

Talitha Kumi in the Cuckoo's Nest

Colleagues,

I was asked to be guest preacher on July 2 at an ELCA congregation here in St. Louis. Not because I'm noted for "Fourth-of-July" homilies, but because the pastor, with away-from-home holiday already booked for the nation's 230th birthday, was desperate to find anybody who would say yes. So I said it.

But I didn't know what I was getting into. "Our tradition," the organist told me when I got there, "is to have special music when it's the 4th of July. Between the reading of the gospel and your sermon, we'll have an interlude where we sing patriotic hymns. First there'll be a soloist singing God Bless America. Then the congregation will repeat that hymn and then we'll all sing several more. Most of them are in the LBW. Oh yes, we always have a guest trumpet player to accompany the organ for this celebration. He's very good. And you'll see many of our members all dolled up in red, white and blue."

I wanted to run, but I didn't. I had anticipated in my sermon deliberations to "cross" the day's gospel with the Saturday newspaper's headlines. That would have been jarring enough. The Gospel was Jesus' resurrecting Jairus' 12-yr old daughter "interrupted" by the adult woman surreptitiously touching his garment to be healed of her dreadful affliction. That was the good news. The bad news was the two front-page headlines in the St. Louis Post-Dispatch: "GIs probed in Iraq rape, killings . . . revealed during routine counseling session" and then right below it "Bring Fourth the festivities! Fair St. Louis opens today."

The disconnect between these two headlines with each other—rape and murder and then celebrate, both predicated to birthday-celebrating America—is as cavernous as is the disconnect between them and the day’s Gospel. What was the headline-writer thinking when he pasted the two of them together? Probably no more than most of us readers did when we read them. “Oh, that’s awful, but . . . it is the 4th of July. So we’ll go with the second headline.” Reminded me of Milton Mayer’s stellar book “They Thought They were Free: The Germans 1933-45.” Amazon.com commentators say this about it:

Mayer gives us a chilling look at Nazi Germany through conversations and interviews with ten self-described ‘little men’, who were all members of the party. The men tell of their beliefs and experiences during the years of the Third Reich. We hear them, in their own words, make their excuses and justifications and evasions, but the same question will not stop coming up in our minds: “What would I have done?” In some ways the scariest aspect of the book is how normal the men seem to be. Their Nazi beliefs are somehow more frightening as they do not come from high ranking officials like Himmler and Goebbels, but rather from ordinary civilians. To a man, they declared that their days under Hitler were the best in their lives. I found the parallels with current day America to be much too close for comfort. This book will open your eyes as to how totalitarianism is welcomed by the mass of people if the media support it, and the economy is good.

I didn’t refer to Mayer in the sermon, but you ThTh folks can think about it. I do remember one quote when I read his book years ago. One of his 10 “average Joes (Johanns)” said something like this: “Yes, Hitler did do some awful things. The first ones were small, but I didn’t protest then. Next time he did something worse, but since I’d remained silent the previous

time, this even worse action didn't seem THAT much worse, so I did nothing. Finally the awful things just rolled by me."

"GIs probed in Iraq rape, killings." It just rolls by. This is NOT God blessing America. Au contraire.

Here's what I tried to do in the sermon.

When the patriotic singing ended I began by saying that it would be jarring to cross the Gospel (read 10 minutes earlier) with the America texts we'd just been singing. But that was what their pastor asked me to do for them: to link the mark 5 text to the text of our own lives on this 4th of July weekend 2006. Most of us DID indeed know that the "alabaster cities gleaming" may perhaps have been true a century ago when these hymns were written, but that just in our own town of St. Louis there are stretches of wasteland that are anything but alabaster. Lots of things are not gleaming in America today. The hymns may reflect our nostalgia, but our nation—like those two women in the text—is afflicted with sickness. We need "talitha kumi."

I then read the newspaper headlines out loud. Is that sickness, or what? And the two headlines side-by-side. Is that schizophrenia, bi-polar, or what?

I had previously decided to go with mental illness as the metaphor for our national malady—and also that of us here this morning—torn between our habitual patriotism and the realities of such a headline all on the same weekend. And I opted for the title of Ken Kesey's book/play of days gone by "One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest" for my illness metaphor, reminding the congregation that in that play you couldn't tell who was crazy and who was not. Not only among the patients, but also among the staff of the mental hospital. You expect the patients to be crazy and the staff to be sane, but in this Cuckoo's Nest that line zig-zagged through both groups. So who's crazy, who's sane,

in our national life? Hard to tell. You thought whatzisname was the “good guy,” sane (the Latin word for healthy), and his nay-sayers were crazy. But then out comes this new revelation, and the zig-zag shifts. The cuckoo’s nest for all of us US citizens is not that “some” are crazy, but that often you can’t tell who is, who isn’t.

So let’s take Jesus’ “sane” words “Talitha kumi,” and cross them to our cuckoo’s nest.

Talitha Kumi in Our Cuckoo’s Nest.

Perhaps you don’t think our national scene is a cuckoo’s nest. I won’t argue.

But we all have our personal versions: Where’s your cuckoo’s nest, where it’s just crazy?

Your own daily life. Your family. The neighbors. The workplace. Just inside your head.

Sane/insane means healthy/sick. Talitha kumi are Jesus’ words for getting from crazy to sanity.

In Kesey’s Cuckoo’s nest, both the patients and the staff survived (if I remember it right) by creating little “oases of sanity” where they could “live” in the otherwise insane world of the mental hospital.

That’s almost a Biblical insight. Right out of today’s text. Jesus does not bring healing to the masses. Only in the corner of Jairus’ home does sanity happen. Neighbors who laughed at him are excluded from this oasis. Ditto for the older woman. Right in the middle of the mob, she touches Jesus and there’s an oasis in the desert, her desert.

“Daughter, your faith has made you well, go in peace, and be

healed of your disease.” Sanity after the insanity of many doctors and all her money. And fundamental to it all, Jesus’ “Peace,” namely, God-relationship-sanity healing the hemorrhaging of God-disconnect insanity.

But let’s take it one step at a time. [Herewith the Crossings paradigm]

The Bad News—

1. The cuckoo’s nest in Mark 5: Both of the afflicted are women. Both suffering. Point of death for one. Papa desperately begging. Insanity zig-zagging through their lives.
2. The heroes in the story are ones whom Jesus links to “faith.” But not so the crowds, even the klutzy disciples, worst of all those who “laugh at” Jesus’ therapeutic analysis. His own depth-diagnostic term is “fear,” the antithesis of faith. That’s the temptation confronting Jairus, and the afflicted woman. In fear, driven to trust all other kinds of M.Ds for sanity and distrust the genuine healer.
3. Distrusters wind up “put outside.” No oasis for them. Just more insanity. Eternal cuckoo’s nest. Total God-disconnect. Permanent.

The Good News—

4. The Healer, peace-creator, the Sanitizer. The oasis-creator. The craziness of God’s son to join the crazies in the cuckoo’s nest. He sweet-swaps the unhealth/insanity of both women for his healing sanity. What’s all involved in that transfer, of course, is Good Friday and Easter. Twice the reference to touch, the point of that sweet-swap transfer. Jesus gets their infections; they his health.
5. “Fear not, only trust.” Faith in Christ replaces fear’s inverse kind of faith that trusts other clinicians for coping with the cuckoo’s nest. What’s the nature of

“faith” in this text? The faith Jesus commends is a) confidence that Jesus CAN provide the help, and b) that He WILL DO IT for me, unclean, near death tho I be.

6. Back into crowd of daily life, living from the corner of sanity, the Christ oasis. Living by Christ’s continuing “Talitha kumi” in the cuckoo’s nest.

Crossing over to us folks here this morning at X-Lutheran Church:

1. Pick your own cuckoo’s nest. Where sickness, even insanity, seems to be in charge. Your own begging. Helpless. Maybe even 12 yrs already. Or a whole lifetime.
2. How “natural” to respond with fear. [Terrorists know the power of fear. Are they not winning? What drove those GIs to rape and murder? Is Iraq a cuckoo’s nest or what? Is the USA?] But to be driven by fear disconnects us from Christ. It’s really that simple. Either “fear or faith.” He says so. But fear is not something you can exorcise on your own. Outside help is needed, big help.
3. When fear invades our Christian hearts, it puts us “outside.” Cut off from Christ’s oasis. Permanent cuckoo’s nest. Getting healed:
4. Jesus comes to our cuckoo’s nest. The Healer, peace-creator, the Sani-tizer. Who sweet-swaps our unhealth/insanity for his healing sanity. What’s all involved in that transfer, of course, is Good Friday and Easter. Twice the reference to touch, the point of that sweet-swap transfer.
5. Today he’s in our cuckoo’s nest too, offering us that touch once more to unload our frazzled selves and come into his oasis. His offer: Fear not; just trust. Namely, “just” trust me. Touch me and keep touching. Faith puts us in God’s oasis. From that oasis we too can cope with the insanity around us—even inside us. He even makes that

offer to the GIs in the headline. That's how crazy his offer is.

6. Daily life as Talitha kumi in the Cuckoo's Nest. Getting up again each morning. and moving out as Christ's "daughter." Which means God's own daughter too. Taking the oasis with you, this little piece of healed life back out into the crazy world. When insanity surrounds you, TOUCH Christ again. PEACE comes with Talitha Kumi. In Christ's oasis you're in the right place WITH GOD. That what "Shalom" is all about every time Jesus mentions it. The goodies follow. "Give her something to eat," Jesus said. Daily nourishment from the oasis for life back out in the cuckoo's nest.

Christ has "something to eat" (and drink too) on the altar for us here this morning. Even on this crazy 4th of July weekend when we want to be patriotic, but know that's no oasis for survival. So let's join him—and each other—at the table. "Talitha kumi," he says to us. "Daughters (and sons) of mine, get up and come to the table." With this nourishment we can cope with any cuckoo's nest. He said so. His words to Jairus are his promise to us: Don't be afraid, just trust me.

Peace & Joy!

Ed Schroeder