

When Right Things are done by the Wrong People

Mark 9.38-41

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Laudate. Praise be!

Maybe it's the anthem in Latin this morning. Maybe it's the Pope's visit this week. But I'm feeling a little catholic today; which is to say that I find myself wanting to embrace both the universality and the diversity that is spiritual community. That's the essential definition of 'catholic.'

Don't get me wrong. I have deep differences with the institution of the Roman Catholic Church – although, the truth is, I have deep differences with some of my Baptist sisters and brothers from time to time.

And let me take this opportunity to say that anyone who claims to be a Baptist and says that a Muslim, simply by virtue of being a Muslim, should not be elected President of the United States, doesn't know his Baptist history. Roger Williams, who founded the First Baptist Church in America and created what became Rhode Island must be turning over in his grave.

As recently as May of 2013, Public Radio did a story honoring Roger Williams and 350 years of religious freedom. In that story, Scott Mackay said that Roger Williams imagined Rhode Island like “a ship on which all religious believers – or those who had no belief at all – would be represented [and] the ship's captain could mandate anything that was necessary for passenger safety but could not bar religious liberty. The result was a dynamic colony that welcomed everyone, including Jews ... Muslims, Quakers and atheists. People who respected each other would find a haven in Rhode Island, which evolved into a prosperous trading colony [and] became a magnet for immigrants from around the world” and, by the way, by policy also fostered positive relations with their native Indian neighbors.

So that's our story as American Baptists, and I for one, am sticking to it.

And, at the same time, I'm feeling a little catholic this morning because, in its most far-reaching and essential definition, being catholic is about embracing the unity and the diversity, not of an institution, but of spiritual community.

Pope Francis said as much in his speech to Congress on Thursday: “In this land, the various religious denominations have greatly contributed to building and strengthening society,” he said. “It is important that today, as in the past, the voice of faith continue to be heard, for it is a voice of fraternity and love, which tries to bring out the best in each person and in each society.”

Now frankly, this seems a little overly generous to the voices of faith in the United States. That voice has not always been one of fraternity and love.

But what Pope Francis is voicing is an understanding that the aim of our diverse religious communities is a common one – “the common good,” both economic and environmental. It’s about the financial well-being of our neighbors and the well-being of this planet that makes us all neighbors. Whatever our income, whatever the color of our skin, whatever our national boundaries or political party or religious affiliation or lack thereof, this one planet makes us all neighbors.

And then Pope Francis gives us four Americans who are examples of what he means.

Abraham Lincoln, of unspecified religious affiliation, who defended human liberty.

Martin Luther King, Jr., a Baptist, whose dream was for the “full rights of all [our] brothers and sisters.”

Thomas Merton, a Roman Catholic mystic who, challenged the “certitudes of his time” and was “a man of dialogue, a promoter of peace between peoples and religions.”

And, then, I honestly didn’t see this coming, Dorothy Day, the founder of the Catholic Worker movement committed to stand in solidarity with the poor and a social activist who was never fully embraced by her own Church. It was the Catholic Workers in Chicago who were the first to provide housing to the poorest and sickest of people living with AIDS; many of whom were abandoned by their own families. And they did that hard work with almost no money and with very little support from their own Church because they were led by two Franciscans who had left their order so they could be honest about their lives as gay men. They were an inspiration to me and they introduced me to the great Dorothy Day.

So if that’s what it means to be ‘catholic’ and it includes a Baptist like Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and Roman Catholic like Dorothy Day well then count me in.

Because, after all, the Pope said, “the open wounds which affect so many of our brothers and sisters demands that we confront every form of polarization which would divide [us] into two camps” – that “simplistic reductionism” that sees the world as the right people and the wrong people.

Now if I needed any more convincing, this is the lesson from Mark for today:

Mark 9.38-41 (the *Inclusive Bible*)

John said to Jesus, “Teacher we saw someone using your name to expel demons, and we tried to stop it since this person was not part of our group.”

Jesus said in reply, “Don’t try to stop it. No one who performs a miracle using my name can speak ill of me soon thereafter! Anyone who is not against us is with us. The truth is, anyone who gives you a cup of water in my name because you belong to the Messiah will certainly not go without a reward.”

This is the question Mark seems to be addressing: What do you do when right things are done by the wrong people?

It’s the question at the root of the famous “Good” Samaritan story in Luke 10. I have always resisted calling it the “Good” Samaritan story because it sounds like all those other Samaritans might be bad ones but this is the “good” one. Like all those other minority folks, or immigrant folks, or strange folks might be bad, but this is a “good” one. It’s just a Samaritan doing the right thing. And Jesus says, ‘even if you think this is the wrong kind of person, go do the same – the right – thing.’

This comes up in the Hebrew scriptures too. I have always loved the story of Jonah, not because of the whale but because it’s a story about a preacher. It’s a story about a preacher who gets called to the wrong people and he doesn’t want to go. But then there’s the big fish and being spit up on shore and that call apparently not to be refused. So Jonah consents to go to those wrong people in Ninevah and he does his best to preach hellfire and brimstone and, guess what? They repent. As a community they change their ways.

Great evangelistic success, right? But Jonah is depressed. What he signed on for was destruction and what they got was salvation. And Jonah is so upset that he just wants to die.

What happens when the right thing is done by the wrong people?

In the wake of the September 11 attack, trauma specialist, Tilda Norberg, tells this story by a Roman Catholic priest in Manhattan about people running down the stairs of one of the World Trade towers:

As a [Palestinian Muslim] was running for his life in the surging crowd, he stumbled and fell. Paralyzed with fear and unable to get up, he was trampled within seconds by hundreds of feet rushing past him. Then the man felt an arm on his shoulder and a voice speaking to him, "Get up, brother! We have to get out of here." Unable to stand because of his injuries, he felt himself being picked up. Again he heard the voice, "Brother, we have to get out of here!"

Half dragged, half carried down many stories, the man finally emerged from the building leaning heavily on the rescuer. As the injured Palestinian turned to thank the person who had carried him to safety, his eyes widened ... the person who had called him 'brother,' the man who had saved his life, was a Hasidic Jew."

There is a Hasidic tale about an old Rabbi who once asked his students how they could tell when the night had ended and the day had begun.

"Could it be," asked one of the students, "when you can see an animal in the distance and tell whether it's a sheep or a dog?"

"No," answered the Rabbi.

Another asked, "Is it when you look at a tree in the distance and tell whether it's a fig tree or a peach tree?"

"No," answered the Rabbi.

"Then what is it?" the students demanded.

"It's when you can look on the face of any woman or man and see that it is your sister or brother. Because if you cannot see this, it is still night."

Died in the wool Baptist that I am, if I'm feeling a little catholic this morning it's because I want to wake up to this vision. I want to clear away the fog that keeps me from seeing all those right things being done by people I suspect are the wrong ones.

And the story in Mark 9 makes it personal. Jesus says: "anyone who gives you a cup of water." So think about a time when someone did right by you who was the wrong kind of person.

Now, okay. We are good liberal folks so there are no "wrong" people, right? There are confused people. There are unenlightened people. But there aren't any "wrong" people.

Really.

First of all, there are some of us here today who know what it is to be identified as the 'wrong' people. It doesn't matter what we do or how faithful we are. We are just the 'wrong' people and, because we are, we can't do anything right.

I remember thinking in the debates about our being a welcoming and affirming congregation that if only people realized all the good work we do in the world, then they would see us as sisters and brothers. But it didn't matter what we did. We were the wrong people. And I would get letters telling me just how wrong we were.

And sometimes I find myself feeling the same way about them. If they feed the hungry or shelter the homeless or do the hard work of racial reconciliation; if they do all these right things I'm still suspicious because they look like the wrong people to me. Their theology isn't right. Or their social agenda isn't right. Or their motives are questionable.

So what do I do when the right things are done by the wrong people?

Well, maybe the choir has it right this morning ... *Laudate!* Praise!

It's like that instruction in the letter to the Philippians:

Whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. [4.8]

I have learned never to underestimate the capacity for human beings to turn something positive and praiseworthy into something negative and damnable.

Maybe what we do when right things are done by the wrong people is to just learn the practice of *Laudate!* Praise!

Died in the wool Baptist that I am, when Pope Francis calls for the diversity of our spiritual communities to come together for the common good; when he takes a child into his arms and blesses those with special needs; when he asks random people in the crowd to pray for him ... I say *Laudate!* Praise!

When, no matter who we are, we continue the work of Abraham Lincoln and Martin Luther King, Jr. and Thomas Merton and Dorothy Day, I say *Laudate!* Praise!

When I stumble and fall and am about to be trampled and someone comes along to pull me up by the shoulders and says “Come on, brother, we have to go on from here,” no matter who that person is, I am learning to say *Laudate!* Praise!

When our witness about love and hope means that people’s lives are changed, I don’t say, “Rats, I was hoping for a little hellfire and brimstone, a little payback,” No! I say *Laudate!* Praise!

When the night is lifted and we can look into the face of any woman or any man and see our sister and our brother, I say *Laudate!* Praise!

What do I do when right things get done by the wrong people? Well, I’m learning a little Latin – I’m learning to say *Laudate!* Praise!

And, when we have convinced ourselves that no matter what we do we will never get it right because somehow we are the wrong people and a voice from heaven or deep within our hearts says, “you are my beloved ones, in you I am well-pleased,” well, then, maybe we just say *Laudate!* Praise!

And today, if you hear that voice, do not harden your hearts.

NOTES

The text of Pope Francis’ speech to Congress can be found online at the website for the *Washington Post* www.washingtonpost.com. The Public Radio story about Roger Williams and religious freedom by Scott Mackay can be found online at www.ripr.org/post/remembering-roger-williams. Dorothy Day’s autobiography is *The Long Loneliness* (HaperSanFrancisco, 1952). Tilda Norberg’s stories and reflections on September 11 are in her book *Ashes Transformed* (Upper Room Books, 2002). The story included here is on page 54. The Hasidic tale is in Frederic and Mary Ann Brussat’s *Spiritual Literacy* (Scribner, 1996), p.502.