

Protagonist Corner

Truth-Telling Comfort

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The events of September 11, 2001 (the bombings in New York City and Washington, D.C.), evoke for me the sobering verdict of Karl Barth:

As ministers we ought to speak of God. We are human, however, and so cannot speak of God. We ought therefore to recognize both our obligation and our inability and by that very recognition give God the glory. (*The Word of God and the Word of Man*, 186)

This surely is the perplexity in which pastors of the church find ourselves always, but intensely so in the face of that ominous happening. Of course I have no warrant to speak beyond that of every sister and brother in ministry to speak when we cannot; but like every brother and sister in ministry, I have some obligation to try.

I.

The first word to be spoken in and by the church of course concerns *grief and comfort* over the insane loss of life that is, in the countless concrete cases, completely nonsensical. The grief is about loss, more so about meaningless, violent loss, and it must be uttered deep and loud and long, and not quenched soon. I suspect that the church will be driven to texts of sadness such as it has not “needed” for a long time. The grief surely concerns personal loss. For this, a series of lament psalms provide a powerful script.

But the loss, beyond the personal, is a systemic shattering, a new public sense of vulnerability and outrage, an abrupt subverting of our shared sense that we in the United States are somehow immune from the rage of the world. There is currently great attention to “Lament Psalms” as they function in “pastoral care,” an immense gain in church practice. Not so much noticed, however, are “communal laments” (such as Pss. 74, 79) that bespeak the shattering of the most elemental public symbols of coherence and meaning, in the Old Testament embodied in the Jerusalem temple. This public dimension of grief is deep underneath personal loss, and for the most part, not easily articulated among us. But grief will not be worked well or adequately until attention goes underneath the personal to the public and communal. My expectation is that pastors, liturgically and pastorally, most need to provide opportunity and script for lament and complaint and grief for a long time. No second maneuver after grief shall be permitted to crowd in upon this raw, elemental requirement.

The full voice of grief is to be matched by the *enactment of comfort* that seeks to meet grief. That comfort begins with bodily contact, but eventually we must speak about the God of all comfort beyond our feeble but indispensable personal offer of comfort. I suspect that in our effort to speak credible comfort, we will be driven back to Easter seriousness, an Easter claim that has not been very serious or even credible in much of our bourgeois self-sufficiency. The claim on which everything rests for us,

however, is that the God of the Gospel has rendered impotent “the last enemy” who can no longer rob us of life with the God of whom Paul affirms:

For I am sure 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, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Romans 8:38-39)

We pastors utter these words almost every time there is a funeral. But now, I suspect, we will be tested by this required Easter utterance. On the one hand, we will be tested to see if we subscribe enough ourselves to say it; on the other, we are challenged to make sure that the affirmation is not glib in its failure to credit the durability of Friday and the permeability of Saturday, the power of which is not fully sated by Sunday morning. Church people will be helped by the affirmation that the anguish of Friday and Saturday persists, as we know in our own experience.

Grief and comfort come first, and are the peculiar work of the believing community. For it is the comfort out beyond our management, the reality of God, that makes grief without protective denial possible. It is now frequently said that the U.S. church is “theologically soft” on the things that count. Now we shall see. We shall variously find out for ourselves in the dark silent hours of pastoral resolve.

II.

Beyond that obvious but urgent pastoral task that is entrusted peculiarly to such as us, we are drawn back to first questions by *the power of negation*, the kind of question that we often need not face. President Bush has said in response to the disaster, “Our nation has seen evil.” He of course did not exposit his use of the word “evil”; but his usage has given me pause. Most likely the President referred to the “evil persons” who committed this act of brutality, and that dimension of evil is not to be discounted.

But for pastors, the term “evil” evokes more, and is not easily contained in human explanations about particular sins enacted by human agents. For “evil” draws us beyond “bad deeds” to cosmic questions. Very much Christian triumphalism claims easily that God in Jesus—at Easter—has eliminated the cosmic power of negation. Barth, however, has written of the durable power of “Nothingness,” and almost all of us are familiar with Cullman’s suggestive notion about the continued threat of the enemy between “D Day” and “VE Day.” More recently, Jon Levenson, a Jewish interpreter, has shown that in the Hebrew Bible evil as a cosmic force persists, made visible in concrete acts but not contained in or reduced to visible acts. Evil persists in a powerful way in defiance of the will of the creator.

So what shall we tell our children? Perhaps we will have learned enough from the Jewish Holocaust to refrain from any glib triumphalism, in order to affirm that God’s crucified way in the world continues to be vulnerable and at risk from the demonic forces that may be in a last gasp, but in a powerful last gasp. Our children, so protected and privileged, may need to be delivered from romantic innocence to recognize that we live in a profoundly contested world, contested all the way down between God’s good will and the deathliness of evil. Our commitment in the thick contest, moreover, matters, so that when we sign on (in baptism), we join the contest as partisans of the Vulnerable One, and join the at-risk vocation that is the God-willed future of the world.

III.

Finally, of course, pastors with a cunning sense of good timing will eventually have to raise questions about U.S. policy and U.S. entanglement in the spiral of violence that continues to escalate. Much of popular opinion, reinforced by official posturing, acts as though Reinhold Niebuhr had never spoken about U.S. innocence and self-righteousness. The huge temptation for “Christian America” is to imagine that the U.S. is a righteous empire that endlessly does good around the world, comfortably portrayed in Manichean categories of good and evil. Such knee-jerk response to the crisis traffics in a combination of chauvinism and unreflective Christian triumphalism that refuses to think systemically about the U.S. as the international bully that continues to enact and embody the “Christian West” against non-Christian societies with its huge economic leverage, and with immense, unrivalled military power. And with the gospel of Western globalism, the U.S. is passionately committed to override the fabric of any other kind of culture.

The prophetic task surely has never been more problematic for us than in this issue. The old texts articulate the stunning claim that God can indeed critique and move against God’s own chosen people. The simple prophetic articulation by itself is too raw and must be accompanied by patient education in systemic analysis of power, an analysis is known and implied in the prophetic texts, but seldom made explicit.

There will be, to be sure, little patience among us for such systemic analysis, and pastors should not in my judgment, resort to this second task too soon. But if pastors eventually settle only for interpersonal “grief and comfort,” the deep issues of U.S. militarism in the service of U.S. consumerism will go unexplored, because there is almost nobody else for such analysis and such utterance.

This is a moment in which pastors, both liberal and conservative, might move out of deathly intramural spats to face big questions about good and evil, and about our U.S. location in the midst of it all. Pastors who face such questions will be engaged in deep questions of their own faith. Pastors who face such questions will be beleaguered, because a triumphant society does not relish truth-telling.

It occurs to me that Paul’s lyrical declaration about ministry, so popular in more-or-less innocent ordination sermons, is a moving resource for today:

We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair, persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies. (II Cor. 4:8-10)

As you know, Paul concludes: “Therefore we do not lose heart” (v. 16). The heartless evils of September 11 could cause loss of heart. But our heart is set elsewhere in joy and freedom, in grace and in truth-telling about the God of all truth.

I suggest that there are a series of important pastoral tasks concerning *grief, comfort, cosmic evil, and social analysis*. The evils of yesterday create a new context for preaching. The rawness will make for careful alternative listening, because the word the church has now to speak matters enormously. Having said that, I finish by insisting, yet again, that the first task is grief, grief to be done long and well before anything else (see Romans 3:7, 15:8).

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