

May 12, 2019
Fourth Sunday After Easter
Psalm 23
Acts 9:1-20

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But Never Mind That

On Tuesday evening when news of the shooting at Highlands Ranch STEM School in Colorado was just breaking, I spoke with our son Adam who lives in Denver with his family. He assured me that his kids—my grandchildren—were fine. “There just seems to be a beam on Colorado,” he said. Colorado, a western state with its long history of cowboys, the wild west and guns is at the epicenter of the conflict between gun rights supporters and gun control advocates. Tragically, this is playing out in schools, where children are the victims of society’s malaise. It’s as if some cosmic force is zeroing in on the nerve center of this problem. What is being confronted in the gun debate is nothing less than our personal and collective sense of what it is that makes us feel empowered, strong, safe, productive and loved. It strikes at the heart of our country’s ethos of independence and self-reliance and asks us, as people of faith, to consider how we chose to address violence and power both collectively and individually.

Power is intoxicating, some would say corrupting. No one knew this better than the apostle Paul. Paul was born in Tarsus somewhere around 10 years after Jesus died. He was a devout Jew as he himself attests in his letter to the Philippians, boasting: “Circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews.” (3:5) He was an avid persecutor of the early church of Jesus Christ. Acts reports that he “laid waste the church” and “dragged off men and women and committed them to prison” (8:3); he “persecuted them even to foreign cities.” (26:11) As a Pharisee devoted to upholding the Law, he was angered by the fact that the followers of Jesus did not adhere strictly to its mandates. By his own admission, even after his conversion, the cross was a stumbling block for him. The Christian identification of the crucified Jesus as Messiah flew directly in the face of the traditional expectation that the Messiah would be powerful and triumphant, not a suffering servant who was crucified on the cross.

How we reconcile our cultural view of power and the teachings of Jesus is very challenging. Though we may pray for peace, we are daily subjected to the lure of the pumped-up power of violence, the power of money and success, the enticing power of risk and excitement, the power of authority and influence, all of which stand against One who suggests that the greatest exercise of power is to feed some lambs, to suffer for others, to serve and love all people. It doesn't sound mighty in any traditional sense, either then or now.

Paul's conversion was nothing if not dramatic. On his way to Damascus to ferret out some disciples of the Lord and haul them off to prison, a light from heaven strikes him, throws him down and a voice says, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" He asks, "Who are you, Lord?" And, from who knows where, the risen Christ replies, "I am Jesus whom you are persecuting. But get up and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do."

Though Paul could stand, he could not see; though his eyes were open, he was blind. If you have ever been blindfolded, you know how completely disorienting it is. Try it this afternoon: go out into the yard with a rag around your head and try to get someplace without seriously injuring yourself. Paul couldn't walk. Paul who just moments before was one of the most powerful men around, was thrown from his horse to the ground as the cover of our bulletin so dramatically illustrates in the painting by Caravaggio. Where once he embodied power, he is instantly rendered completely dependent on his fellow travelers who take hold of his arms and lead him slowly into the city where he collapses for three days, eating and drinking nothing.

This man who was so powerful is suddenly totally vulnerable, reduced to utter dependency. This is a good thing. As Richard Rohr says, "As long as you show up with some degree of vulnerability, the Spirit can keep working. *Self-sufficiency makes God experience impossible!* That's why Jesus showed up in this world as a naked, vulnerable one, a defenseless baby lying in the place where animals eat. . . Naked vulnerability means I'm going to let you influence me; I'm going to allow you to change me."

(Richard Rohr with Mike Morrell, *The Divine Dance*.)

This is true for us, isn't it? When we're at the top of our game, feeling strong and independent, it's really hard for God to get in. When we are crushed, however, we either

turn our faces heavenward, begging for mercy, or curl in a ball away from the One we believe to be our accuser and judge.

Have you ever wakened in the night in a cold sweat with the searing memory of the awful thing you have done or said starkly before your eyes? It can instantly rouse me from a deep sleep. I want to punch myself; I squeeze my eyes shut in shame and humiliation. I can't believe I was so insensitive, such a fool, so stupid, selfish, thoughtless, cruel, oblivious or rude. Riddled with shame, I withdraw beneath the covers, away from reality, away from God. If Paul genuinely believed Jesus had come to him, I suspect he was undone by shame, paralyzed by guilt, embarrassed and caught. Curled in a fetal position I wonder if he'd ever have gotten up of his own volition. Apparently, Jesus had the same concern because he sends Ananias to restore Paul's sight. Incidentally, this mission does not sit well with Ananias, loyal disciple that he is. Why should he go to rescue the leader of the opposition, the man who has been seeking his own demise?

Isn't this just like Jesus? Not only does he choose the most unlikely fellow around to be the lead evangelist, he sends an intended victim of Paul's fury to save him. Beware, if you come to this church, this gospel, looking for pumped-up power and security. Prepare to be disappointed and thrown from your proverbial horse because Jesus' idea of strength is rooted in humility and vulnerability. And the fuel of his power is forgiveness. This is a grace-filled faith for all people that requires enormous courage.

You can't help but wonder why Jesus chose Paul, exemplifying the adage about the converted sinner. Did he suspect that Paul would spread the gospel more convincingly than anyone else? Did he see in Paul's vehemence the root of his own redemption? Is collapse what it takes for all of us to truly start afresh? Is this part of what we are to glean from Jesus crucified and beaten?

It is certainly the times in my life when I have felt completely destroyed that I have also been most receptive to change and a new beginning. Somehow the old way of being must be left before a new life can begin; we can't hobble along with one foot on the old road and another on the new. Though Jesus knocked Paul down, he did not tear him up. He had plans for Paul, because he recognized that his raw material, if you will, was worth saving, worth recycling.

We observed Earth Day a few weeks ago and I think it entirely appropriate to recognize that Jesus is the master recycler. He doesn't seem to care especially what you have done; he doesn't apparently want us to wallow in shame and degradation. When he responded to Paul saying, "I am Jesus whom you are persecuting," my favorite word is his next: "but." "But get up and enter the city and you will be told what to do." Get up and get going; a variation on his simple instruction, "Follow me." Yes, yes, I am Jesus the one whom you despise. But never mind that; that was then and this is now."

Can you believe this is true for you too?

Yes, yes, Jesus says, I know you fudged the books, but never mind that, come with me and you'll be fine.

Yes, yes, Jesus says, I know you feel useless and worthless, ugly and stupid, but never mind that; I think you're beautiful.

Yes, yes, Jesus says, I know you cheated on your spouse and lied to your friend, your teacher, your lover, but never mind, that was then, this is now; come with me.

Yes, yes, Jesus say, I know you tend to choose the easy path and do less than you might, give less than you can, remain silent when you might better speak up; but never mind that come follow me and I will open your heart and give you voice.

Yes, yes, Jesus says, I know you're an addict, I know you hurt people, I know what you have done, but never mind that; come with me and we will fashion a new life together.

The caveat here is that we can no more start anew by ourselves than Paul could have. Left to his own Paul might have rotted in the fetal position. He needed Jesus to save him and, oddly enough, Jesus sent a reluctant messenger. This happens to us, I think, as well. The one who offers us a hand is not the one whom we were expecting.

When we think of recycling and reusing the world's resources, when we consider Paul's transformation and new beginning, when we wonder what good can possibly come tragedy, it's worth turning to the afflicted, the victims and asking them what they need. When Paul was knocked off his pedestal on the road to Damascus, blinded and in a very real sense assaulted by the love of Christ, he withdrew to heal, to turn inward, to find, perhaps the inner Christ of life and renewal within himself.

On Wednesday night there were vigils in Highlands Ranch Colorado. One was held at the STEM High School where the shooting occurred. Sen. Michael Bennet, a

Democratic presidential hopeful, and Congressman Jason Crow, spoke to the crowd expressing condolences and beating into the ground the call for gun legislation. And the students rose up, protested and walked out. Deep in grief and mourning, they didn't need another political rally where politicians called once again for stricter gun control measures. They were not being heard, their collective state of grief and fear not acknowledged and I imagine it felt like an added assault.

There was another vigil held that same night at the St. Andrew United Methodist Church. More than 1,000 people attended. Students read scripture, songs of healing were sung and the pastor, Rev. Annie Arnoldby, told the assembled that anger and grief were normal and that the church was a safe place, a sanctuary. She encouraged people to turn to the person next to them and express their feelings and talk about how they were coping. Many people went up to the microphone to speak; there were lots of tears and hugs. Where at the High School there had been a political rally, at the church there was simply love and vulnerability as they effectively lay in what Anne Lamott calls "the dirt floor basement of their hearts." It was, in effect, Paul's three days of a fetal position.

Tragedy fells innocent victims all over the world but it knocks us down as well--- tears us down, if you will, but not up. May we rise to our feet, holding on to one another, to some unlikely helpmate, to a friend, to our beloved, and trust the master recycler, Jesus, who sees in each of us, flawed as we are, the light of salvation, the love of God, the beauty of Christ eternal.

The earth is never fed by the blood of the innocent, but it is always softened by the salt of our tears.

Grace and Peace.