

Biblical Background

Back in Jesus' time connections were made through 'the practice and institution of 'patronage.' In that system you needed to find someone bigger and stronger than you, someone with more resources who could help you when you needed something done: a patron. This whole system is at work in this short story from Luke; the centurion is a patron because he brokers favors and resources from Rome to the local citizenry and the Jewish elders who plead his case to Jesus are middle-men who speak on his behalf to Jesus, who the centurion sees as a broker between the God of Israel and God's sick people (Matthews,5.29.16 UCC Sermon Seeds).

Luke 7:1-10

After Jesus had finished all his sayings in the hearing of the people, he entered Capernaum. A centurion there had a slave whom he valued highly and who was ill and close to death. When he heard about Jesus, he sent some Jewish elders to him asking him to come and heal his slave. When they came to Jesus, they appealed to him earnestly, saying, "He is worthy of having you do this for him, for he loves our people, and it is he who built our synagogue for us." And Jesus went with them, but when he was not far from the house, the centurion sent friends to say to him, "Lord, do not trouble yourself, for I am not worthy to have you come under my roof; therefore I did not presume to come to you. But only speak the word, and let my servant be healed. For I also am a man set under authority, with soldiers under me; and I say to one, 'Go,' and he goes, and to another, 'Come,' and he comes, and to my slave, 'Do this,' and the slave does it.' When Jesus heard this he was amazed at him, and turning to the crowd that followed him, he said, 'I tell you, not even in Israel have I found such faith.' When those who had been sent returned to the house, they found the slave in good health

"Interventions That Heal"

Then shall all the trees of the forest sing for joy before God
For God is coming, for God is coming to judge the earth
God will judge the world with righteousness
and the peoples with God's truth.

Psalm 96:12b-13

One of the pillars of faith in the Jewish religion is the belief that the Holy One who created Israel by gathering her together as a people of God, enters human history to judge not only Jews but the whole world as well. This faith believes in an Almighty Judge who comes to interrupt and counter every prevailing demonic order that goes against God's will of promoting goodwill, well-being, and abundant life in the human community. For those who believe, healings of the sick, human acts of mercy, and corporate works of justice are signs that the Creator is powerfully present and faithfully redeeming God's beloved children from the power of fear and the evils of sin.

The faith of the psalmist sounds a lot like Pope Francis' God who enters humanity as Jesus-God-Spirit to judge human beings with righteousness and Divine truth. In his papal encyclical he wrote: "The Lord has redeemed all of us, all of us, with the Blood of Christ, not just Catholics. Everyone! 'Father, the atheists?' Even the atheists. Everyone! And this Blood makes us children of God of the first class! We are created children in the likeness of God and the Blood of Christ has redeemed us all! And we all have a duty to do good. And this commandment for everyone to do good, I think, is a beautiful path toward peace. If we, each doing our part, if we do good to others, if we meet there, doing good, and we go slowly, gently, little by little, we will make that culture of encounter: we need that so much. We must meet one another doing good. 'But I don't believe, Father, I am an atheist'. But do good and we will meet each other there.

Divine Judgment is a down-to-earth Holy Act of intervention that deepens faith in God's goodness and trust in the good heart of humanity. Some say that Divine Intervention of this kind is pure miracle. Those who do suggest 'that instead of seeing a miracle as something that violates the laws of nature that undergird our existence in the material world as 'an interruption of an order' . . . that we see a miracle as 'the eruption of the true order-of the creator God-into the demonic disorder of the present world, a reminder, if you will, of who is really in charge'. (Luke, Belief Series, Gonzales)

In our gospel story for today Divine Judgment steps into the demonic socio-economic religious world of patronage in Jesus' time. It's a beautiful story that delights in the Goodness of God and sheds light on the good heart of humanity. In it we find a cast of compassionate people reaching out and joining with others to help a suffering man. It's a good meets good miracle akin to the story of the atheist who heard a suffering cry coming from a sewer. Instead of passing by he stopped and saw that a baby was stuck in the pipe. Powerless to free the infant by himself, he called upon rescue workers for help. Working carefully together, little by little they cut away the pipe in which the child was entombed. When the baby lived the amazed press called it a miracle, just like we do. But we . . . who understand miracle as God's truth interrupting demonic disorder are obliged to do more than just calling it a miracle. We are called to think about the demonic dynamic that Divine Judgment disarrns in good- hearted stories of healing. To feed our faith imagination, Julie Polter offers some food for thought:

"This is the big lie that the world tells us: The world is connected by trade agreements, electronic banking, computer networks, shipping lanes, and the seeking of profit-nothing else. This is the truth of God: Creation is a holy web of relationship, a gift meant for all; it vibrates with the pain of all its parts; its destiny is joy.' (Sojourners Sept/Oct. 1994).

Here she suggests that industrious connecting with others for one's own gain which is devoid of the Holy Act of seeking the well being of others who are in need, .is the demonic disorder in the world of human relationship making that is in need of healing.

Last Wednesday I attended a meeting of do-gooder West Bridgewater Food Pantry workers. After all the money and organizational matters were over and done with, the Truth of God began vibrating through her Holy web of relationship. The good stuff began when the team started talking about some of the clients whom they are serving at the pantry. Special dietary needs, joblessness, marital problems, health issues, and emotional stressors were raised as issues that might be adding to the suffering of our food recipients. When a concern was raised that could not be met with Food Pantry resources, everyone thought about where they could get the needed help. After the discussion had gone on three times longer than the scheduled business, one of the members present challenged the group with the question: "Is this a gossip session?" To which I replied: "If I may, I'd like to reframe what we are doing here. For me this is not gossip but rather a compassionate act of listening with our third ear for the pain and suffering of kindred souls.

So what do you think? Do Holy Acts of this kind help to heal wounded souls who need faith in the Goodness of God and renewed trust in the goodness of humanity? Does connecting with the good heart of others give you joy?

Prayer

Divine Judge of Goodness in the here and now, grant us the humility of the centurion that we might trust in the power of your healing love. Grace us with the wisdom of the Jewish elders that we might trust to approach your throne of grace. Grant us the compassionate heart of Jesus that we might speak up for those who suffer and cannot cry 'help' for themselves. Amen.