is universal, knowing no age, no race, no culture, and no condition . . . For the privileged and underprivileged alike, if the individual puts at the disposal of the Spirit the needful dedication and discipline, [she and he] can, in the chaos of the present, live effectively the high destiny of a child of God.

Amen

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