

BECOME WHO YOU ARE

Texts on Sunday, January 24, 2010

Psalm 121; 2 Corinthians 4: 7-18

Look at the Psalm we opened this celebration with. *God will not let your foot be moved? The sun shall not strike you by day? The Lord will keep you from all evil?* What do you make of this? No need for sun block? Just after the New Year, we spoke here about our struggle to manage the multitude of selves each of us contains—but *this* self, delivered from all evil? Have you met this one who cannot be harmed? Or should we rather think of the psalm as religious poetry, intended to comfort, not correspond directly with experience; a sort of pep talk while we're here on the bench, before we go back into the one game everyone loses? Is that it?

But look. Here is Paul. It sounds like he might be singing the psalm in real life: *We are persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed.* His affirmation joins many. In the letter to the Romans, for example: "For I am convinced that neither death nor life nor angels nor rulers nor things present nor things to come . . . can separate us from the love of God"; or to the Philippians: "In all things, I have come to know both how to be abased, and how to abound." Turn to the story of Job, who comes definitely to grief, but not to despair, which has no more voice. Job is still speaking. Of course, Jesus' passion—*Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do*—is for Christians the central figure in whom harm has no final purchase. But indeed, the whole Bible is movements of a symphony whose leitmotif is: *No evil can destroy you, no grief cut you down*—a word for *this* life. Who is this You already delivered from evil? Some people think themselves too smart to be very religious. Listen now to the Spirit of your tradition. It dives deeper than you.

Throughout this celebration of the life of Martin Luther King, Jr. I have been thinking about confidence in the face of harm, for those who have practiced militant nonviolent resistance have practically channeled the divine blessing, *Fear not!* Think of the images of bodies bent back by blasts from hoses. *He will not let your foot be moved?* Somehow! Remember truncheons crushing into heads and ribs of souls on the bridge in Selma. *Struck down, but not destroyed?* Somehow!

I went back reading about Rev. James Lawson, who like King, had awakened to the possibility of a new freedom when studying Gandhi's practice of *ahimsa*—meaning: no violence—that burst India free from empire. Gandhi trained resisters for his army of *ahimsa*. A generation later, so would Lawson. Nonviolence is not a head decision, it is a habit of the heart, it is the strength to love. The resister had to train within to see the human world in a way the ordinary ego will not see; as utterly unified, in spite of appearances. Gandhi trained his people to see that the policeman whose stick crashed in your head was following his dharma, his required path, just as the resister also followed his in receiving that violence without violence.

Lawson recruited his army from the large numbers excited by the movement. He winnowed from them those willing to train and be tested in his workshops for the inner rigor of nonviolence. Many did not meet the test. From those who did, Lawson sought signatures on pledge cards! They pledged to one another and for the whole nation to submit their own feelings and their own bodies for the whole. No longer I, I, I—for one person's inner discipline to react not from hurt and fear was now linked like a charge of life to every other person during a demonstration. One person's lack of control was like a fuse on dynamite, liable to explode bullets and blood on others.

Why is that nonviolence powerful enough to overturn historic evil has come through religious leadership? Here's Paul's hypothesis: *This extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us.* Do you believe it? Both these great movements spoke a word which the ego—that strong defender

of everything past I call me, that nay-sayer in us all who knows no way forward into possibilities—cannot hear. Do you hear this? The ego cannot accept what the eye of Spirit has seen for long ages: You are not who you think you are. You are not your own. You are not alone. You belong. More than thought and its ego can ever grasp, you are. Nothing can destroy you. And in every other being, without exception, no matter how hard it is to see or sense, this absolute belonging life burns like a fire.

Martin Buber called this way of seeing the other as part of me the *I-Thou* relationship. In the first pages of his 1923 book, he writes, “So long as the heaven of [seeing] *Thou* is spread out over me, the winds of causality cower at my heels, and the whirlpool of fate stays its course.” Proof? Just see how historic brutality stumbled and crashed on the rock of this word of love, fixed in the being of nonviolent resisters in Bombay and in Birmingham. That part of us which doubts the spiritual conviction of unquenchable being, which insists that our feelings, our property, our thoughts are vulnerable, liable to harm, weak, hurt, soon to die, desperate, oblivious—this part of us, this wailing flailing failing nature of us—makes possible all the world’s evil. All the weight of ordinary oppression puts its weight and accomplishes its will on the fulcrum of our fear. You may not have heard this word yet—I may not have heard this word yet down where it begins to move—but what Martin Luther King called the “giant triplets of racism . . . materialism and militarism” will never bow before people who trust only in what can be seen; who believe only in their outer nature, wasting away. Against these, evil has it easy to keep to its ways.

But who is You, really? That slowly dying thing, full of cramps and complaints? All the prophets of God rise up against that doleful conclusion of the damned. Who is You? You’re perplexed, but You-really is not despairing. Perhaps you are persecuted, but You-really is not forsaken. Struck down, but really, not destroyed. Turn Paul’s argument around and it may become more sensible. The you who sometimes despairs is not You-really—not Christ within. Go deeper. The you who feels angry, hurt, forsaken, is not You-really. The 20th c. French contemplative Simone Weil writes—*When someone hurts me with a word, I should be grateful to him, for he has shown me what level I am living at.* Go deeper. The you who is afraid of dying is not You-really. Live deeper, for whether you have let her speak lately or not, You-really lives eternally now. What is seen is temporary; what is eternal cannot be seen. The Lord keeps you from all evil, the Lord keeps your life.

The Nobel laureate Juan Ramon Jimenez set this down this way:

Yo no soy yo.

Soy este

que va a mi lado sin yo verlo,

que, a veces, voy a ver,

y que, a veces olvido.

El que calla, sereno, cuando hablo,

el que perdona, dulce, cuando odio,

el que pasea por donde no estoy,

el que quedará en pie cuando yo muera.

I am not I.

I am this one

walking beside me whom I do not see,

who sometimes I go and see,

and who sometimes I forget;

the one who is silent, serene, when I talk,

the one who forgives, sweet, when I hate,

the one who takes a walk where I am not,

the one who will remain standing when I will die.

This power to live does not come from us! The power belongs to God. If in your trials you feel you are scraping at the bottom of your barrel—physically, morally, psychically—you are in the wrong barrel, the barrel of dead-and-dying you—but you are not with “this one, walking beside me . . .” who is Christ in you, in whom you know that the Lord will keep you from all evil. Where indeed does the spiritual get the Spirit to sing “I don’t feel no ways tired . . . I come too far from where I started from”? Where *did* you start from—You-really? Christ in you! Now I say, Become who you are: You-really.

First Church, you have made a good beginning. You are lovely to regard, in a way few congregations touch. You are not made up, not cosmetic, but cosmopolitan—citizens of all creation. It’s a word the

apostle uses, a command to the church: *Kosmopoliteuesthe!* Be citizens of all creation. But your race is not over, far from it. Now press on for the upward call in Christ Jesus. See this marvelous inter-connection.

1. A church must be founded and grounded on the strength to love—that is, to say Thou, to see You-really, in every being. This power is not in you. Do not scrape for it. It is a gift. Ask for it. That's 1: Love from beyond your capacity must be the church's one foundation.

2. It is love like that that frees you to become who you are—You-really. All self-help and self-esteem manuals are pulp fiction compared to Christian self-realization. You become who *you* are when you say "Thou"—You-really—to whomever you meet. "Good people and evil, wise and foolish, beautiful and ugly, become successively real." (Buber, p. 15) In other words, the freedom to act without fear is the only way that new power and possibility comes into being. Do not measure your accomplishment against the wall of earthly wrongs. Only give thanks for the stream of fire to love pouring through you. It is a gift. Ask for it.

Now 3—the challenge to the church: The template for God's church made visible in our times is the army of nonviolent resisters, where strength to love from beyond capacity manifests itself in freedom to act—strides toward freedom—which have brought immense machinery of coercion and oppression to stand still. My Lord what a morning, when those awful stars began to fall. For many decades, the Church of Jesus Christ has not been on the stage of history, to act its part as injustice slyly rearms itself in new weapons of coercion.

This is because church people have either been corrupted in lust for power, or afraid and not trained in their heart for strength to love. Until we know that though we be struck down, we cannot be destroyed, we are not ready for the struggle. Become who you are, imbued all through from on high with the strength to love the other, even the enemy, beyond human capacity. Thus comes our God into time and space to do God's utterly new thing—Thy will being done on earth, as if in heaven. Be bound together, O church, never alone, delivered forever from evil. Become who you are.

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