

GRAVITY. GREED. GRACE

Texts on Sunday, November 13, 2022

Isaiah 65:17-25 and Matthew 5: 38-48

Near the end of Martin Luther King Jr.'s famous Riverside speech "Beyond Vietnam—A Time to Break Silence," he declared "When machines and computers, profit motives and property rights, are considered more important than people, the giant triplets of racism, extreme materialism, and militarism are incapable of being conquered." He then invoked America's urgent need for "a true revolution of values." It would not have been out of tune to rejoin, "For they shall not hurt or destroy on all God's holy mountain."

More than fifty years have passed. No revolution. Were Isaiah here in the pews, he'd shout "No, it's two thousand five hundred fifty years that have passed—and no revolution, no new earth." Though listening to Isaiah's song felt like being lifted up on eagle's wings this morning, after all the lies and fears of the past election season, the luminous poetry of each fragment of that prophet's dream reveals also the dark side of how things stand.

No more remember things of old! Because our souls need rest from remembering countless hurts done to us and by us. No more weeping heard in the city? Because the eyes of compassion sting in the thick smoke of the cries of injustice rising all day, all night. No more infants dying? Because this country can stop marking the highest infant mortality rate among rich nations—but wills it not. No more will they build houses and others inhabit? Because redlining and foreclosure and eviction notices paper the streets. No more children born for calamity? Because the nations can put brakes on climate calamity—but will it not. The wolf and the lamb shall feed together, the elephant and donkey sit down and reason together, and they shall not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain, says the LORD. Ah! Dream it, hold the image and the sound of it—the drumbeat for civil war on these shores fading to silence in a true revolution of values.

Think of such hope not as prediction but as an alarm. On seeing that a dream set down by the prophet so long ago still maps closely to the evils of our day, we can also see that the unending need to hear this oracle means one thing, that every human is a child of God. That has been the cry of the scriptures across all the world and time from every tradition according to its kind: Each person carries all humanity within. Do not crush. Each an eternal mystery, each of equal worth; the harm done to each, an assault on God.

For months, we have heard continuously about threats to democracy—unless, of course, a fox was in the henhouse. After the votes were counted,

we also heard more than a few sighs proclaiming that democracy won and despotism lost. For now. The usual discussion of democracy stuck strictly to secular terms of politics and power and society. If you had no spiritual training, you could not discern that yearning for democracy is first a spiritual yearning. It is the dream that all humans be seen and heard human, that all be held in awe with respect, because, as Genesis has it, all are made in the image and likeness of God, all of equal worth, all lambs of God.

Democracy is that manner of governing a society which springs from the aspiration in a people—in most of them, anyway—to acknowledge the presence of the divine in every person. By no means do all agree that all humans are created equal. It is not self-evident. Why, the USA only became a democracy with the passage of the Voting Rights Act in 1965. We are new at this. Let it never be more plainly said: Attacks on voting rights and attacks on democratic processes are attempts to drive the divine presence out of the spirit of a people, to demoralize them in every sense of that word, so that greed may proceed with taking what is not justly given.

What is at stake today has nothing to do with teams and tribes, with red or blue. The demand for democracy is a spiritual struggle, testing whether, in the words of Abraham Lincoln, “this nation, or any nation . . . conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all are created equal . . . can long endure.” Will greed be regulated by those who are spiritually mature? Will it be let to run amok? It is a spiritual contest.

Let us cut deeper into the nation’s disease by pressing that metaphor from King’s speech, the “giant triplets.” What are triplets but closest possible relations, from one source? What one source have racism, materialism, and militarism in common? Greed. Greed isn’t green; it hasn’t to do with dollar signs clogging rich men’s eyeballs. Greed is the gravity that drags my consciousness down when my desire meets another’s need and I do not want to see it; and I will not acknowledge you; and I will not let go my advantage.

The greed of racism—structural, institutional, personal—hordes advantages social, economic, and political for the dominators. The greed of materialism hordes things in pursuit of a happiness eternally out of reach, desperate to save itself from its own emptiness. The greed of militarism hordes unjust acquisitions of lands and spoils in the pretense of power and security, and fills the people with hatred and fear, which they drink to save themselves from their emptiness. Greed is a spiritual disease.

Lately, Rev. William Barber has added to Martin King’s triplets two siblings. You hear in each of his speeches a precise delineation of the enemies we face: racism, materialism, militarism, and now also climate

destruction and Christian nationalism. Quints, if you will, born of greed.

The greed of climate disasters is that we in the rich nations dragged up from the mud trillions on trillions of ancient trees carefully boxed in the earth by slow nature—and burned them fast for our advantage. At first, it wasn't greed but the thrill of discovery. Yet since the scientists proved that the world will burn and drown if we keep this up, it was greed that kept it up with no regard for the calamities of weak nations and generations unborn and cities built on sand.

The greed of Christian nationalism hordes God to itself. It claims its clan has God's Yes behind their every thought and action. Christian nationalism locks the door on consciousness of sin. What a force is greed!

The roots of words often reveal meanings evaporated from ordinary usage. At the root of greed is an ancient word meaning "hunger." Now, greedy does not mean hungry; there is nothing wrong with being hungry. The root branched into "greed" to describe the disorder of our being too hungry—still hungry after you've had your fill, hungry for what no one needs, for things and plans that will cause harm. When we do not know who we are, or whose we are, or what we are for, but have only our self at the center of mind, our greed devours people close to us and far, and things of all kinds, even the whole earth, even God. When we fear that nothing will save us from oblivion, greed descends on our soul like a horde of locusts.

Sometimes greed descends on a whole nation. In great numbers, people desperate to be saved from their emptiness and anger submit to a tyrant promising to sate their basest hungers with hatred and violence. Alas, most people who have ever lived on earth have given in to or suffered under such rulers. But those who feel drawn to them—perhaps a third or more in every nation—are not mature. The fear that drives them is really in them, but the objects that terrify them are not real. They are curses of their imagination. Tragically, the projects of greed in which the fearful can join wreak terror and destruction on millions. The fight for democracy is a real conflict, with real enemies. At bottom, it is a spiritual conflict.

What then shall we do? First, hear the counsel of the great tradition. The apostle Paul warns that in "passing judgment on another, you condemn yourself, because you . . . are doing the very same things." A profound benefit of seeing the injustice at work on the world's stage in terms of greed is that, with attention, we can readily observe the motivation of greed in our own self. Have you never taken what was not justly given—never lied to your advantage; never refused to share when another had need? Greed names a spiritual contest at work in every human. To see this is to feel with

Terentius (Roman playwright, 165 BCE) that nothing human is alien to me.

Here in a spirit of humility is a beginning in wisdom, for we cannot overcome the gravity of greed by strength of will. In the public square, our angry activism and politics get nowhere. You have heard it said, "Love your neighbor and hate your enemy." But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, This you cannot do by force of will—yet this you shall do. Only grace can help here. Shall we call it grace when we are able to perceive that the evils we deplore in others are driven in them by fears not utterly different from those we can observe in ourselves? There is a start in loving our enemy. It does not diminish the gravity of the conflict. It does invite us to make space for grace.

When your child comes in the night terrified of monsters under the bed, you do not hate the child or make fun of her. Her fear is real, her understanding is not. You do not feed her fear; you stay with her. You know she is not mature. Is there something in this figure to inform a practice with citizens who howl in fear at monsters at the border, at black faces, at Jews, at people coming home from prison . . . and on and on? Their fear is real, their understanding is not. They are not mature. This you will never see said in the media, but if you accept your calling as peacemaker in this greed-driven world, begin with a prayer for grace to love your enemy. This does not require you to accept that your enemy sees what is real. Pray rather to see your own fault with attention, and learn how to meet your enemy.

From the mountain top, Jesus' last word to you was, "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect." The translation is imperfect. Every other use of that word in the New Testament—Paul was especially drawn to it—is translated "mature." The Greek word comes from *telos*, meaning your ultimate goal. "Begin with the *telos* in mind," Steven Covey might have written. Be goal-turned as your heavenly Father is goal-turned. Be spiritually mature, so that you may be children of your God in heaven. By grace alone can come the peace. And by grace, you can serve as a warrior for democracy on God's holy mountain.

Rev. Stephen H. Phelps
© 2022 Stephen H. Phelps

delivered at First Presbyterian Church
Brooklyn, N.Y.