

A New World

Nicaragua has been in the news lately, a small Central American country that rarely gets much attention in the US.

I pay attention because back in my seminary days, I had lunch with the young men who would eventually take power away from the Somoza family, dictators that ruled Nicaragua for generations.

One of those young men sitting around a table at the seminary dining room was Daniel Ortega, who would go on to lead the revolution that eventually threw out Somoza in 1979.

Everyone hoped that the Sandinista revolution would improve the lot of the common people, and provide education and reforms so that everyone could lead a dignified life.

And while the early days after the revolution were full of hope and social reform, sadly, as of now, Ortega has simply become another Somoza.

Now it is Ortega's family who rules the country, loots its treasures, and shoots to kill anyone who dares object.

I'm thinking along these lines because for many years I read today's passage in Luke as a call by Jesus for revolution: turning the existing social relations upside down, putting the struggling poor in the chairs of the satisfied rich.

But perhaps that thinking was wrong, and maybe that's why the word is "revolution" - if you wait long enough, everything revolves back to the way things were!

And so it seems that Jesus is after something far deeper, far more demanding, far more radical than a mere revolution: Jesus is after

transformation; of people yes, but also of the communities and societies that we people create.

As it turns out, it's no coincidence that it's Luke's gospel that we hear from today.

Luke's community, his early comrades in following Jesus, were, the scholars tell us, made up mostly of wealthy people.

Luke after all was a doctor, and at the beginning of his gospel he tells us he's writing to the "most exalted Theophilus, so that you may recognize the reliability of the accounts you have been taught."

Given all of that, the question becomes, just who is Jesus talking to today?

Is he speaking to the dispossessed, the poor, the outsider?

As it turns out, he's not, because Luke tells us that after teaching and healing the vast crowd that came out to see him, which was most likely made up of the poor, the dispossessed and the outsider, "Then he looked up **at his disciples** and said: Blessed are you..."

He's talking not to the crowds, but to his closest followers, he's talking to the exalted Theophilus, he's talking to us.

In this disturbing litany of blessings and woes, Jesus is not only interested in reversing who and what we usually think of as blessed and cursed, he is cajoling us, especially we who are well off, we who tend to be on the winning side of society, to see life through the eyes of the "other."

Particularly the "other" who is in pain, who is just scraping by, the "other" who, without Jesus pointing her out, we might just scurry by on the sidewalk.

This is the first anniversary of the Parkland High School massacre, another in a long series of horrific gun violence episodes in our country, yet one that sparked something different: the student victims refused to remain victims, instead they are organizing rallies and marches and lobbying efforts to bring some sanity to our gun laws.

Which brings us to this notion of seeing life through the eyes of the "other", because Jesus is adamant that only by seeing life through another's eyes are we able to see in each other, the image of God.

As we mark this anniversary of the Parkland shooting, it goes without saying that no one is more "other" than the young man (and it always seems to be a young man) who charges in and does the shooting.

So it was with some interest that I listened in on a story of a teacher who got word about a high school junior who was making threats of violence on social media.

As the story developed, it turned out this young man had been viciously bullied ever since Middle School.

In fact, in the 8th grade, a classmate took an unprovoked swing at him, hit him square in the eye, and after a dozen or so surgeries, the young man eventually lost that eye.

The bullying continued for a long time, finally resulting in the emotional outburst that led to threats of violence against his high school classmates.

After the police arrested him and ultimately determined he wasn't actually planning an assault, a school psychologist got involved.

What this psychologist realized was that if he was going to reach this enraged young man, he needed to learn how to see the world through the student's eyes.

He needed to put himself in the student's shoes, and only then was the doctor able to slowly help him untangle the rage and fear and feelings of powerlessness that drove those destructive emotions.

The young man graduated high school and now, some 8 years later, finds himself at peace with himself and others.

And at the end of this story, both the student and the psychologist were overcome with emotion by how they were each of them transformed: one through the act of understanding, the other through the grace of being understood.

Our world today seems obsessed with highlighting our differences, whether it's about politics, race, culture, creed or language.

But Jesus is all about helping us find our common ground.

It's why he gives this sermon today "on a level place", because that's the place where we are all the same.

But here's the tricky part, finding common ground requires self awareness.

It is the discipline of self awareness that allows us to be mindful of our constant tendency to see the world not through the eyes of the other, but through the limited gaze of our own eyes, eyes often covered with blinders.

What Jesus insists upon is that we develop the self awareness to recognize that "faith is as close to, and yet different from, presumption as virtue is close to, yet different from, hypocrisy." M. Robinson, *What Are We Doing Here?*, 294.

Meaning, that while faith beckons us to walk on water, presumption says that God owes me something; that while virtue is a practice that brings its own reward, hypocrisy is all about what others think of me.

And so when we build ourselves up, set ourselves apart and seek to be stand-alone beings in a stand-alone world, we succeed only in diminishing the pure majesty of what it is to be human - creatures made in the image of God - creatures made not for isolation - but community, not for self-sufficiency - but for unity with all.

As one fellow observed hundreds of years ago,

"It is a most astonishing mystery to see heaven and earth married together in every human being; the dust of the ground and an immortal spirit clasping each other with such dear embraces and tender love ... what dear affection is found between them while breath sweetly links them." Id. modified.

Seeing the world through the eyes of the other allows us to see in each other the very image of God.

Seeing the world through the eyes of the other has been the mission of St Elizabeth's since its founding in 1902.

A white Ohio deaconess, with the help of one of the nation's richest men, Mr. Procter, came to Honolulu to open a settlement house for a people who were at the time among the most despised and discriminated against: the Chinese.

To this day they were the only nationality singled out for exclusion from this country.

And in that atmosphere of bigotry and fear, St Elizabeth's became a safe harbor where people were honored and loved, given opportunities to learn a trade and a new language, and all these years later, their

descendants are the pillars of our community, filling the ranks of business folks, teachers, preachers and more.

And today, St. Elizabeth's has opened its arms to folks from all over the world, such that we sing or speak in five different languages every Sunday - while during the week the hungry are fed, the sick are given comfort and the lonely some companionship.

Seeing the world through the eyes of the houseless, the newly arrived immigrant, the confused, the young and old, this gift erases lines, creates community, breeds love.

And it does one more thing too: it opens the gates of heaven to us; not after we have taken our last breath, but here, now, today.

On a level place a long time ago, Jesus reminds everyone that what this world needs is not so much revolution but transformation - and transformation only occurs when we finally, and at long last, come to see the world through each other's eyes.

+amen

