

A Culture of Life and the Politics of Death

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If politics is the management of public power, then a *politics of death* is the management of public power in ways that produce fear, hate, alienation, and brutality. If culture is a web of human signification and interaction, then a *culture of life* is a web of human signification and interaction that produces a community of security, joy, well-being, peace, and freedom.

One dimension of the church's vocation is to foster and sustain a culture of life; it does so by neighborly engagement and by sacramental valuing of the elemental realities of human existence. That practice of church vocation frequently, and certainly now in the United States, must be done (if at all) amid a politics of death that is characterized by an anti-neighborly attitude, an acquisitive economy, and an uncritical commitment to a national security state.

A culture of life is characteristically, and in our setting, a minority report; it is a minority report that bears witness to the intransigent truth of the gospel, that the will of God is for the well-being of all creation.

In what follows I will consider three texts concerning this unequal interface, and then make a few interpretive leaps to our own demanding milieu of ministry.

I.

The Elisha narratives are set down in the midst of the Books of Kings (2 Kings 2-10).¹ They are surrounded by narrative reports on the Kings of Israel and Judah presented in highly stylized, mostly predictable royal reports that reflect establishment reality in which little is unsettled or left in doubt. The royal reports have very little generative force. By contrast, the narrative accounts of Elisha teem with unsettling transformative energy. The contrast in narrative style is commensurate with the contrast in substance. The kings, not surprisingly, reflect a commitment to equilibrium, whereas the Elisha narratives bespeak an openness to newness. These latter narratives, the subject of our interest, report on the inscrutable and inexplicable that is evoked and caused by Elisha, the uncredentialed prophet. And while the narratives offer something of the fantastic, they are in fact at the same time grounded in concrete, lived human experience; they characteristically concern life and death matters such as illness and recovery, hunger and food, war and peace, debt and credit. The stories are remembered and told by those who cherish the ways in which this emancipatory agent of life operated within and against the politics of death that was sponsored by the several kings in the narrative. Without any interpretive commentary, it is clear that Elisha embodies and evokes a culture of life that is profoundly subversive of the politics of death sponsored and embodied by the monarchy.

The first narrative I consider is in 2 Kings 4:1-7, a characteristic tale of prophetic intervention. If we read discerningly, we will see that what Elisha does is to evoke a culture of life amid royal policies of death. The story line of the narrative is easy enough to trace. It concerns a woman who had bills she could not pay; she is frantic in her appeal to the prophet, because she fears she will lose her children (v. 1). That's the problem. She is in a terrible economic fix! The prophet intervenes, causes a surplus

of oil in her house, and instructs her to sell the oil, pay her bills, and live well with her children. It is a simple story of deficiency-to-surplus, from anxiety to well-being. Old Testament scholars label it a “miracle story” and so it is.² In that regard it is a fantasy. If, however, we read more carefully, we can see that the narrative is much thicker than that label might suggest.

When we consider the problem with which the narrative begins, we are given two clues to the politics of death out of which the story arises. First, we are told that she is a widow, for she said, “My husband is dead.” It is obvious that in a patriarchal society organized around male power, a male-less woman is profoundly vulnerable and is not likely to have resources for life or the means to protect herself and her family. She is exposed and in huge jeopardy. Second, there is the mention of a “creditor,” one who loans money, hold mortgages, and exercises immense social leverage. Moreover, we are told that the creditor is about to foreclose on the widow. Before the creditor, the widow is helpless. Indeed “creditor” and “widow” make a perfect pair for the culture of death, wherein the powerful act upon the powerless. The outcome of the leverage of the creditor on the widow is that her vulnerable children may be forced into debt slavery, that is, forced to work, perhaps to perpetuity, in order to satisfy a debt that cannot be otherwise satisfied.³

The convergence of *widow*, *creditor*, and *slave debtor* provides the elemental notice of the politics of death. For the politics of death concerns precisely the absence of a human infrastructure, a complete default on neighborly relationships, and the reduction of neighborly interaction to commodity transactions. The creditor, for all we know, is not mean or rapacious. He is simply committed to the laws of the market whereby debts must be paid, collateral must be held, and defaults must be faced honestly and unflinchingly. Likely he intends the widow no ill, but all parties in the narrative are held to the relentless working out of commodity transactions. One can tell, in this opening scene, that there are no neighborly restraints to the commodity transactions, no capacity for generosity, no sense of shame for exploiting the vulnerable woman, no pathos about the seizure of the children, and no remorse about reducing a family to a marketable commodity. The politics of death is a way of organizing social power so that leverage is completely “rational” and unrestrained by any sense of the possibility of human solidarity.

The politics of death in turn leads to the elimination of a sense of the public, the loss of any awareness of common membership in and responsibility for society. One can see, in our own time and place, that politics of uncurbed market freedom in the disappearance of the public, in the refusal to finance by taxation any social safety net, a default on health care, an abandonment of public schools, and, in the name of “reform,” the reduction of persons to commodities. Writ large, the same perception of reality leads to the shameless pursuit of Islamic oil by way of raw power, without regard for the cultural context of oil or the social fabric of the oil-holding societies. The outcome of such a politics of death is the history of the bodies of dead soldiers, the brutalization and dehumanization of “the enemy,” matched by complete indifference to multiple deaths among “the enemy.” All of this, I propose, is inchoately in view in our narrative. The widow is a cipher for all those preyed upon by an acquisitive society in the narrow, blessed name of the market.

The prophet is ready and has the capacity to create, amid this woman and her children, a culture of life. Whereas we kill for oil, this culture of life evokes an

abundance of oil for the woman, a precious commodity then as now. We are not told how this abundance happens, and the narrative exhibits no curiosity on the point. We do notice that the act of abundance requires the gathering of the entire community; the story goes outside the politics of death and abundance displaces scarcity. The account of the abundance of the widow is a total contrast to the account of the early commodity crisis:

So she left him and shut the door behind her and her children; they kept bringing vessels to her, and she kept pouring. When the vessels were full, she said to her son, "Bring me another vessel." But he said to her, "There are no more." Then the oil stopped flowing. (2 Kings 4:5-6)

The home of the widow became a venue in which resources for life are given. The threat of the creditor is lifted and the children are safe. The one with power, in this culture of life, stands in solidarity with the helpless widow who need no longer be vulnerable. The conclusion of the story is the prophetic directive to "pay your debts." Get yourself out of the politics of death so that the creditors can no longer prey upon the vulnerable widow who need be vulnerable no longer. In the end, *the children are safe!* They are regarded, by the end of the narrative, as social treasures and not as market commodities.

This brief narrative may function as an epitome of the struggle between the politics of death and the culture of life, a struggle that always goes on and that is acute among us now. The narrative, however, is not only a glimpse of the struggle that we cannot disregard. It is also an evangelical declaration of the triumph of the culture of life; this triumph is made possible by the inscrutable working of the spirit of the abundant creator who works alongside a bold human agent and a mobilized human community for the culture of life among those who are not inured in the politics of death.

II.

The second narrative account of the politics of death and the culture of life that I cite is from 2 Kings 8:1-6. In this episode, the mother from the narrative of 2 Kings 4:8-37 reappears. In the earlier episode, her son had died and her husband was old (v. 15). In chapter 8, the son reappears, the one whom Elisha had raised for the dead (8:5). His reappearance attests to the claim that Elisha is indeed a powerful practitioner of the culture of life. Her husband is no longer mentioned in this episode; it seems fair to assume he has died. If so, she is, of course, a widow without a male advocate, albeit a remarkably resourceful widow.

In the narrative of chapter 8, the woman is urged by Elisha to flee her homeland in the face of an impending seven-year famine. She is for some years a displaced person as she lives "in the land of the Philistines," surely a phrasing used to situate her in a most alien environment, far from home. While she was gone, of course, she lost her land. She was not present to protect her land or defend it legally; in her absence her land was taken from her. Thus the crisis of the loss of all to which she was properly and rightly entitled, lost in the rapacious normality of land transactions. The narrative does not comment on how she lost the land. We might assume the land was taken from her by land speculators, by aggressive lawyers, by sharp dealings that may have been legal but that entertained no memory of her inheritance. On any reading, the loss of her

land is a part of the politics of death in which the art of the possible—legally and economically possible—runs roughshod over any human entitlement not supported by social leverage and muscle. However her land loss should be understood, it clearly reflects a politics of death not unlike the situation of the widow we have considered in chapter 4. In both cases, the bereft woman is helpless before the relentlessness of market forces of a ruthless male economy.

Our interest in the narrative, however, is about her reclamation project. When the famine is over, she returns home. She finds her property confiscated or reassigned. She immediately files a petition with the king to reclaim her inheritance. We are not told the name of the king to whom she appeals, but it is one of the sons of the notorious Ahab. As we know from the story of Naboth's vineyard (1 Kings 21), this royal dynasty does indeed practice the politics of death. Among other things, the dynasty managed the death of Naboth on phony charges, declared Elijah an enemy of the state, and handily seized the land of the framed and wrongly executed Naboth. Thus the widow woman must make an appeal for her entitlement to the royal system that practices an economics of death. The prospect of her winning her case before the throne would seem to be remote. We might expect that the king would dismiss her appeal and conclude that her erstwhile inheritance now properly, even legally, belongs to one of his usurpation cronies. She stands no chance before such a judiciary.

But the story takes a curious turn as sometimes happens in real life. We are surprised to learn that the king, son of the death-dealing Ahab, was having a conversation with Gehazi, Elisha's aide and associate. The servant Gehazi, moreover, knows all about the culture of life that Elisha practices that we file under the rubric of "miracle," for he has had close, hands-on contact with this practitioner of life. The king, curious or perhaps threatened, says to Gehazi, "So tell me about the great things Elisha has done." Give me a summary of the miracles of life he has enacted. This is a strange request out of the mouth of the deathly dynasty, but then, the politics of death is always placed in jeopardy by the culture of life. Gehazi responds and tells the king. He begins with the most remarkable of all of Elisha's prophetic acts of new life. In 2 Kings 4, the son of the woman has died, and Elisha raised her to new life, because he is a bearer of life. Gehazi got no further in his wondrous review before the king's secretary knocked on the door of the oval office. Sorry king, but there is an hysterical woman out here demanding to see you. She enters into the king's presence; of course the king did not know her. But Gehazi did. Gehazi recognized her from chapter 4. Gehazi reports to the king, "Oh my God, it is the woman from chapter 4, the one whose son was raised from the dead." And along with her is the son whom Elisha restored to life. The son is living, concrete, irrefutable evidence of power of the culture for life that surges around Elisha. It is clear that the culture of life touches everything, a woman without oil, a woman with a dead son, and a woman with forfeited property. Elisha's very presence stirs the prospect of newness in contexts where no newness seemed remotely possible.

The king welcomes the woman. He now knows, because he has been told, that the woman and the son concretely represent a new culture of life that he, the king, can take as opportunity or as threat. When the king is satisfied that he has all the data, he issues his royal verdict: "Restore all that was hers, together with all the revenue of the fields from the day that she left the land until now" (2 Kings 8:6).

What a surprise! What an astonishing royal decree! It is not what we expected from

a son of Ahab. We expected something more like Ahab against Naboth: “As soon as Ahab heard that Naboth was dead, Ahab set out to go down to the vineyard of Naboth the Jezreelite, to take possession of it” (1 Kings 21:16). We anticipate that the king would say to the vulnerable woman: “Tough luck! The land is now organized for the sake of my entourage and your claim has been legally overridden.” We call that “the right of eminent domain,” whereby the powerful override the powerless, whereby helpless widows characteristically lose their homes in the name of royal progress. It would have been completely in character to draw such a royal conclusion.

Against our expectation, and surely against the expectation of the woman herself, the king acts for a culture of life and against the usual politics of death that prevailed in Samaria. He delivers the royal verdict: “Restore all that was hers, together with all the revenue of the fields from the day that she left the land until now” (2 Kings 8:6).

The royal decree meets the petition of the vulnerable woman; what she has lost will be restored! Even though she is alone and has no male advocate, she is guaranteed by the king, restoration to the economy in an effective way, a way making life possible for her once again.

We are not told why the king, against the usual politics of death, signed on for a culture of life. But the most plausible explanation within the narrative is that the king is impacted by the “great things” wrought by Elisha and recited by Gehazi.⁴ The inventory of prophetic miracles reported to the king made available to the king an alternative vista of political possibility. Options never on the horizon of the dynasty are now available and possible. This narrative is important, for it seems to suggest that the *prophetic alternative* may indeed spill over into *royal policy*, thus moving in a public way to the recovery of the political economy as a venue for viable, human public life.

III.

Thus far I have cited two narratives of Elisha. The first in 2 Kings 4:1-8 exhibits the prophet generating new life in a context of death...creditors and slavery. The second in 2 Kings 8:1-8 indicates that the prophetic alternative may set in motion an alternative politics in high places of power. The two narratives together are paradigmatic for our theme of life and death in the public domain. In addition to their paradigmatic importance, the narratives function serendipitously in Christian reading, for they provide a segue to the narratives of Jesus that exhibit the same interface of life and death in the public domain. Indeed, it is possible to see that the narratives of Jesus are much informed by and patterned after the Elisha narratives.⁵ For Jesus characteristically enacted a new option for life and regularly evoked the malice and hostility of establishment types who have a stake in maintenance of a politics of death. In the narrative account of Luke, this contestation is nicely summed up in Luke 19:47-48:

Every day he was teaching in the temple. The chief priests, the scribes, and the leaders of the people kept looking for a way to kill him; but they did not find anything they could do, for all the people were spellbound by what they heard.

The first party of this summary report, “chief priests, the scribes, and the leaders of the people,” taken together, constitutes the power establishment that has a vested interest

in the status quo with its careful entitlements and the commensurate exclusionary practices that go alongside entitlements. For the common folk, the establishment did indeed practice a politics of death, denying access to the sources of life.

Conversely, “the people” represent all those who experience exclusionary exploitation by the power establishment and who groan for an alternative that they find palpably available in the ministry of Jesus. It is no wonder that the latter are “spellbound” by his teaching and by the narrative reports of his actions. They are dazzled and mesmerized because Jesus operates outside conventional explanations and makes possible what the establishment had declared to be impossible. And of course, they recognized that his radical alternative was indeed a gift of life that they had never dared hope to receive. While the theological point of the interface is obvious, the sociological dimension should not be missed. The power establishment was denied by Jesus its capacity to control by the dangerous force of alternative public opinion. The report in Luke might suggest that when vividly under way, the culture of life has such a generative power that resistance by the politics of death is ineffective and eventually impotent.

IV.

It remains only to observe that this deep contradiction is defining for the church and its ministry, and consequently defining for the work of preaching. Preaching is situated exactly in this alternative option, the declaration of that power that arises in a culture of life that the power of death cannot resist. There is, characteristically, resistance in the listening congregation to such a declaration, and indeed the preacher herself often engages in resistance through the practice of timidity. Much of the church is tamed by and invested in the politics of death. But that articulation and practice of a culture for life is nonetheless an enormous yearning among us. Such words of course amount to an utterance of “great things” in the hearing of the king, but that utterance belongs inescapably to the daily missional life of the congregation. The utterance of that alternative may indeed evoke alternative action. It is never easy and always risky to speak and act against the culture of death. But when we do it, we know concretely that a politics of death can never contain the power for life that surges in such utterance and in such practice. Talk about spellbinding!

Notes

1. On these narratives, see Walter Brueggemann, *Testimony to Otherwise: The Witness of Elijah and Elisha* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2001).
2. On the patterned regularity of miracle stories, see Robert C. Culley, *Studies in the Structure of Hebrew Narratives* (Semeia Supp. 3; Missoula, Mont.: Scholars Press, 1976).
3. There is no doubt that covenantal Israel cared a great deal about debt management. Particular reference should be made to the provision for “the year of release” in Deuteronomy 15:1-18. It is clear that such a command is from a different world than the rough and tumble of this narrative account.
4. The royal decree, no doubt inadvertently, is congruent with normative teaching in Israel concerning the property rights of unprotected landholders; see Deuteronomy 19:14; Proverbs 22:28; 23:10.
5. See Thomas L. Brodie, *The Elijah-Elisha Narrative as an Interpretive Synthesis of Genesis-Kings and a Literary Model for the Gospels* (Collegeville, Minn.: The Liturgical Press, 2000).