

FEW ARE GUILTY, ALL ARE RESPONSIBLE

Luke 13:1-5

It was just about this time that some people arrived and told Him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with that of their sacrifices. At this He said to them. Do you suppose that these Galileans were worse sinners than any others, that this should have happened to them? They were not, I tell you. No; but unless you repent you will all perish as they did. Or those eighteen on whom the tower of Siloam fell, killing them all? Do you suppose that they were more guilty than all the other people living in Jerusalem? They were not, I tell you. No; but unless you repent you will all perish as they did.

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Cathedral Homily

September 11, 2002

One wonders what we can possibly add to the conversation tonight. We have all been barraged with non stop reporting on this event for the last week, the last month, the last year. It is as if, it is the only story in town. *It is* the only history right now, and it is a significant piece of the story, but it is not the only story or even the whole story. We gather here tonight convoked by this tragic moment in human history and in honor of its innocent victims and its authentic heroes. But the unique and always scary task of a religious and ecumenical gathering, as we have here tonight is to see all things inside of the sacred, inside of the cosmic egg of meaning that we always live inside of-- but seldom recognize or understand.

The cosmic egg of meaning contains three enclosures, each of them sacred, but even more so when all three are honored and all three honor one another: There is first “my story, then” our story”, and finally “THE story”. The unique character of the Biblical revelation is that it honors and integrates all three levels. The function of healthy religion is to always re-frame the cultural and personal questions in the largest frame possible. Not just the private anecdote, not just entrapment in recent political correctness, not pleasing this side or the other of any social debate, but always “in specie aeternitate”, in the light of eternity. We actually learned this from the Jewish prophets, who always both consoled and challenged Israel through the biggest frame of THE STORY, which they saw as the passion and the pathos of God for what God had created. We see Jesus being a consummate Jewish prophet in his unsettling words in the Gospel tonight.

Jesus’ mind is clearly larger than the simple dualistic mind that most of us live out of. He refuses to play the blame game. He says, in effect, don’t waste any time trying to find out who is guilty or who the good guys are and who the bad guys are. From the perspective of eternity, we are all caught up in the web of good and evil, we are all complicit in evil and we are all capable of good, and it is inside of that web that God liberates us for love and for life. This is almost impossible for the dualistic mind to understand. The dualistic mind, which is every mind before it has experienced authentic transcendence, can only frame things in terms of victim and perpetrator, worthy and unworthy, right and wrong. It settles the dust, it gives us a false sense of security, superiority, and closure. It might console MY STORY, it might buttress and defend OUR STORY. But it is not THE STORY. This is why almost all the prophets are apparently killed, or at least compartmentalized and ignored. With God, they suffer and carry the burden of evil, and do not project it elsewhere. They try to invite Israel into that same vocation, by

constantly accusing them of that complicity in evil. They do not satisfy our need for a nice headline of good guys and bad guys. Jesus also refused that need in the Gospel today. He asks his Jewish compatriots to recognize that we are all “the bad guys” and human tragedies are not some attempt to expel and punish the problem. This is what the Taliban does not know, and what the Gospel allows us to see. There are no bad guys to be destroyed in World Trade Center buildings. Killing people of another race, another religion, or another nation will not resolve the problem of evil. Evil does not go away. It does not go elsewhere. We are all in this together. We are all complicit in evil, and only *the God touched* can carry this redemptive burden and refuse to project it elsewhere.

In the adamant holding to THE STORY, all lesser stories, all tiny dramas through which the ego tries to define itself are relativized and even dismissed as irrelevant in the giant drama of salvation.

The attack on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon redefined war, made America feel genuinely vulnerable, and was a tragedy of the first magnitude. But it was also a part of a daily and ongoing tragedy that is called history. It is only that this little bit of history hit OUR country, invaded OUR media, and in many sad cases became our sad and tragic story. Eckhart Tolle, a contemporary wisdom teacher for many of us, stated THE STORY well on September 11 itself. He was speaking publicly on that day, the tragedy was announced to him, and while expressing his sadness and concern for the pain, he said calmly, “The Sun will also die”. The Buddhists call it the first principle of impermanence or the eternal cycle of “samsara”, Jesus lived it as the eternal mystery of death and resurrection, which Augustine called the paschal mystery. But none of us want to believe it: all things must die, each in their time, and our job is to learn from that mystery and to move toward compassion, not just to bemoan it, create dramas and monuments, look for culprits and count casualties. That is the best the dualistic mind can do, but it changes nothing. It leaves us inside of our justified resentments and neither side faces its shadow self because it is allowed to think that the other side is the total problem. We can do much better. Let’s look for a moment at the truly larger story of that one day in history called 9-11-01

On September 11, 2001, 24,000 people died of hunger on this earth, 6,000 children died of diarrhea, 2,700 from measles, 1.1 million children had not access to basic education, 1,410 women died in childbirth, 14,000 children lived the day severely malnourished, 1,100 million people had no access to safe drinking water, 2,400 million people had no access to sanitation, 1,200 million people were living on less than \$1 a day. These people are also a part of the tragedy that has never stopped.

Sisters and Brothers, there is only ONE TRAGEDY, only ONE. It is the suffering of God for the life of the world, it is our participation in that suffering-- either consciously or unconsciously. Abraham Heschel, the Jewish mystic, says that the prophets shared in the “pathos of God and the passion of God”, where few are guilty and all are responsible. In fact, the goal is not even to impute guilt but to engender responsibility for this common tragedy that we are all caught up in. Heschel says that the Prophets always speak “one octave higher” than everybody else, not in volume but in level of full awareness. For those of us who are Christian, Jesus is the living image of that pathos and passion of God. He speaks one octave higher than most are ready for. Like Kohlberg’s levels of moral development, you cannot even comprehend someone one full level beyond your own. In fact, they appear crazy or even dangerous. If it is true that most people are

at the early stages of moral development, which Jesus describes as “an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth”, you can understand why Jesus and all the prophets—who are level six persons in Kohlberg’s classic model—are largely irrelevant to any political or media driven discussion. They are perceived as crazy or even dangerous, although none of us would have the courage and honesty to admit it. So we just keep reading the prophets and reading the Gospels, and politely saying “Thanks be to God” while going ahead with business as usual and not believing a word of it! We would rather let CNN and USA TODAY define our worldviews, and even dare to let it define the sacred for us. We remain trapped in our little anecdotes and our small American world view while the spiral of violence continues with ever new urgency.

The Gospel passage ends not with the imputing of blame or the settling of any dust. In fact, Jesus kicks up some new dust and tells us *all* to change. The last thing we want to hear! We would rather change other people, those terrorists or those Arabs or those Muslims—anybody rather than ourselves. The clearest indication that religion is honest and true is when it does not let us off the hook, but tells US to change. This is what the prophets did for Israel, and why Israel killed them. This is what Jesus does for the church, and why we continue to kill him. As T.S. Eliot said in the Four Quartets: “humankind can not bear very much reality”.

Only those transplanted into their true and larger identity in God can bear reality. All the rest of us will keep projecting, denying, avoiding, punishing, and expelling. It is only the prophets among us who can carry it, who can be the pathos and the passion of God for the life of the world. Stop wasting time trying to neatly delineate the good guys from the bad guys. We are all victims and we are all perpetrators in the great mind and heart of God—only in different ways and at different times. Outside of America, and I was teaching in Budapest on this day last year, it seems to many that America is also a part of the problem, also a perpetrator, but this cannot be said in polite American society. It must be said in the church, or the church is no longer a place of truth and freedom. If we cannot speak this truth here, THE story, then where will we speak it?

Yes, America has many precious freedoms that are worth protecting, but this liminal space called church and synagogue and mosque, has an even more precious freedom. To proclaim the truth of THE STORY, as St. Paul said, “When convenient and inconvenient, in season and out of season”

Let me end with the words of a poet, Mary Oliver. So often they can say things better than we preachers can ever hope to. This is part of her life changing poem, “Wild Geese”:

...

Tell me about despair, yours, and I will tell you mine.
Meanwhile the world goes on.
Meanwhile the sun and the clear pebbles of the rain
are moving across the landscapes,
over the prairies and the deep trees,
the mountains and the rivers. . .
Whoever you are, no matter how lonely,
the world offers itself to your imagination,

calls to you like the wild geese, harsh and exciting—
over and over announcing your place
in the family of things.

It is in this family of things, this cosmic egg, this heart of God, that we can carry both the pain
and the burden of human history. Here only a few are guilty, but all are responsible.