

INSIDE OUT

Texts on Sunday, March 11, 2018

Lamentations 3: 1-9, 16-24; Mark 5: 1-20

Studying the scriptures brings surprises. Matthew, Mark, and Luke tell the story about the man from whom demons leapt into swine and “rushed down the steep bank into the sea.” They locate it on the eastern side of the Sea of Galilee, where no Jews lived. All the versions tell of “the steep bank”—all, except the Sea of Galilee itself, which has never had steep hills on its eastern shore. Was the story subject to the tendency toward the fantastic found in folklore everywhere? If it was, is that a problem?

Not when you expose yourself to what is inside the story. Not when you consider why a story developed such value for its hearers that they just had to tell it again. Stories are like lanterns in the storm of time and change. Only stories can pass the light from generation to generation.

It does not really matter whether that man with demons who bruised himself with stones out among the tombs lived as he is described, for as he is described, he is living now. The story says the townspeople restrained the man with shackles and chains, but he broke them and “no one had the strength to subdue him.” But wait! Shackles of some size could certainly have settled him., hence the listener must decide: Either the story has made him into a cartoon giant so Jesus can be its hero. Or the town was not serious about restraining him. The town did not really want to stop him or help him or heal him. They actually needed him “out there,” hurting himself. If they didn’t have him out there, they’d have had to deal with what’s in here.

In here is where the embers of the ancient story are glowing. It is the basic tragedy of societies. In order to keep a false peace within themselves, the people project their guilt out there—on the “evil empire,” on an “axis of evil,” on the Black “super-predator,” on “bad hombres.” Holding themselves innocent—and unexamined—a people often sets out to destroy the demonized “other” through rituals of exile, torment, execution, and war. When I was young, America was certain that communism was the evil to fear. Since 9/11, Islamic terrorists have filled that bill. Yet in the interval between the end of the evil Communist and the dawn of the evil Terrorist— between the fall of the Berlin wall and the fall of the Twin Towers—who was pressed into service in America as the evil one none could subdue? The Black man. During the 1990s, America threw more than two million black men in prison. And though the rate of violent crime fell all through that period, and though it has fallen lower today, still many Americans, including the top of government, preach that the evil is “out there,” that none can subdue them, that

more shackles and more prisons are needed.

The man at the edge of society is always with us. As a nation, we create him because we need him out there, hurting himself. Without him, we would have to deal with what's in here. And what's in here—the opioid crisis tells it every day—is despair. James Baldwin got it right fifty years ago:

White people in this country will have quite enough to do in learning how to accept and love themselves and each other, and when they have achieved this—which will not be tomorrow and may very well be never—the Negro problem will no longer exist, for it will no longer be needed." (The Fire Next Time, p. 22)



Twice a month for ten years, I took part in a conversation with men in the state prison at Attica. The program, run by a Franciscan brother, offered no inducements to come to the group—no awards for attendance, no course credits, no promise of letters to the parole board. A man returned to the group only because he wanted to. It was the same for us volunteers. We did not go as experts or counselors. All of us, from inside and out, returned to the conversation because we found it helpful. I went about 200 times.

About a dozen men would join three or four volunteers, male or female, in chairs in a circle. The ground rules would be laid out: Absolute confidentiality for all that was said. No interrupting. No reading aloud from texts or tracts. Any subject matter was permissible, with one proviso: everyone speaks only from personal experience. Whoever noticed that the discussion had disconnected from personal experience was encouraged to stop the conversation and get us back in the groove of self-inquiry, of growth.

Now, in the year or two before I began at Attica—this was some twenty years ago—a divorce had been looming above me like the awful air before a hurricane. My thoughts drummed endlessly and fruitlessly on injuries done by me and to me. Then something shifted. The deadly mental repetition of sorrows spurred a new seriousness for growth. With the aid of spiritual guides, I began to experience my self as not the sum of my thoughts and feelings. Rather, from observing them, yet not following them, I experienced a degree of freedom, a space, a peace, not like the world gives peace. Desiring this freedom more brought more of it. Feelings and motives that once had bound me like a prisoner I was now able to see. And the one watching was not bound.

Newly resident in Buffalo, N.Y. and alone after the divorce, I was taking part in the Attica conversations. As I listened to the men describing the terrifying limitations and contradictions they faced in prison, and the anger, the shame, the yearning to overcome enemies within and without; and their successes and their growth, I heard myself saying— I saw myself seeing—"I

am not different from these men. I'm a criminal." I wonder whether I can convey to you how wonderfully light was this insight. It was not that my crimes had been of the kind society calls crime. It was rather seeing that the fears and cravings which had driven me to my crimes differed not at all from the fears and cravings that had driven these men in prison to theirs. We are brothers absolute, I thought. The words of the Roman playwright Terence came alive: "I am a human; I consider nothing human alien to me."

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.

Filing through the prison corridors and sitting in our group, the men I saw were black, black, Latino, black, white, black, Latino, black . . . At Sing Sing Prison, where I taught ethics and Christian history for a few years, the same demographics show. Now, most Americans are white-washed in the belief that justice is color blind; that prisoners have plucked the bitter fruit of their bad behavior. But No! An evil far more insidious is hidden outside the iron bars than inside.

For hundreds of years, Americans have drowned their black and brown citizens in poverty, unemployment, and violence—to deal with, but never solve, a disturbance within themselves. In the years since the publication of Michelle Alexander's *The New Jim Crow*, more and more of us are perceiving the dreadful, deadly, and threatening seriousness of the spiritual crisis building underneath centuries of violence against people of color. Alexander calls it a "racial caste system."

One in every fourteen black men is in prison compared with 1 in 106 white men. One third of American black men are or have been under the control of courts, prisons or parole boards. No doubt you have learned by now that the penalty for possessing 100 grams of powder cocaine, a drug preferred by whites, has been the same as the penalty for possessing a single gram of crack cocaine, a cheaper substance. Of those who use crack, 15% are black, but 85% of those imprisoned for crack are black. Whites make up 65% of crack users, but only 5% of those imprisoned for crack are white. In one sense, then, America has a lenient drug policy. It is marked: Whites Only.

I could flood the whole hour with facts and figures that hurt to hear. The sum of it is that the prison system has been developed to help the dominant society keep on using and abusing whom we will, never choosing a new path, never coming to ourselves, never seeing that our ways are crimes, and that our conscience is jammed with guilt, and that among the symptoms of

our guilt are despair and addiction and suicide and gun violence. All because we refuse to see that we are brothers and sisters, every one, absolute.

I once observed here that when conflict arises in a close relationship, and you fight and you win—you lose. When the other person matters, you can't just win flat out. The tragedy of an exceedingly polarized political environment is how this simple fact of relationship and co-existence is utterly lost. Millions seem now to think that by hoarding power to themselves and their kind by whatever means necessary, they will win, and that is all that matters.

But who that hears his brother cry that he sits “in darkness like the dead of long ago, walled about so that I cannot escape, with heavy chains on me; and though I call and cry for help, my way is blocked with hewn stones, and my teeth are made to grind in the gravel; and my soul is bereft of peace; and I have forgotten what happiness is” (Lamentations 3)—who that has ears to hear can hope to win by causing our brothers to lose everything?

When Jesus restored the man to his right mind, one might think the town would have rejoiced to have their citizen healed. Instead, they were afraid. They begged Jesus to leave town. With no evil man at the outskirts, the townspeople sensed that they would reel into confusion. They would have to own their own evil—or beg their politicians for laws to sweep legions of citizens out of sight where they might be safely despised.

But Jesus has healed the man, who now wants to follow him. Jesus refuses him. “Go home to your friends,” he says. Compassion knows that healing and saving are never solely personal. Healing must also be social. The outcast must come home, free and welcome. The people must come to know and accept their “dark side.” The powerful and privileged must see their own violence and greed, their own fear, their self-loathing.

“Go home to your friends,” says the gospel. We have a long path to walk before our friends can come home from prison, safe, able to work and find housing, vote and find communities of welcome. You would think any Christian could see that the problems are not in them so much as in our culture and our fears. But we can only give account for ourselves, not for others. For ourselves, then, let us pray for the wisdom of the ancient Roman playwright, spoken in the very spirit of Jesus Christ: I am human. Nothing human is alien to me. Friends, come home.