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Isaiah

THE NEXT REFORMATION

I have just returned from two days in Bloomington, Illinois, where I delivered a lecture and conducted a workshop with pastors and laity who are interested in the future of progressive Christianity. It happened because someone recommended that members of the New Covenant Community church in Bloomington read my book, "Saving Jesus from the Church," and then culminated in the establishment of the Jim and Gwen Pruyne Lecture of Progressive Christianity. I was honored to be asked to give the inaugural lecture in the auditorium of a local community college on Friday evening, and then to conduct a three hour workshop the next morning.

As it turns out, Jim Pruyne, after whom the lecture is named, has been a campus minister at Illinois State University for 50 years. He grew up in Ponca City, Oklahoma, and frequently visited my hometown of Wichita, Kansas. He even has a relative after whom Oak Park in Wichita is named, the very park where I first professed my love for Shawn Weirick, who is now Shawn Meyers. One of his best friends was one of my professors in seminary, and now at the age of 81, he told me about his work at the dawn of the civil rights movement in Illinois — how he had to lobby for local barber shops to cut the hair of African American students at ISU, and how he would often have students living in the campus ministry building for their own safety, and how after the murder of Emit Till, he organized the first freedom ride to Savannah, Georgia. His wife was a spunky and outspoken woman who talked about how difficult it can be to be a good minister's wife, and how she decided long ago not to

even try! I ended up loving these people, and feeling immensely lucky to have met them and to have shared a meal with them.

To say I had a wonderful time would be an understatement. I feel almost bonded to these people now, and they feel bonded to me and to Mayflower church. They are keenly interested in what happens now that the mainline church is on life support, and they wonder what God has in mind that has not yet appeared. I took a simple message to them, that we are in the midst of a reformation, and that I believe that the only thing that can save the church is for it to become driven primarily by mission, not primarily by theology.

We had lively and wonderful conversations about how the church can recover its original subversive character, its pacifist roots, its radical egalitarianism, and its commitment to distributive justice (that is, in making sure that everyone has enough, which is the biblical definition of justice). And that brings me to this remarkable text for the opening chapter of Isaiah.

Remarkable because it is a part of chorus of voices among the Jewish prophets of that time who shocked the religious establishment of their day by daring to say that it is one thing to speak to God (which we call prayer), but it is something entirely different to speak for God (which we call prophecy).

For several centuries in fact, during the turbulent and bloody wars with the Assyrians and the Babylonians, and the exile that resulted, prophets like Amos and Hosea and Micah all wrote as if prayer and justice were enemies, saying that God was sick and tired of all our rituals, especially when they were not backed up by any distributive justice, which insists that the strong take care of the weak, and that strangers in the land are protected from abuse in a tribal society.

What is “distributive justice” you ask? Those Mayflower members who are graduates of the Just Faith program can tell you. It begins with the simple idea that the earth and everything in it does not belong to us (I know this sounds anti-capitalistic but bear with me). God owns the earth and we are all aliens and tenants (pilgrims to put it in our language) just passing through. We don’t possess the land, rather we are its temporary custodians.

Again and again in the Hebrew scripture we hear God being spoken of as a God of justice and righteousness, and what that means is that God acts with steadfast love, and these qualities should flow from God to us. As Jeremiah puts it, “Act with justice and righteousness, and deliver from the hand of the oppressor anyone who has been robbed. And do no wrong or violence to the alien, the orphan, and the widow, or shed innocent blood in this place.”

Think about this is a time when immigrants are despised and made the object of political commercials, when our bloody incursions into foreign lands results in the death of countless innocent people (which we lie about until we learn the truth, not from our own government, but from Wiki-leaks). Think about the biblical concept of distributive justice in a time when the gap between rich and poor is higher than it has been since just before the Great Depression, and when one in seven of us live in poverty?

The prophet Isaiah even has something to say about suburban sprawl. “Ah, you who join house to house, who add field to field until there is room for no one but you, and you are left to live alone in the midst of the land.” That is a complaint against grabbing the land for oneself, for taking more than you need, when in fact it all belongs to God.

When things got very, very bad during this period in Jewish history, the prophets we say we admire and even revere, went a little bit crazy. In a society that valued prayer and the rituals of the Jewish faith, they tried to shock their listeners into seeing how pervasive injustice had become by saying that God is sick of our rituals, sick of our prayers, sick of our empty bowing and scraping and petitions to God for mostly selfish reasons — while people starve, widows beg, and babies die.

Amos says it with the most force: I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them; and the offerings of well-being of your fatted animals I will not look upon. Take away from me the noise of your songs; I will not listen to the melody of your harps.

But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.

Likewise with Hosea, writing in same time period as the threat from the Assyrians grows. He rails at the idea that worship and justice can be separated. Listen: For I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings.

Micah joins his voice to those who are singing the same song, asking: With what shall I come before the Lord, and bow myself before God on high? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousands of rivers of oil? Shall I give my firstborn for my transgressions, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?

He has told you, O Mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God.

We sing that text every Sunday morning at the close of our worship service, and I wonder if we know how radical it really is. It says that the love and knowledge of God, made known in the world through distributive justice, is what God wants, not sacrificial offerings meant to appease or restore or even bribe an angry Deity.

Isaiah echoes the same theme in our text for this morning, saying that he has had enough of burnt offerings of rams and the fat of fed beasts--that he does not delight in the blood of bulls and that incense is an abomination. Perhaps most indicting, if we want to get real with all this, is the line: I cannot endure solemn assemblies with iniquity. Your new moons and your appointed festivals my soul hates; they have become a burden to me, I am weary of bearing them. When you stretch out your hands, I will hide my eyes from you; even though you make many prayers, I will not listen; your hands are full of blood.

Now you may be thinking: but we don't offer animal sacrifices anymore, and we don't even use incense (that's a Catholic thing). And our assemblies aren't all that solemn. But does this mean we don't have blood on our hands? And is it really true that we don't have our own version of a sacrifice? — something we offer up in order to be “right with God”?

I believe that Christians like to feel superior to those ancient tribes who practiced animal sacrifice, but that in fact we have replaced one form of sacrifice with another. I believe that after a few hundred years of

ceasing all sacrifice and allowing the church to be a largely underground movement, we created creeds and doctrines as our new form of sacrifice.

The creeds were certainly cleaner, more intellectually satisfying, required no special advance preparations (liking finding a spotless lamb), and of course, the best part was that after we finished saying the creed, we felt marked off from those who did not say it, and therefore did not believe it.

When the emperor Constantine forced the bishops of the age to fashion a creed, a short-form, definitive statement of what a Christian is based on what a Christian believes, he essentially gave the church a new sacrificial system. We call it the Nicene Creed

Every time we mouth that creed in worship (or the earlier Apostles Creed), we do so in part as a kind of offering to God, a gesture of our obedience, a way of flashing our Christian I.D. It's like when people call in to talk to Rush Limbaugh and begin by saying, "Mega dittos Rush." It is a kind of credential. It says, "I belong. I am sound. I am a fan. I am a true believer. Therefore I am accepted."

The problem of course is that you can say that you believe something and it doesn't necessary change anything about your behavior. I know some very brilliant scholars who have written some amazing and insightful books about love who are anything but a loving human being!

What the prophets of the Hebrew Bible are telling us is that when prayer and justice are separated, or when we substitute various rites of worship with doing what is right, God actually threatens to destroy the Temple itself. That is, if we keep acting as if prayer can be offered without justice being pursued, the prayer is a mockery, and that mockery is despised by the very God to Whom we pray!

Because I believe that we have largely replaced Christianity as a way of life with Christianity as a system of creeds and doctrines, I believe that we are in danger of not only being despised, we are in danger of losing the Temple. That is, we are bringing about the destruction of the church itself by pretending that we can go through the motions of prayer (and other religious rituals) while failing to work for justice in an unjust world.

People haven't left the church in droves because they ceased to be spiritual beings who crave community. They have left because they

cannot stand people who pray, “Your kingdom come” when what they really mean is, “My kingdom stay!”

Young people haven’t left the church because they just don’t appreciate our music or respect our sacred traditions. They have left because nobody is paying attention to the lyrics anymore, and those sacred traditions seem to leave the practitioners untransformed. If Christianity just makes a person meaner and more judgmental, then who needs it?

While in Bloomington, I had dinner in the home of the chair of the committee that made all the arrangements for my visit. She had graduated from the University of Oklahoma, and asked me if I knew the name Bill Fell. “No, can’t say that it rings a bell.” “Most people have never heard of him, but he lived in this house.” “So what did he do that more people should know him” I asked.

He is the man who persuaded Abraham Lincoln to run for president. After his debates with Douglas had ended, Lincoln was disgusted with politics and wanted no part of them anymore. But Fell, who was a friend and confidant, approached him and said that the country needed him, and that he couldn’t give up now. Were it not for this man that few of us know outside of the state of Illinois, we wouldn’t have had the president that saved the nation.

I feel exactly this way about the church right now. We are discouraged and dejected, and our reputation is in shambles. So now is the time when someone needs to step up and say, “We need the Beloved Community back — to challenge the enormous injustices of this world, to keep working for the equality of women, to protect people who are unfairly harassed and to resist the forces of evil that have blood on their hands.

We need the church to be an underground movement again, to give its loyalty to no one but the Lord, and to be a thorn in the flesh of the Empire in which we live, to be leaven in the loaf of this superpower until what is corrupt is itself corrupted. To give people who have been marginalized and forgotten and made to disappear a chance to stand up, speak their name as a child of God, and reappear once more in living Technicolor. “Here I am. I matter. Because if I don’t, then neither do you.”

Welcome the reformation. It is upon us and we don't even know it.
Orthodoxy is dead. Long live Orthopraxy. We will be given a second
chance by God only if we are "doers of the word, and not hearers only."

That's what I told them in Illinois, the land of Lincoln. They are
good listeners, and good people. So are you.

Amen.



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