

My Way or Our Way?

The dramatic events of the last two weeks involving children separated from their parents could not have been a more stunning contrast in how life can be lived.

On the one hand, in Thailand, a group of boys got lost in a cave, and the whole world came together, first to search for them, then with great relief finding them, then with even greater relief, saving them, except for the one rescuer who gave his life to this heroic effort.

It was a beautiful thing to see people from all over the world sending personnel and materials, ideas and prayers, as we held our collective breath that these children might be saved.

Unity, love, and human solidarity were the air we breathed throughout this ordeal, a beautiful thing indeed.

Contrast these boys and those feelings with the images coming from our borders, where children as young as two months old were taken from their mothers breasts, and now as the scramble to reunite young children with their parents drags on, with the growing fear that some children will never find their way home.

What motivates a policy that strips mother from child, human beings seeking refuge from gangs and domestic violence and state sponsored terror?

It is fear.

Fear of the other.

Fear of sharing our bounty.

Fear of being displaced.

That same fear drove a man to viciously attack a woman setting up for a family picnic in a park on the mainland.

The woman wore a Puerto Rican flag tee-shirt, which enraged this fellow who screamed that she should be ashamed of such a flag, even though Puerto Rico's residents are US citizens.

That same fear drove a woman in LA to attack a 92 year old Mexican grandfather, hitting his face with a brick last week, yelling: "go back where you came from" – even though he is a naturalized citizen.

That fear has one of our neighbors across the street on the war path with us because houseless folks live nearby and she's insistent that we send them away.

And that fear is what Mark's gospel this morning holds before us, looking us straight in the eye, in all of its ugliness and despair.

Herod is a wannabe king, an active alcoholic, and a philanderer.

On a trip to Rome, he falls for his brother's wife, who is also his niece, and she, believing perhaps she can climb the social ladder one or two more rungs, agrees to marry him.

But even in this blackness, there are shades of grey.

Herod is entranced by John; he hangs on John's words, perhaps because even in the most debauched of us, there is grace, there is the spark of God that will not be smothered.

As Flannery O'Connor once said: "There is a moment in every story in which the presence of grace can be felt as it waits to be accepted or rejected even though the reader may not recognize the moment."

That moment comes for Herod when his step-daughter dances an erotic dance, and Herod, in his pride and swollen ... ego, promises her half the kingdom.

But it's not a kingdom she wants, it's her mother's revenge against the prophet who has the temerity to speak up against the incest, the adultery, the sheer ugliness of her union with Herod.

And Herod's moment of grace arrives: will he grant the girl's request despite knowing the truth of who John is; or will he risk the shame and embarrassment of his guests by rejecting her ugly demand?

Alas, fear and greed and pride win out, John is no more, a body separated from its head, which rests on a dinner plate.

It's a dark scene, one no preacher wants to get into, especially on a beautiful Sunday morning with all of you beautiful people here to give praise to God.

And yet, Mark seems to be saying to us this morning, we really do need to come to terms with our own darkness, with our own fears, with our own insistence on "my way" rather than "our way."

Some of Herod lives in me, and perhaps some of him lives in you too.

It's what Jesus is getting at when he says those who would save their lives will lose them, but those who will lose their lives for the sake of the gospel, will save them.

Meaning, if we build walls and retreat into tribes, if we hold tight to our money and worry only about safety and security, why, that is the road of Herod, it's the road that leads to selfishness and greed, and in the final analysis, the road that rejects grace.

There is another way.

It is the faithful, radical, following of the crucified one.

“And it’s dangerous.

It’s not about a pat on the back.

It begins with the pain of repentance, of changing completely how we see each other, and this world.

It’s not a recipe for success, it’s an ego deflating confrontation with the truth.

It’s not a welcome home party, it makes us 'homeless' and 'rootless', and yet, it liberates us to truly follow Christ, who was himself homeless and rootless.

The cross is not about high sounding morality, it’s about scandal, and those most scandalized are often fellow believers!

But this scandal liberates the world, which is not free.

As long as our society is built on the idols of achievement and self-reliance and fear of others, as long as pain and death are our worst nightmares, true faith is a turnoff, a joke, an affront to common sense.

And yet this faith is the only thing that can free us from our cultural illusions, from our worship at the altars of power, control and celebrity, so that we might at long last see the truth of our existence and society.

Because while we love the beautiful and shiny and popular, God loves the broken, the smelly and the outsider.

And that’s a hard fact to face.

When our neighbor kept insisting that we get rid of the houseless surrounding our property, the question she and I and we must answer is: if these folks are Christ in the flesh, what say we then?

When immigrants and refugees are banned from our shores, if they are the face of Christ, what shall we say then?

You see, the cross in the church is not what we think.

The cross points to God crucified — not between two candles on the altar — but between two thieves at Golgotha, where the outcasts belong.” J. Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, paraphrased.

Yes, Mark today invites us into a very dark place.

But if we can bring ourselves to face ourselves: individually, as a community, as a nation, as human beings, then we might really be able to accept the full weight of the glory that Christ is longing to place at our feet.

It is a glory that is born out of solidarity and kindness and love and commitment — not to my welfare — but to our welfare.

It is a glory that sees in the faces of the least and last and lost among us the very face of Jesus.

It is the glory that Merton saw “at the corner of Fourth and Walnut, I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I loved all those people, that they were mine and I theirs. If only everybody could realize this! But how can you explain to people that they’re all walking around — shining like the sun!”

Or Dostoevsky’s beloved priest, who assures his friends, “We don’t understand that life is heaven, for we have only to understand that and it will at once be fulfilled in all its beauty, we shall embrace each other — and weep.”

In these dark days, let us embrace one another, embrace the stranger
embrace the houseless.

If we trade in "my way" for "our way," perhaps we are already halfway
to heaven.

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