

“Outrunning the Bear”
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The Beatitudes – Matthew 5:3-9

Psalm 24

Matthew 25:24-40

Immanuel Kant – “Act only according to that maxim whereby you can, at the same time, will that it should become a universal law. ”

A few years ago Sandy and I camped in Glacier National Park in Montana. It’s one of the most beautiful of our national parks, and we had a great time. Except for one thing. A friend of mine who had been at the park just prior to our visit gave me a book he bought at the camp store, Grizzly Attacks and How to Avoid Them. Of all the scary books I have read, none has ever terrified me as much as this. And to make matters worse I was reading this book as I went to sleep in my sleeping bag in a tent in a campground that had a sign at the entrance, “Bears have entered this campground and killed people.”

But wherever there are horror stories, there also jokes, designed I guess to ease some of the dread. So here’s a popular bear joke.

Two biologists were tracking grizzlies that had been collared for identification. All of a sudden a grizzly emerged from the bushes and charged the biologists. They scrambled up the nearest tree, and lo and behold the bear started climbing the tree. One of the biologists stripped off his boots, put on some running shoes and dropped his pack.

“What are you doing?” asked the other.

“I figure when the bear gets close to us, we’ll jump down and make a run for it,” said the first

“Don’t be ridiculous. You know you can’t outrun a bear,” said the other.

“I know,” said the first, “but I don’t have to outrun the bear. I only have to outrun you.”

Picking apart jokes and analyzing them is an annoying, party-pooing downer. And this is exactly what I’m going to do, because I believe that this joke says volumes about where our faith, our morality, economics and our politics have gone wrong in the last five years.

The farthest back I can trace this joke is about 2006. It seems that its first form was about two lawyers hiking in the woods, which suggested perhaps that only lawyers were self-centered enough to throw a friend to a grizzly. Then it moved to biologists, still a limited group. Then it just became two hikers, which would include any of us.

My tracking of the joke on the internet suggests that it reached its peak popularity in 2008, around the time that the stock market bubble collapsed and what is known as the Great Recession began to take over.

Jokes start out being funny because of their absurdity. They then catch us with their tiniest possibility of underlying, if not absurd, truth. When they get too familiar they turn into a cliché. Think of Michael Scott in *The Office* repeating “That’s what she said!” after every other comment. The “I only have to outrun you” joke is approaching this cliché status today.

I think this joke gained such broad appeal around 2008 because we were so insecure in our economic and financial status as the stock market lost close to half of its value and jobs started disappearing right and left. The notion that “I just have to outrun you” was used as an example of Steven Landsburg’s Communal Stream economics theory in which we don’t have to outrun our attackers. We only have to outrun other targets of similar interest to the attacker.

The notion, however, that any of us could outrun the bear market by simply leaving behind those who couldn’t run as fast as we, not only was immoral, it simply didn’t work. And the notion that any of us can outrun the bear of economic inequality in this country alone by throwing the unlucky to the beast is both wrong and unjust.

I would argue that this is remarkably un-Christian, as well as un-Jewish. It’s also un-Buddhist, Un-Muslim, un-Native American, and unethical according to any humanistic moral philosophies that don’t advocate sacrificing the innocent. The joke highlights how deeply ingrained our individualistic, look out for number one, life style is.

How did we get this way?

My hunch is that most of us found our faith, or our moral compass, in a very personal way. With all good intentions, my own youth leaders encouraged me to think of how God was calling me individually. At evening vespers at church camp we’d sing the spiritual, “Jesus walked this lonesome valley. He had to walk it by himself. Oh, nobody else could walk it for him; he had to walk it by himself.” In verse three this then became “You must go and stand your trial. You have to stand it by yourself. Oh nobody else can stand it for you. You have to stand it by yourself.”

And this was in a Congregational, UCC summer camp. Those of you in evangelical traditions had the experience of being called forward to be saved one at a time as the choir sang, “Just as I am...” which uses the word “I” or “me” fifteen times.

If you were working out a humanistic, existential sense of direction in your life, it probably felt like a very personal, individual search for meaning as well.

At one level all of this is good, necessary, and true. The leap of faith is something that at one level, we do alone. We do need that fundamental, personal foundation of our faith and ethics.

At the same time, there is an unavoidable element in the Judeo-Christian tradition that says that our healing, our salvation is always communal. We rise and fall together in community. “Compassion,” writes Frederick Buechner, “is that sometimes fatal capacity for feeling what it’s like to live inside somebody else’s skin. It’s the knowledge that there can never really be any peace and joy

for me until there is peace and joy finally for you too.” (Wishful Thinking, p. 15).

But for a politician today to say there is no peace and joy for me until there is peace and joy for you is to be called a socialist. It’s like looking for an American leader wearing a plastic moral reminder bracelet that said, “What would France do?”

Yet communal care is at the root of our faith. The most fundamental of all commandments begins, “Hear oh Israel...” It’s not “Hear oh Abraham, or Sarah, or Jacob or Leah, or Isaac, or Rachel.” And from this communal perspective the commandment continues, “The Lord our God is one and you must love the Lord with all your heart, all your mind, all your soul, and all your strength.” God calls the whole community.

The most telling of all the stories of loss in the book of Genesis is the excuse of Cain after he has killed his brother Abel. God asks Cain where his brother is. Cain replies, “Am I my brother’s keeper?”

The question is so lame that God doesn’t even dignify it with an answer. But the message of God is clear, “Of course you are, and while we’re at it, you are also your sister’s keeper.”

Judaism rises and falls as a community. When the Hebrew people are exiled, they stick together. When they are allowed to return home, they return together. One of the reasons the Torah, their law, was so important was that in exile they knew who they were because they kept Sabbath together, they ate kosher together, and they worshiped regularly together.

The same is true in Christian scripture and tradition. Jesus is not a Lone Ranger. The first thing he does is call together a community of disciples whom we know today to be many more than the twelve men identified in scripture. They included women. Their names varied. They stuck together, and it is they who were the beginning of the church.

Jesus calls whole cities to task, “Woe to you Capernaum, Chorazin, Bethsaida...”

The Beatitudes we read earlier are not trophies for individual accomplishments. They are blessings of whole groups of people - the poor, the grieving, the meek, those who hunger and thirst after righteousness, the merciful, the pure in heart, and the peacemakers.

And at the end of Matthew’s gospel, Jesus proclaims that our lives are judged not by whether we followed a certain doctrine, or recited a certain creed, or were at the top of our class, or the top of our university, or business, or community, but by whether we fed the hungry, gave drink to the thirsty, clothed the naked, or visited the sick or the imprisoned. We’re all family Jesus says, and when you touch the least, you touch me, you touch the Christ, the holy in yourself.

I could go on and on. Attacking the individualistic mentality of “I only have to outrun you to outrun the bear” is too easy. It’s so simple and clear that God calls us as a people in community. The categorical imperative of Immanuel Kant calls us to act in such a way that our individual actions could be a universal standard for all and that we never use others as a means to an

end, such as getting away from a bear. Mohammed said “that person is the most beloved of God who does most good to God’s creatures.”

But as a nation we seem to be moving in exactly the opposite direction of these communal principles. If this sounds political, I don’t know how we can avoid being political when we are called by our compact to act in Christian concern for the welfare of all people. I believe in the social contract, that government exists to protect each of us in our most vulnerable times that we might rise freely in our most powerful times.

I believe we know this. I also often despair when it comes to acting upon this belief.

I come back to two kinds of awareness. First, I carry the words of John Donne from our call to worship as a memory text. “No one is an island entire of itself...any one’s death diminishes me, because I am involved in humankind. And therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee.”

It, like the compact of this church, reminds me of my link by our common humanity with all the joys and struggles in this world.

The second awareness comes from words of Psalm 24.

Psalm 24

*The earth is the Lord’s and all that is in it,
the world and those who live in it.*

For God has founded it on the seas and established it on the rivers.

Who shall ascend the hill of the Lord?

And who shall stand in God’s holy place?

Those who have clean hand and pure hearts,

who do not lift up their souls to do what is false, and who do not swear deceitfully...

Such is the company of those who seek God.

It would seem on the surface that this would leave us out.

But listen to the following words of Annie Dillard in her book, Holy the Firm. Listen in terms of the responsibility we have as a spiritual community.

“There is no one but us. There is no one to send, nor a clean hand, nor a pure heart on the face of the earth, nor in the earth, but only us, a generation comforting ourselves with the notion that we have come at an awkward time, that our innocent fathers and mothers are all dead—as if innocence had ever been—and our children busy and troubled, and we ourselves unfit, not yet ready, having each of us chosen wrongly, made a false start, failed, yielded to impulse and the tangled comfort of pleasures, and grown exhausted. . . . But there is no one but us. There never has been.” (*Holy the Firm*, pp. 56-57.)

Notice that she doesn’t say, “There is no one but you, singular.” She says, “There is no one but us.” We are a people of community. We are indeed the company of those who seek God, and it is to us, busy and troubled and confused, that God calls. It is we, who like the Jewish, Christian, Buddhist, Muslim, indigenous, and humanists working and caring in community together

through time immemorial respond simply and humbly not only, “Here I am. Send me” but also, “Here we are, send us.”

If we go back to the bear joke, I remind us that at our best, we as Americans, we as people of good will, and we as people of faith know that none of us is an island, alone unto ourselves. We know we are connected. We know we are saved economically and theologically not individually, but together with one another. I offer this here to remind us that this is our faith and our calling and to further remind us not to get sidetracked by those who think it is possible, profitable, or moral to outrun the bear by outrunning the person by our side, by outrunning the social class two rungs down the economic ladder, by outrunning the disabled, the younger, the older, or anyone without the security or swiftness we enjoy.

I offer this because we are already ahead in the game of loving rather than outrunning our neighbor. We are the United Church of Gainesville. We are in community, this church. There’s no better place than this to celebrate this awareness of how good and right it is to love rather than try to outrun each other than right here tonight.

Prayer

O God of our Florida summers, where rain finally came when it seemed forever lost, bless us this evening with the common sense of common care instead of the selfish nonsense sacrificing our friends thinking this will save us from the bear.

We pray this night for summer evening’s blessings, the joy of being together, the gift of caring for one another, and for grace that comes to us as freely as the taste of ice cream.

In this ice cream of grace tonight, let us see love in each other’s eyes, in the sugared up excitement in the children, and in the joy that is friendship. And in this joy let us pray for long ago hopes of a nation’s freedom to be a beacon of hope to a darkened world, a blessed land that never forgets to bless the world.

And then let us leave here, never wanting to outrun the neighbor by our side, but rather always taking the hand of another who is also afraid, and together taking the deep breath, staring down the bear of fear, and trusting that together, all shall indeed be blessed and indeed very well blessed. Amen.