

Isaiah 55:1-9
March 24, 2019

Higher Ways

The college admissions cheating scandal that has been in the news lately has been on my mind, but not in the way one might think. For some reason it reminded me of the time when my oldest son Evan was in college several years back at the University of Illinois.

Coming from a small town and being surrounded at school by people from the large suburban Chicago high schools, Evan complained that he was at an academic disadvantage. He may *have been* in some ways, though not in the elite private v. public high school sense, more in the large suburban well-resourced and competitive v. small town less resourced and less competitive sense.

One day I went to visit him at the school and we went to one of the cafeterias for lunch. On the way he received a phone call from a girl who had also gone to his high school but was not in the same grade as he and while in high school I had not noticed that she was a part of his circle of friends. I wondered why he had received a call from her. He said, “we all like to look out for each other,” that is, all the people who came from that same small town.

He said all the guys played on the same intramural soccer team, and that from time to time they socialized together (I think that meant they went bar hopping together). They made sure everyone was

okay. I asked if people from the other high schools did the same and he said, “no,” and that people were jealous of them and desired the same kind of hometown camaraderie.

The people from the large suburban high schools had an academic advantage but suffered a lack of community, while, at least those from our little town, lacked a competitive edge but were connected to a support system that helped them through. It occurs to me that community lessons are as valuable as any academic lesson learned at school, maybe more valuable. That was on my mind.

The Shooting

I was also thinking about the shooting at the mosques in the so interestingly named town of Christchurch in New Zealand. I thought about the difficulty in having a sense of community with people of different religious faiths. Of course, no such lack of fellowship is a justification, or even a reason, for violence, and this violence, like all others, must be condemned.

The world has gotten small enough that we can no longer expect to live in isolation from the people in the world from whom we differ. Somehow we are going to have to learn “community” with those of other faiths, some sense of friendship. The desire to dismiss them, or live as if they are not there, or even to kill them, must be abandoned. This has been on my mind.

Floods

It was also in the news that the rivers in the western part of the midwest; North and South Dakota, Nebraska, Iowa are in a state of flooding that is the worst in 50 years. This flooding involves rivers that flow into the Missouri River and eventually the Mississippi, which makes me wonder if there will be flooding sometime this spring in my home city of St. Louis.

I thought of how different the lives are of the people so affected, and how few of them I know personally, and how far away they are, and yet how I am connected to them because they are producers of food and other products I use on a daily basis.

The Readings

Then I was confronted with the lectionary readings for the day. The readings from the New Testament, the gospel and the epistle, were very much in line with the spirit of the Lenten season. In Luke 13, Jesus tells his followers that the people who suffer tragedy, in that case at the hands of the Roman Governor Pilate, were not worse sinners than anyone else, and unless *they* repented, they would perish. Thus he introduced into religious semantics the homiletical phrase, “repent or perish.”

In the epistle, 1 Corinthians 10, we find Paul using one of the tragic stories from Israel’s history to offer the same kind of message; a warning against setting

one’s heart on evil things. The main example was the unfaithful in Israel in the time of the Exodus, whose bodies were scattered all over the desert because God was not pleased with most of them. It was meant to prod the believers at Corinth to stand firm in their faith, a kind of “stick” method of moral and spiritual encouragement. The stick is necessary sometimes, and it can be said to work.

The Old Testament Readings

But, I am convinced, not as well as the carrot. At least I found myself more attracted to the message of the Old Testament readings. From the 63rd Psalm, we read about the one whose, ‘soul thirsts for God in a dry and weary land where there is no water,’ the one who prays, “my lips will glorify you because your love is better than life.”

The emphasis is on what he is attracted to and seeking out rather than what he is trying to avoid. If I may say, it is a mark of spiritual maturity to place less emphasis in our moral and spiritual pursuits on what we are trying to avoid, and more emphasis on what we seek, long for.

And then there is the great invitation of Isaiah 55,

“Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters . . . Listen to me and eat what is good, and your soul will delight in the richest of fare. Give ear and come to me; hear me that your soul may live. . . .”

Here we are reminded that life does not consist in the abundance of things, or the abundance of knowledge, that we are not only led away from what is bad for us but also toward what is good. Strikingly it comes in the form a a general invitation, given to everyone.

“Surely you will summon nations you know not, and nations you do not know will come running to you . . . Seek the Lord while he may be found, call on God while he is near . . . For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways,’ declares the Lord. As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher, and my thoughts higher than yours.’”

Higher Ways

Our thoughts lead us to try to get ahead. Our thoughts lead us into adversarial relationships with others and each other. God’s thoughts gather us together. God’s ways lead to reconciliation. We are all humans beings! We all share this planet! We are all sinners in need of mercy. The time is now for us, as believers in Jesus Christ, to at long last accept that there is only one race, and it is the human race, and only one home, and it is the earth.

When I was young, I went to church every Sunday and was taught to desire heaven instead of hell, and that heaven was a possibility because of God’s mercy and grace. I was taught to try to be good and seek forgiveness when I failed, and that forgiveness was promised because of Christ’s sacrifice. I am grateful

for these lessons and respect those who taught them to me.

Yet I was in a group of people who shared all the common human maladies that threaten us; it was racially segregated, and patriarchal, and it was parochial, tied to cultural traditions that were taken for granted as being superior, but which lacked the grand vision of the gospel.

My tradition perpetuated suspicion and doubt about the value and morality and goodwill of all those outside it. I have spent my life trying to shake off the lower ways without losing the impact of God’s higher ways that I was taught at the same time.

I find myself hesitant to get to know people from other places, other traditions. Whether one is from mass suburbia or a small southern Illinois town, or a Muslim from an exotic place at the bottom of the world called Christchurch or the flooded plains of the Missouri River Valley, or anyplace else, we are all connected to one another, because we are recipients of a grand invitation, offered to everyone, bathed in mercy and splendor, obtained in faith, bound for heaven.

This invitation unites us, and though its implications boggle the mind, let us accept it as the higher way of God, the better way of Christ, through whom it has been graciously given. Amen.

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