

Advantage McEnroe!

Isaiah 45:1, 9-13; Acts 10:34-43

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Advantage McEnroe! It could have been “advantage Federer,” or “advantage Williams.” Or “advantage Nadal.” It is usually “advantage” for the highest ranking players in the National Lawn Tennis Association, because in tight tennis matches, you cannot win a match without “advantage.” Better than that, as long as you have “advantage” in a tight tennis match, you cannot lose. You can do the numbers. So I want to think with you about having “advantage,” the difference it makes and the problems it creates.

I.

History is the endless performance of the advantaged. The un-advantaged mostly do not leave a track in the sand. But the advantaged leave many tracks, many carefully recorded monuments, and rich carbon footprints on the earth.

The Bible is the memory and testimony of the advantaged. The Old Testament is the story of Hebrew-Israelite-Jewish advantage and was so from the beginning. The first word uttered to Abraham and to Sarah was about an advantage consisting in a name, a land, a great nation, a carrier of blessing. When that story impinged upon the slave camp of Egypt, Israel is said to be “my first-born son,” the one entitled to all the gifts and properties (Exodus 4:22). It is anticipated that Israel will be for YHWH a priestly kingdom and a holy nation (Exodus 19:6). By the time of Deuteronomy, it is declared: “For you are a people holy to the Lord our God; the Lord our God has chosen you out of all the peoples on the earth to be his treasured possession” (Deut. 7:6). “For you are a people holy to the Lord our God; it is you the Lord has chosen out of all the peoples on earth to be his people, his treasured possession” (Deut. 14:2). That was not because Israel was big or righteous, but only because the Lord “set his heart on Israel,” lusted after Israel, and gave Israel glorious gifts.

Likewise the New Testament is the story of God’s chosen people:

You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask in my name. (John 15:16)

But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are. (I Corinthians 1:27-28)

But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out darkness into his marvelous light.

Once you were not a people, but now you are God’s people.

Once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy. (I Peter 2:9-10)

John, Paul, and Peter are all agreed on that.

As you know, we have parlayed that chosenness into economic authority and advantage, so that the Popes, the Popes for us Protestants for fifteen centuries, did not allow error the same right as truth. It is our pope who divided up the new world so that Spain and Portugal could split the income from the mineral deposits. Since then all kinds of profits and advantages have accrued to Jesus' well-beloved church, all the way to clergy discounts and tax advantages, even baseball passes in such enlightened wise cities as St. Louis! All rooted in chosenness!

That Christian advantage for God's people has segued over into Western White advantage that Ta-Nehisi Coates has termed "The Dream" for those whom he characterizes as "the Masters of the Galaxy." Coates writes of white advantage:

"White America" is a syndicate arrayed to protect its exclusive power to dominate and control our bodies. Sometimes that power is direct (lynching), and sometimes it is insidious (redlining). But however it appears, the power of domination and exclusion is central to the belief in being white, and without it "white people" would cease to exist for want of reason.¹

The "advantaged"—whether Jewish or Christian or Western or white or even black thugs who run dictatorships in Africa—control the press, the media, the courts, the church, the university... whatever; we are indeed "masters of the galaxy."² We have gladly performed such hegemony, and mostly we do not even notice we are doing it. We simply assume it and expect others to acknowledge it as well. The Bible is a narrative of such wondrous divine advantage:

From heaven he came and sought her to be his holy bride,
With his own blood he bought her, and for her life he died.
Elect from every nation, yet one o'er all the earth, her charter of salvation,
one Lord, one faith, one birth.³

Ye chosen seed of Israel's race, ye ransomed from the fall,
...hail him who saved you by his grace, and crown him Lord of all!⁴

II.

The Bible, however, is a narrative of *advantage negated*. Hard to believe! But the story concerns a God who extends advantage and then moves against the advantaged. The Jews in exile waited for homecoming. In their grief they knew that God willed to bring them back home to Jerusalem. But God's intention for them was not so singularly Jewish. Isaiah has God declare that deliverance and homecoming will be accomplished by a Persian, by a *goi* whom God calls "my Messiah" (Isaiah 45:1). What a contradiction in terms! *Goi*-Messiah. The Jews had lost their assumed advantage in history and then must be saved, if at all, by the agency of a *goi*. God found it neither necessary nor possible to contain history in the confines of the advantaged. God's way lies beyond such tight assured advantage. It was a Persian who would

tend to the advantaged in the world.

Some among Isaiah's audience noticed the contradiction and did not like it. They must have protested. They wanted to be saved the way they always were saved in the past, by the wonder of their Jewish advantage. Some said, "We will not be led home by a *goi*. We will wait for an advantaged Jewish Messiah." In response to such resistance, the poet chides his Jewish companions: "How dare you question God's way of rescue, even if it is not the way of your old advantage!" The advantaged Jews are like a clay pot that questions the potter. The advantaged Jews are like a fetus that questions the birth process or like semen that does not want to follow the usual path of connection. The poet says:

Woe to you who strive with your maker....
Woe to those who say to a father, "What are you begetting?"
Or to a woman, "With what are you in labor?..."
Will you question me about my children,
Or command me concerning the work of my hands?
I made the earth;
I created humankind;
I have aroused Cyrus the *goi*.

"It will be the way I say and not the way of your advantaged expectation. My ways are not your ways, and my ways will not be squeezed into your advantage." The poet says "woe." Big trouble is coming to those who cling to their advantage when it collides with the purposes of God.

The resistance encountered by Isaiah is not unlike the resistance that Peter voices in the Book of Acts. Peter knew the purity laws. He knew the guidelines of advantage. He knew that snakes are unclean and must not be eaten. When commanded to do so, he protested: "I have never eaten anything unclean" (Acts 10:14). I kept to the rules of advantage. He knew Gentiles are unclean, and we should not eat with them because we reserve the right to refuse service to the unclean, to the colored, and most recently to the gays. Except that Peter's advantage is interrupted by a nightmare. The voice in the trance said, "What God has made clean you must not call profane" (Acts 10:15). It took some doing for the Spirit to bring Peter along. But when Peter gets ready to preach this new disclosure, he blurts it out: "I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him" (10:34-35). I truly understand that the old purity laws do not work. I truly understand that the old advantage is now completely compromised. In the opening section of his sermon, Jewish advantage is abruptly put to flight. In his homiletical thesis, the end comes dramatically to privilege, certitude, and control. The God who chose now shows no partiality.

And Paul will line it out, perhaps in baptismal formulation: "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male or female; for all of you are one in Christ. And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise" (Galatians 3:28-29). Paul names the privileged ones: Jews...free...male. We transpose the list: free, male, Western, white, straight. We could imagine this new list of heirs is the equivalent of a *goi* Messiah or like eating a snake or welcoming a Gentile who has come to emancipation, not unlike Jews,

males, and free persons.

And now the protest against God's new arrangement is thick in our midst. Male advantage is disappearing. White advantage is being called into question. We know in our guts that advantage is evaporating all around us. American advantage is fading as China initiates its own IMF and controls bigger parts of the world and the economy. And straights are not, with their biblical advantage, any longer privileged. And the church has no more advantage. In many churches it is said this way: a) "The world is going to the dogs," or b) "We must take back our country." When probed, this means taking back advantage, and "to the dogs" means the disadvantaged are asserting themselves. I say this to you because I have come to think that political health and economic wellbeing in our society now depend on the graceful and willing acknowledgement that ancient advantage has been taken from some of us by God. It is that loss of advantage that fuels the anger and anxiety and rage and violence among us. But that advantage is now over, as Isaiah taught his exiled companions and as Peter witnessed to the early church. It is by the mercy of God over. God has moved beyond old chosenness.

III.

We are inching by the mercy of God toward a new level playing field. Peter, in his post-trance sermon voices this hard truth as the Spirit had given it to him: "I truly understand that God shows no partiality" (10:34). The ground of that truth is the peace preached by Jesus Christ to Israel: "He is Lord of all" (10:36)! And Peter in his sermon describes the inexplicable force of Jesus of Nazareth: "He went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him" (v. 38). But the people who sought to maintain advantage killed him. They put him to death on a tree. And they will kill anyone who threatens their advantage: King, Romero, all the daring witnesses who attest the end of advantage. And then Peter, in his own testimony, reports on the instant in the sweep of human history when these ancient advantages came to an abrupt end: "God raised him up on the third day" (v. 40). The power of Easter does not let the old niceties of chosenness prevail. If Jesus had not been raised from the dead, the chief priests and the Roman governor and the entire male, straight white Western ownership class would have had partiality from God to perpetuity. But he has been raised! The world has new possibility because it is under new governance.

Peter concludes his sermon by declaring the nature of the new possibility beyond advantage and disadvantage: "All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name" (v. 43). For believing in him means abandoning the kingdom of scarcity and entering the land of abundance with the neighbor. The new evangelical possibility is grounded in forgiveness, the cancelation of debts. People are held in disadvantage by unpayable debt. But the advantaged are also held in debt by the unending anxiety and the unforgiven guilt of exploitation and diminishment of brothers and sisters. We advantaged remain in a cocoon of denial and do not even know our guilt for such leverage that defiles the neighbor. But it is there. It is, moreover, such a relief when all of that is forgiven. We become free, we males, we would-be free, we Jews, we chosen, we whites, we Americans, we so long in advantage.

It turns out that advantage is only a necessity (a *desiratum*) in the pre-Easter

domain of death. That domain of death is a zone of a scarcity. There is not enough for all in the world, so holding advantage and keeping advantage and securing more than the neighbor is essential to wellbeing. Advantage protects us in a zone of scarcity where all are vulnerable.

But here is the news. Easter has dispelled the truth of scarcity. In the kingdom of the resurrection there is no more scarcity. There is an abundance. That is why debts can be cancelled and sins can be forgiven, because post-Easter reality is a zone of generous abundance from God toward us and toward the neighbor. It is so abundant that in the next paragraph we are told that the gift of the Holy Spirit was poured out even on the Gentiles; we dare say even on Greeks, even on slaves, even on females, even on non-Westerners, even on non-straight, even on non-whites, even on non-Christians. Because the Spirit is a flood and surge and a torrent of generosity for all.

IV.

We make the move as we are led from scarcity to abundance, from Friday scarcity to Sunday abundance, from fearful coercive leverage to glad emancipated wellbeing. I tell you this because many of you are pastors among those who are losing their advantage and do not understand beyond their fearful anxiety. You are pastors among those who have arrived at the edge of the new zone of abundant forgiveness and now must find new neighborly ways to exist, to share, and to love. Or at least this much: you and I live in a society that is stunned at the loss of advantage so long assumed that now must find ways to live in the alternative world of Easter abundance in which no one is kept in hock to unpayable debt. All is forgiven.

I tell you this because you and I are a part of a great institutional advantage that is abruptly ending. We could be in despair or in denial or in disappointment. We could be, except that God raised him up on the third day. Here and there we have found in our loss of advantage that we are overwhelmed by the gift of the spirit who surges among us. This is the news:

- There is no partiality;
- The kingdom of death and scarcity has been defeated by this Sunday surprise; God raised him up!
- The Spirit surges in forgiveness upon those who have no advantage.

We are then free for a different life, forgiven, empowered, free from fear, ready to turn the world right side up! McEnroe threw a tantrum every time he lost an advantage. So do most of the rest of us. It was never his best performance; neither is it our best performance.

Notes

1. Ta-Nehisi Coates, *Between the World and Me* (New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2015), 42.
2. *Ibid.*, 92.
3. "The Church's One Foundation," *Glory to God* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2013), 321.
4. "All Hail the Power of Jesus' Name," (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2013), 263.