

ON THE ROAD AGAIN, PART TWO: OR CREATIVE LIFE IN THE LAND-IN-BETWEEN; LUKE 12: 49-56; AUGUST 14, 2016; CAMERON AIRHART; WESTMINSTER PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

“Jesus, what a friend to sinners, Jesus, lover of my soul.” That’s the Jesus we like, and every church in America has a picture of a long-haired, gentle, Kenny Loggins-like Jesus, blue-eyed and blond, laughing with children.

Then we read Luke 12, and who is this guy? Jesus’ evil twin? This Lukan Jesus describes a dystopic future, predicts a bad end for himself, and cultural chaos for everyone else. He seems to have no family values, no respect for the authority of parents and no interest in the harmony of extended families. And after this outburst, he moves on to insult his hearers by calling them dumb hypocrites who claim to know things that they are too stupid to know. Now remember, this is a gospel, a unique genre that proclaims itself to be good news. Have you found any good news yet?

So, what is going on here and why should we listen in 2016?

First of all, we listen because Jesus is claiming to usher in a world that looks just like the world we live in. Especially right now in America, we can easily feel like the American community is melting down, with conflicts between races, social classes, urban and rural populations, religious communities, and economic groups; it feels like Thomas Hobbes’ ugly picture of the state of nature—a war of all against all—and Hobbes said we would only be delivered into peace by an authoritarian leader. Sound familiar? And our present conflict is especially hard to take because we thought we were beyond conflict—no more Soviet Union, no more Cold War, no more economic depressions, no more racial conflicts, no more LGBT discrimination, no more religious prejudice. Boy, have we been surprised! And our new unexpected and vicious conflicts are now dividing families and harming relationships. For notice that Jesus talks about divisions between people who know each other, not between impersonal social groups. And our present state of social conflict seems to be getting personal. Have you been listening to the vicious attacks on people, not on ideas or policies, in the election of 2016? Jesus’ description of conflicts rings very true today.

And the rocket fuel for these personal hatreds is our insistence that our side has the answers to all our problems; we all claim to know how to “interpret the present time.”

And then Jesus just calls us hypocrites. And here ends the reading. Thanks be to God? For what? I’m looking for some good news here!

Well, there is good news, but it’s going to take some thinking to grasp it. Because right now, we’re with the disciples in Luke 18:26, who exclaimed, “Then who can be saved?” And that’s what we all want—to be saved from our present dilemma. I don’t want to be called names by Jesus, I want to hear some good news. Now we need to remember to Jesus’ reply to his

disciples in Luke 18:27, “What is impossible for mortals is possible for God.” And with possibility comes faith, with faith comes optimism, with optimism comes creativity, and with creativity we begin to participate in the world that God is bringing into being, for we live not in perfect times, but in a time in-between the breaking into history of the Good News and the final triumph of that Good News. And we, ignorant mortals, are constantly surprised at how that Good News is unfolding into the world over time, bursting the old wineskins we are constantly making to contain it. And sometimes this breaking in of the Kingdom of God IS the conflict that Jesus is talking about.

So let’s get to the task of understanding.

First, let’s acknowledge that the world of enmity Jesus describes is the world we live in. It’s a world of constant change and struggle, where things come into being and other things pass out of being, a world where individual lives and fortunes are harmed and helped, where winners and losers are created daily. It is never static and it feels competitive, and as individuals we feel like things happen to us, rather than we control things, although we are pretty good at pretending to be in charge. (Americans are especially good at pretending to be omniscient; ask any non-American about this, for Americans are world famous for approaching all problems with an open mouth. It is a truth universally acknowledged.) We are sitting ducks for false saviors, or the errors of nostalgia or the temptation to withdraw. When things don’t go our way, we are prone to deep pessimism; right now, some writers are suggesting that the country is “sloughing toward Bethlehem,” quoting the widely read Yeats poem of 1919. When things are going our way, we are prone to unfounded optimism, like that of the 1989 book, “The End of History,” which argued that history had ended because conflict had ended—some sort of millennium was being inaugurated. None of these reactions are good ones. All of them are, in Jesus’ terminology, hypocritical, because they assume too much human agency and too much human knowledge. If we want to tap into the good news of God’s movements in the world, then we need to abandon our power-filled intellectual constructs, methodologies and interpretive grids, and in the words of St. Francis, get rid of “the money bag of our own opinions found in the inner recesses of our hearts.” We need to take off our blinders and see the activity of God around us.

And this will take faith. For the last few weeks we have been reading about faith in Hebrews, and have been told that it sustained the Hebrew patriarchs and prophets and was preserving the early Christian community. Faith in what? Faith in the saving activity of God in time and over time, and our individual salvation comes from our participation in the activity of God while we are alive. Now, understand what this means: God shapes, we listen; God controls, we participate; God moves, we cooperate. Our lives, then, should be spent watching for God breaking into our world, and moving with the Spirit as best we can.

How can we recognize God’s movement in the world? How can we tell the signal from the noise? A good way is to read the gospels, especially the one we are reading today. It has three sections: the large middle section contains Jesus’ teachings, and his teachings give us a guidebook for seeing the work of God all around us, for seeing what kind of actions and

attitudes are praised by Jesus. The other two sections of Luke are bookends around Jesus' teaching and are about how Jesus saves us, not how we save ourselves. Taking these sections all together, we can begin to grow a faith that seeks to recognize God's work in the world, combined with the knowledge that we don't control history.

And this is tremendously freeing. We become maturing travelers, experiencing new worlds with the assurance that these new experiences will be woven into a tapestry of goodness by God. We are freed to make errors, to take risks; above all, we are freed from conventional, conformist thinking and acting, and are invited in all aspects of life to be creative. We are invited to participate in the new world that God is bringing into being, even when this involves conflict.

Now, this sounds a little too abstract, even for me. So let me give an example of what I mean about the freedom from conventions that the gospel brings, and I'll get personal.

I'm a college professor. I entered college in 1972 and I have never left; for over 40 years I have been an academic. For over 20 years, I have been tenured. I am an expert on how we do things in higher education and on the unwritten rules and cultural practices of my tribe. My bet is that many of you can tell a similar story in your area of life. Part of my training was to respect the practices of my elders and to pass them on to the next generation. The status quo was deeply valued. I expected to live out my days in this kind of world, with books, students, genial colleagues and wicked administrators. Actually, this all sounds rather good...

But a few things happened to me. I started reading a Presbyterian historian from Edinburgh named Andrew Walls, and he, with his colleagues at Yale Divinity (Tom Yorty's alma mater), was destroying the conventional understanding of world Christianity, and from Walls I learned to ask about what God was doing in the world. So I began to look around. At the same time, the other-worldly quality of colleges was being besieged by economic and cultural forces, especially after 2008. And then I moved to Buffalo, and saw up close needy, helpless people and organizations trying to help, like WEDI or Jericho Road. And it was obvious to me that helping these people was a part of what God was doing in the world.

What emerged in my life was a new way of conceiving myself as a college professor, and that resulted in a new kind of college dedicated to bettering the lives of Buffalo's newest and poorest residents. This new college has established itself in the West Side community and has been designed to deliver a two-year college experience that costs poor students nothing, while providing them with an excellent faculty, fine tutors, free books, free bus passes and free computers, all delivered in an environment of care and comfort. These results emerged one step at a time, and came from a deeply spiritual place—the creativity that brought all of these pieces together into a new creation was only released because of the faith that God was looking after the results and nudging our steps, of which there were many missteps and false understandings. Out of this faith came confidence and creativity, and that creativity is now being used to bring a better Buffalo into existence. And following the trail opening in front of us, we are establishing another center in Utica, NY, a program for ex-offenders on the East Side

and a program for working adults with children. All, perhaps, in 2017. Opportunities are outstripping our ability to meet the needs, because now that we are noticing the needy, the needs are greater than we first thought. Now we are scrambling for resources. And I think that is what it's like when, through the mist, you try to see the world God wants to bring into existence.

I could tell many stories from the last two years about young Buffalo lives being changed for the better, but I'll tell one that is only a couple of weeks old.

A young woman came in to see me to ask about enrolling in our program. She is in her mid-twenties, from Puerto Rico, with some false starts at other colleges and in the military. She has no car and no money. She works hard on the night shift. She has a four-year-old son, a dead-end job and wants to go to college to have a future for herself and her son. We had aid money for her but no child care, so I sent her over to the Westminster Early Childhood Program, and she got the last spot in the universal pre-K program and a scholarship. She starts college in two weeks, and this is what she wrote on Friday to our program director:

Thank you so so so much!!! I'm very excited. It's been a long time since I've felt secure and like I could actually make progress and move forward. With this opportunity I can provide a better life for my son. I'm eternally grateful to you and Cameron as well as everyone at the Westminster church. Through the grace of God, everything is falling into place. Thank you.

So when you think about the future, when you worry about the present, Christian faith asserts that we do not have to fully comprehend the present nor understand the future to act with confidence while we are alive. We are all like the young man on the cover of your bulletin, gazing into the mists of the future and seeing an unknown land in the distance. Is that young man filled with terror? Exhilaration? Who knows? But Augustine said it best:

It is one thing to see the land of peace from a hilltop and, unable to find the way to it, struggle on through trackless wastes. It is another thing to follow the high road to that land of peace, the way that is defended by the care of the heavenly Commander.

Guided by the Spirit and protected by the Spirit, we are allowed to be audacious and creative in the midst of conflict, without having to be optimistic or pessimistic. We are merely sojourners with Christ.

Amen.