

Empire-building infects us all

Colleagues,

Co-editor Robin Morgan is attending the national assembly of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America these days in Indianapolis, Indiana. After only a few years on the ELCA clergy roster, she's a voting delegate! Which is something I never achieved in all my decades on that roster in three different Lutheran denominations. Before she left St. Louis for the gathering, Robin composed these paragraphs for today's posting. You'll be edified, as I was, by what she says. Peace & Joy!

Ed Schroeder

I participated in a Crossings practicum a few weeks ago. It was a refresher course for some of us, a way to learn about presenting the Crossings model to a group for others of us, and a brand new experience for a few folks in the crowd. I went primarily to be with a friend, but when the Word of God is opened up and rightly divided, it tends to call the shots irrespective of our original intentions.

The text we parsed was the epistle lesson that week – Galatians 5:1, 13-25. “For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.” Usually I love Galatians, enjoy wallowing in the freedom language (“There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus”), but somehow, on this particular Saturday, it just irritated me.

Lately, freedom in Christ has felt more like slavery. It's been quite awhile since Jesus pulled me back from the edge of the abyss and said we've got things to do together. Not that I've forgotten, but it's been several years now since my life has been immersed in the life of the church and lies far from the abyss. Or does it?

For those of you who live in places where physical survival is a daily issue (did you know these mailings go to folks in 74 different countries? Amazing.) what I'm going to say next will probably sound like just another whiny American with too much time and money on her hands. But I think for those of you who wonder why the American church doesn't do more about global issues, this might give you a bit of insight from the inside.

The machinery of empire building infects everything that we do. Inside the church as well as outside, the constraints of empire building are everywhere. What start out as points of good order, certification for leadership within the church or laws to protect the public from disreputable individuals and corporations, become ends in themselves rather than means.

However, it is our reactions to these circumstances that are the real problem. Some of us, when we find ourselves inside our respective boxes, are tempted to, as Frank Sinatra sang, "do it my way." God obviously is falling down on the job here, so we have to pick up the slack. That tends to be my knee-jerk reaction as one well-schooled in the Protestant work ethic. On the other hand are folks who follow temptation in a different direction. You can't fight city hall so let's eat, drink and be merry, work with the empire just enough to get "my fair share" and spend the rest of the time partying to forget about it.

One of the folks at the practicum wore a t-shirt that said, "Real Fear. Whoever dies with the most toys, still dies." I

liked that. As one who has never related to the Prodigal Son (of course the older brother was angry with his father, who wouldn't be?), that seemed to say it all to me. But as I struggled through Galatians 5, I realized that I was angry at God who, it seemed to me, had given me the skills and the strength to be a long distance swimmer, the desire to be a long distance swimmer and then locked me in a phone booth. I had work to do and God was getting in my way. That's when I realized that there's a t-shirt out there for me, too: "Real Fear. Whoever dies with the most jobs, still dies."

God doesn't take on empires by sending his people into empire-like battle. A crying baby in a rush basket floating among the reeds, handwriting on the wall at a party or three slaves walking around unharmed in a fiery furnace is the way God deals with empires. And finally, a baby born in a manger who grows up to teach, heal, hang on a tree and yet walk away from his grave gives us the new life and the freedom to be who God has made us and do what God calls us to do. That kind of vulnerability isn't my first choice in the face of the empire, but for freedom Christ has set us free.

I don't know how or if I'm going to do any swimming in this phone booth, but as the old hymn says, "I know who holds tomorrow and I know who holds my hand."