

A Vulnerable God

Genesis 15:1-12,17-18
Psalm 27
Philippians 3:17-4:1
Luke 13:31-35

The other day, Tea and I went to see a new movie called: "Where Do We Invade Next?"

It's not a war movie.

Instead, the film takes us to a number of mostly European countries looking for ideas that we might steal for the benefit of our country; things like free college tuition and edible school meals and humane prisons.

And while there is a lot to commend this movie and its themes, what really struck me was the way the German people constantly are reminded about their Nazi past: in school lessons throughout childhood, to plaques and signs in obvious public places, to national days of remorse.

The point being that only in recognizing past evil, and owning it, can we heal.

It is about being vulnerable.

It is about being open with our wounds.

One of our deepest wounds as Americans, of course, is race relations.

Whether the crisis is in Ferguson Missouri or Chicago or in the never ending vitriol that comes out of Washington DC, relations between the majority and minority races seem to be at new lows.

The Southern Poverty Law Center reports a big increase in the number of race based hate groups in our country that are actively peddling their poison.

And it got me to thinking that perhaps one reason why we Americans continue to struggle with race relations is that, unlike the Germans, we have never really atoned for the sin of slavery.

Truth be told, we have never really owned up to the indisputable fact that so much of the wealth of this nation was built on the backs of human beings degraded and abused for centuries.

We have never really said we are sorry, and sought to make right the horrific injustice, the inhumane evil, that was, and to some extent, still is, slavery.

And as a consequence, institutionalized slavery is still alive and well in our country, even today.

It's found in our prisons that incarcerate nearly 1 million African Americans, a rate that is nearly 6 times the rate of white incarceration.

Amazingly, many major manufacturers actually employ these prisoners to make all kinds of every day consumer products; things like Victoria Secret underwear and McDonalds uniforms and military clothing and Starbucks coffee packages, all while paying our modern day slaves as little as 20 cents per hour for their labor.

Here in Hawaii, it is the native Hawaiian population that makes up a majority of those imprisoned and those who are without homes.

And Jesus stands outside of our walls, and weeps.

Lent is a season to reconnect with what matters, not only for ourselves as individuals, but together, as a community, a State, a nation.

Lent is a time to release our fear of each other and to reclaim our vulnerability toward one another.

The vulnerable place is the holy place, it is where God lives — all the time.

It's why we can talk about God as She; because throughout the entire history of our faith, the wise ones know that God IS the vulnerable, and the vulnerable wears a female face.

In Isaiah God asks:

"Can a woman forget her nursing child or show no compassion for the child of her womb?

How then can I forget you, oh my people?"

"As a mother comforts her child, so I will comfort you....." (Isaiah 66:13).

The prophet Hosea sings the same song:

"How can I give you up?

It was I who taught you to walk.

I took you up in my arms; I healed you, led you with cords of human kindness, with bands of love.

I bent down to you and fed you..." (Hosea 11:3-4).

Many people are uncomfortable thinking about God as somehow soft, somehow vulnerable, somehow female.

But as the prophets know, the vulnerable God is as ancient as our faith.

Which brings us to the main topic for today: the chicken!

While Benjamin Franklin lobbied for the turkey to be our national bird, and while the majestic eagle won that coveted spot, go figure, but nobody lobbied for the lowly chicken!

It's true, chickens aren't majestic.

They're lousy fighters -- as common as ants and not particularly pretty.

We know a lot about chickens here at St. E's.

Just last week, Karyn and I looked like the Keystone cops running around the church after several chicks wandered in, making a terrible racket until they finally got shushed out the door.

But we have to be nice to them, especially here, because the bird that actually looks like and acts like God, well, it isn't the majestic eagle -- it's the chicken!

Don't take my word for it.

Listen to Jesus!

There he stands, outside the walls of Jerusalem, outside the walls of Washington DC, outside the walls of Washington Place, lamenting the hard hearts of his people.

But in his lament, he doesn't long to carry them off on eagle's wings nor does he call upon the lion of Judah to pounce and protect.

No.

Jesus -- like a mother hen - invites us into his vulnerable protection.

Chest out, wings wide, the perfect target to be eaten by the foxes of this world: all the while, safeguarding her brood behind her.

And at the same time, grieving for all of the chicks: even for the Herods, even for the Pilates, grieving for all the ones who think they have it all together, and so refuse to seek the safety he offers in his death...

This is why Jesus is so maddening!

Just when we think we have a God of power and might, just when we think God invites us to live lives of power and might, here comes Jesus, the mother hen.

It is the never ending challenge of our faith: give up to get ahead, forgive again and again, die if you wish to find life.

"Imitate me," Paul says today, "as I imitate Christ."

In other words, be a chicken, be a mother hen!

Sit with that for a minute while I tell you one last story.

Most of you will remember back in August, 1991, a couple of years after the Berlin Wall fell, and shortly after the Soviet Union collapsed.

You'll remember on August 20, 1991, when martial law is declared in Russia, and Boris Yeltzin is holding on to civilian power by a thread.

The army is mobilized and a coup begins: everyone goes home and it appears the old guard is making a comeback.

Just then, the babushkas, the old Russian ladies who for nearly 80 years kept the church alive in a country that was officially atheist; these old ladies who are laughed at and condescended to for years -- the babushkas come out that night.

Some of these old ladies feed the pro-democracy supporters, others help out at medical stations, some kneel and pray for a miracle, and still others climb on top of the tanks and, staring into the slits at the powerful and well armed army men inside, tell them that now they have new orders, orders from God:

"You shall not kill."

The soldiers get out of their tanks.

The attack never comes.

After three days, the tide turns, and the old guard creeps away. T. Long, Talking Ourselves into Being Christian (paraphrased).

Mother hens save the day for Mother Russia.

As you continue your journey through this holy season, consider what needs to become vulnerable, yes in your personal life, but also in our collective life, especially in our relations with those who have suffered and who continue to suffer so much because of racism and fear and hate.

The fate of all we hold dear might just depend on it.

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