

Memory and Solidarity

From the series: The Way of Peace/The Way of the Cross

I Corinthians 11:23-26; Luke 14:7-14

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

We have entered the Lenten season again and it is always a rather sober and serious time in our own contemplations and in our worship together. Generally my Lenten theme is set before I go on vacation, but this year, because Easter was late and because the world situation is so volatile, I thought I would wait until I got home. Finally one has to set a Lenten theme and, given the subject of Lent and the state of the world, I chose the theme which is nothing new, and yet needs to be said again in faithfulness to the Christian faith. That is, that the way of peace is the way of the cross.

In our practice we begin the Lenten season at the table, and we come to that table in the words of Paul quoting the tradition, in the words of Jesus, "Do this in remembrance of me." While we were always gathered in the name of Jesus, when we come to the table in a special way, we come to remember the way he was, and in this critical time in the world, when we are teetering on the brink of war, it is important for us again to remember in order that that memory might lead us into solidarity with the way of Jesus.

As I say that, I am reminded of the point at which in my life Jesus became important to me. That may sound strange to you because I had a Jesus-saturated life from childhood. But, the Jesus of my childhood and youth and my early years and the early years of my ministry was the Jesus who was the divine son of God who came into this world in order to offer himself a sacrifice for our sins in order that we might be forgiven and go to heaven. Jesus was an episodic event in the history of the world; he was God's action on our behalf in order that God's justice might be satisfied, human guilt removed, the penalty removed, and heaven be accessed. Because that reflects a rather high Christology – the second person of the Trinity donning the garments of our humanity, executing that redemptive action and then returning to the Father – one would think that that rather exalted Christology would have been the period of my life when I would have stood in awe of Jesus Christ. As a matter of fact, I fell in love with Jesus when I began to see him as a flesh and blood human being. I have repeated this before here, but if you could go back in the archives of Christ Community, I think it was a Lenten

sermon, "Jesus, You Are Really Somebody!" when I began to see him other than this divine savior figure who dips in and exits again, in the meantime allowing God to embrace us. I began to see him in his humanity in what he embodied, what was incarnate in him, what came to expression in him. When I began to see that, then I really stood in awe of Jesus. From that moment on I have been troubled every Lenten season when I try to preach the Jesus that I have come to respect and admire, the one with whom I would be in solidarity. The reason that Lenten preaching is troubling for me is that to preach the Jesus, that I have come to see and to understand is to preach a Jesus who seems like such a hopeless romantic, such a Utopian idealist, that even to bother with him seems like an exercise in futility. I can understand in part why that is so difficult for me, for the likes of us, because his social location, his historical context was so totally different from ours.

I have here a paragraph from the prologue of a book by Richard Horsley and Neil Silverman, a book entitled *The Message of the Kingdom*, which locates Jesus in the concrete history of his time. Let me read a paragraph to you:

The history has almost always been written from the viewpoint of those who build cities and conquer empires, but in the New Testament and the early Christian tradition, we may be able to catch a rare glimpse at the hopes, dreams and Utopian visions of those who suddenly find themselves at the bottom of a new civilization's social heap. In this book we will argue that the earliest Christianity was a movement that boldly challenged the heartlessness and arrogance of a vast governmental bureaucracy run on unfairly apportioned tax burdens and guided by cynical special interest that preached about opportunities, self-reliance and personal achievement while denying all three to the vast majority of men, women and children over whom they had presumed to rule. Christianity arose in a remote and poverty-stricken region of the vast Roman Empire among the struggling farm families of a frontier province that could only be classed as chronically underdeveloped by modern economic criteria. Yet, even after the movement's first great prophet was condemned as a threat to civil order and put to death for his preaching, his followers spread a coalescing gospel of resistance from the country to the city, from the eastern provinces of the empire to the far western edges of the Roman world.

That is what I mean to say about the difficulty that we have in identifying with Jesus and following Jesus, because our social location, our historical context is so totally different. It is one thing for a prophetic or charismatic figure in a situation of grinding poverty where the imperial policy of urbanization was moving people off their land and where they were more and more sucked into that situation of hopelessness and powerlessness. It is one thing to be a leader of a renewal movement in such a context and to say all sorts of things about the established power, the system that keeps it all intact. It is another thing when one happens to be the imperial power to claim to follow such a leader. That is my dilemma. We

come to this table in order to remember, to remember the way he was, in order to be in solidarity with him and it is really hopeless.

Jesus' situation was that of Rome and its great imperial power had its client King Herod on the throne locally, and the religious establishment, the temple establishment, all collaborating with the local client-king and the overarching imperial power to keep the social situation at rest. Rome demanded its tribute. Herod demanded taxes. The priesthood demanded tithes and offerings. And the people lived disoriented lives, disrupted existence in awful poverty. And so, there was that small percentage at the top who kept everything in order and lived very well, thank you very much, the vast majority of folks living in hopelessness and helplessness and powerlessness, and it was Jesus who was able to trigger something in those people, to give them again a sense of hope and of possibility. It was Jesus who made his way to Jerusalem and who did some kind of prophetic act in the temple which earmarked him as dangerous and resulted in his violent death. Every time we see the table, we have the bread which is broken and the cup which is poured out and we are reminded that when body and blood are separated, it is a mark of violence. If you die at peace in your own bed, body and blood remain one. If you die in violence, blood is spilled, body is broken.

Jesus, in his way of peace, was led to the way of the cross, and we remember it. For 2000 years we have remembered it. But, do we really want to retrieve that dangerous memory? Is it possible to follow Jesus, being who we are, the American empire?

Some things have come together for me recently. I think all of us wonder what is going on. I think we are confused; we want to believe in our nation; we value our natural vision, our principles, freedom, democracy, rule of law, respect for human dignity. What a wonderful gift we share together. But, what in the world are we doing? Just somewhat recently I began to understand that there are those who are in leading positions of authority in this nation who have a vision of empire. They don't want to conquer nations and occupy people and territory, but they believe that western democracy and the free economy at this point in history should be imposed on the whole world. If you want to read about that, you can, and you read about that not by what opponents are saying about these people; you read about it according to the programmatic documents of this group, which includes our Vice President Richard Cheney, our Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, who are a part of a group, a Project for a New American Century.

It is a matter of record that in 1992 after the implosion of the Soviet Union, Richard Cheney, then Secretary of Defense, commissioned a study about a unipolar world. The Cold War had been a bipolar world. Now this was a moment in history to be exploited. It was possible now, with the one remaining superpower with our overwhelming wealth and our overwhelming military might, to create a unipolar world of which we and western values would be the center. The Gulf War derailed that temporarily, but that paper became the blueprint for a

program which was promulgated two months before the last presidential election, in which it was being advocated that this is the moment for that unipolar world to be imposed through our overwhelming military and economic power, and that we create the *Pax Americana*, the American Peace.

Now, you are familiar with the phrase *Pax Romana*, that 200-plus period of time when the Roman Imperial forces were scattered across that vast empire and there was relative peace, fewer troops under arms and fewer civilians being killed in wars. The *Pax Romana*, the Roman Peace. It was an imposed peace, but it was a peaceful period.

There is another period of empire, the British Empire from about 1800 to 1917 which was, likewise, a period of quite relative tranquility in the world and unprecedented economic growth. So, empire can be argued for, and what is being argued for is American empire, imposing our value system around the globe. We have the military might and the economic power in order to do it. And so, in order to get there, Iraq is the first step along the way. The reason that we have had such a hard time convincing the world that Iraq needs to be dealt with is because there is a recognition that it is our movement toward the American Empire. Those who advocate this are not demons. They have a philosophy, a vision. They would impose all of the things that we value on the whole world. One can argue for that.

However, it is very difficult to go there without a kind of arrogance, the hubris of empire, and also the fact of self-serving our own interests and security needs. To cover the globe with American power backed up militarily, to work the globe economically, that is a program. I can show you the blueprint and I have to ask myself as a follower of Jesus, do I want to go there? It is not so simple. You are dealing with an underdog with Jesus, and now you are dealing with a top dog. We who are top dogs are asking how we can follow Jesus who was the leader of the underdog. Maybe we ought to just be honest and say, "Jesus you were better off when you were a personal savior who died for my sins and brought my soul to heaven, but don't meddle in the concrete social, historical, political, economic affairs of the world." Maybe we ought to just say it, because that is the real situation.

The papal envoy comes to Washington, photo ops, handshakes. You can say whatever you want about Pope John; I have my arguments with the Pope, but he is a man of great integrity and great humanity and certainly knows the real, gritty human situation politically, coming from Poland where he did. The new Archbishop of Canterbury, Owen Williams just enthroned, appointed by the Prime Minister and the Queen, pleads with his prime minister not to go to war. Nobody is listening. The National Council of Churches, which represents a broad spectrum of churches in this country, sends a delegation to the President. It doesn't make any difference. The whole world church, except, ironically, the fundamentalist wing of the Christian Church, but the whole classic Christian

tradition is calling for a halt to the war machine. It is not happening. So, how honestly, how authentically can we come to the table and remember Jesus? How can we sing, "I Want to be a Christian In My Heart?" How can we arise and go to Jesus?

There have been a couple of individuals who seem to have learned their political tactics from Jesus - Gandhi (of course, he was assassinated), Martin Luther King (of course, he was assassinated). Jesus was closer to a Palestinian suicide bomber than anything in the US of A, with this critical difference, that Jesus was committed to non-violent resistance.

It seems to me that the path we are on will lead to a world in which we are totally dominant, and in which there are all kinds of Palestinian suicide bombers who are powerless and voiceless and have only one way to respond, which is through terror. I think we are going to have a world which we are going to dominate militarily and a world in which we are going to be living in fear continually, because we are continuing that cycle of using power to dominate, rather than using power to change the world.

What would happen if our power and our resources were committed to the poor and the lame and the blind, to the hopeless and the powerless? What would happen if, in this era of a unipolar world, that one pole took Jesus seriously?

I'm not preaching this. This is what I wrestle with; this is what troubles me; this is what I would invite you to think about in this Lenten journey. As one concrete suggestion: What if we were to read every day during Lent Matthew 5, 6 and 7, the Sermon on the Mount?

For years I didn't preach on the Sermon on the Mount. It didn't make any sense. And now, on the edge of senility, I think it may be the only thing that makes sense, unless we are ready to see it all blow up.