

Radical Faith as Gift

As I reflect on ministry, and especially my ministry, I know in the hidden places that the real restraints are not in my understanding or in the receptivity of other people. Rather, the restraints come from my own unsureness about this perception. I discover that I am as bourgeois and obdurate as any to whom I might minister. I, like most of the others, am unsure that the royal road is not the best and the royal community the one which governs the real "goodies." I, like most of the others, am unsure that the alternative community inclusive of the poor, hungry, and grieving is really the wave of God's future. We are indeed "like people, like priest" (Hos 4:9). That very likely is the situation among many of us in ministry, and there is no unambiguous way out of it. It does make clear to us that our ministry will always be practiced through our own conflicted selves. No prophet has ever borne an unconflicted message, even until Jesus (compare Mark 14:36). Thus the Beatitudes end in realism (Luke 6:22-23). Also, it reminds us again that such radical faith is not an achievement; for if it were, we would will it and be done. Rather, it is a gift, and we are left to wait receptively, to watch and to pray.

Perhaps our own situation credits what we have suggested here. We ourselves shall likely move in and out, precisely because of our poor capacity to grieve the death in our own lives and to be amazed at the new futures. We are not more skilled in that than all the other children of the royal community, and therefore we must engage in the same painful practices of becoming who we are called to be. I have come to think that there is no more succinct summary of prophetic ministry than the statement of Jesus: "Blessed are you that weep now, for you shall laugh" (Luke 6:21), or, more familiarly, "Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted" (Matt 5:4).

Jesus' concern was, finally, for the joy of the kingdom. That is what he promised, and to that he invited people. But he was clear that rejoicing in that future required a grieving about the present

order.¹ Jesus takes a quite dialectical two-age view of things. He will not be like one-world liberals who view the present world as the only one, nor will he be like the unworldly who yearn for the future with an unconcern about the present. There is work to be done in the present. There is grief work to be done in the present that the future may come. There is mourning to be done for those who do not know of the deathliness of their situation. There is mourning to be done with those who know pain and suffering and lack the power or freedom to bring it to speech. The saying is a harsh one, for it sets this grief work as the precondition of joy. It announces that those who have not cared enough to grieve will not know joy.

The mourning is a precondition in another way too. It is not a formal, external requirement but rather the only door and route to joy. Seen in that context, Jesus' saying about weeping and laughing is not just a neat aphorism but a summary of the entire theology of the cross. Only that kind of anguished disengagement permits fruitful yearning, and only the public embrace of deathliness permits newness to come. We are at the edge of knowing this in our personal lives, for we understand a bit of the processes of grieving.² But we have yet to learn and apply it to the reality of society. And finally, we have yet to learn it about God, who grieves in ways hidden from us and who waits to rejoice until his promises are fully kept.