

Twenty-First Sunday after Pentecost

The Disciples' Unfaith Exposed

Mark 10:17-31

Twenty-First Sunday after Pentecost analysis by Ed Schroeder

Sabbatarians,

It's actually Monday morning Oct. 6 here in Lithuania. On Saturday we went to Kaunas, #2 city in the country, to spend three hours walking through the Nazi concentration camp there. Before WW II Lithuania's liberal policies had attracted Jews to come here. Vilnius, the nation's capital, was one of the great Jewish cities of Europe. With its 96 synagogues Vilnius was "Jerusalem in Lithuania."

Kaunas also had a large pre-war Jewish population. It's a two-hour drive from Klaipeda. Just across the river from Kaunas was the concentration camp in operation from 1941 till 1944. It's still all there. Visitors walk through the cells, past the firing squad pits, the grisly photos, the lists and charts on the walls, and the guide simply tells the story.

So I want to relay some of that in Sabb. 82, and then move to a Crossings matrix for next Sunday's Gospel (October 12) plus another one for next Sunday's second lesson.

Peace & Joy! Ed

I. THE HOLOCAUST IN LITHUANIA

What we're learning The holocaust in Lithuania was different. "What everybody knows" (well sortuv), but we did not, was that although the Nazis provided the organizational machinery for Jewish extermination here, Lithuanians themselves did most of the killings. Besides our visit to Kaunas we've had two other sources for this. One is a recent convocation on this very topic at our seminary. The second is Anne Applebaum's superb book (pressed into our hands by a friend here) BETWEEN EAST AND WEST. ACROSS THE BORDERLANDS OF EUROPE [Pantheon Books 1994].

Example, from Applebaum's interview with a survivor from the village of Radun: "Not long after the German occupation began, the German military command simply announced that all of the Jews in Radun had to report to the synagogue. There the Germans organized the Jews into a line and told us to walk to the cemetery. They followed on horseback, and Lithuanians followed with guns.... When we arrived at the cemetery, the German soldiers showed us a space beside the cemetery and told us to start digging. I said to myself, I won't dig my own grave. I saw one of the Lithuanians beat someone over the head. We knew what was happening. So I ran. The Germans followed me on their horses, but I got to the woods ahead of them, kept running and running, and they never caught me."

Applebaum continues: The Jews in most of the villages near Radun had been shot in the same way. In this part of the world, there had been no locked ghetto, no trains, no camps. Here so far from civilization, death did not need to be hidden. The local police could be counted on to cooperate. So there was no need, as in Western Europe, to take the Jews somewhere else to die. At the overgrown ditch where it all happened stood a tall monument with a red star on top. The faded inscription reads: "Here lie buried 1,137 peaceful Soviet (!) citizens shot in 1942 by German

Fascists.”

During our time at the concentration camp, however, we heard and saw no reference to Lithuanian participation in the genocide. Such silence is still politically correct (with few exceptions) in the public arena. It's still too hot to handle. So our seminary was patently counter-cultural in addressing the issue. One speaker at our workshop cited new historical documentation that upwards of ten thousand Lithuanians participated in murdering Jews. I hope to lead my ethics class into that turf when we come to the topic of corporate guilt.

Our personal sequel after seeing the camp was an afternoon visit to the Kaunas synagogue. It was Saturday. The Shabbat service had been in the morning and the attendant in the office (with yarmulke in place) was overjoyed to hear that we could converse in German so he could show us around. He too is a survivor. “Did you see my picture over there at the museum?” he asked. “I was 13 years old. My father was sent to Auschwitz, my mother to a second camp, and I to a third.” His own story “would take many books,” but in the final days before the Russians came to drive back the Germans he had found a place to hide, “and I live to tell you about it.” There are 500 Jews now in Kaunas, among the 425K total population. “How did the synagogue building survive unscathed?” we asked. Answer: The German military commandant had sequestered the synagogue for his personal headquarters, and also for storing the Lithuanian “souvenirs” he was collecting. So as the Russians approached, his concern was to get as much of his stuff out as he could and he forgot to torch it.

The riddle remains: Why in Lithuania, “such a Catholic country,” did the natives so willingly become the Jews’ executioners? It happened nowhere else in Europe in equally Catholic countries. Late last summer a group of scholars, the world’s experts on the holocaust and on Lithuania, convened here in Klaipeda to try to

untangle the riddle. But even after days together—profound essays mingled at times with profound sobbing—they didn't succeed. Two of those participants spoke to us at our seminary workshop. So now our school is drawn into the conversation too, very minor players and un-expert though we be.

Granted that theology may not untangle the entire riddle either. Yet Christian anthropology does have a word from God to illuminate our Adamic yen for hatred and murder, also a word for bringing it out into the open, and then a word for coping with it even after half a century of denial. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa, chaired by Bishop Tutu, is using the Word of God exactly so to come to terms with the genocide in their history. Yes, imponderables remain, but they are on the right track. Our seminary wants to follow in their train.

II. A CROSSINGS MATRIX FOR THE GOSPEL FOR PENTECOST 22 (October 19).

The text is Mark 10:17-31.

PROLEGOMENA: The disciples are the people with the problem in this text. The well-to-do legalist and Jesus' conversation with him serves as a "perfectly clear" pre-text for the post-text about the disciples. Yet it was not so perfectly clear to the first disciples. Do we 20th century disciples have any better vision? With the help of this text, we can.

DIAGNOSIS: The Disciples' Unfaith Exposed by their Response to the Wealthy Legalist

STAGE 1 Hanging on to the Law's Rewards for Dear Life

Although Peter claims that they "have left all to follow Jesus,"

the claim rings hollow in his reaction to Jesus' conversation with the rich legalist. The pious man's rhetoric reveals his legalism: What must I do to inherit? [Inheritance does not come by "doing," but by being born (or adopted) into the family where the money is!] Yes, law-keepers get rewards, especially if they've been law-keepers "since their youth." Yet to hang onto the rewards of law-keeping—as right as that seems—and to refuse to divest oneself of them in exchange for the treasures of the kingdom, for following Jesus, is not a smart move.

STAGE 2 The Heart of the Matter

See the list of interior-exposing terms: shocked, grieved, astounded, perplexed. The exchange which Jesus offers his questioner exposes his heart and he makes the choice not to switch.

STAGE 3 Salvation Impossible

Choosing to stick with the old proven way to get treasure amounts to "not entering the Kingdom of God." For such to "be saved" is impossible.

PROGNOSIS: Receiving and Living Impossible Salvation

STAGE 4 Jesus' Mission Impossible

Jesus "loves" (21) the legalist. The ochlos Messiah makes otherwise impossible salvation possible. He partners with the rejects, even the ones who reject God's Mercy-Management Kingdom that Jesus himself brings. He "goes through the eye of the needle"—a cross-shaped eye, of course—to rescue rich legalists and perplexed disciples, so that they come out on the other side saved.

STAGE 5 The Heart of Discipleship

Taking up his invitation, unsaved disciples become saved disciples by appropriating Jesus' own "threading the needle"

operation, willingly divesting themselves of what will not go through that cross-shaped needle's eye as he pulls them through. Call it faith. In that process they relinquish one treasure and appropriate a different one.

STAGE 6 Relinquishing in Daily Life.

Practicing the Paradox of Last/First and First/Last Such relinquishment of one treasure and re-appropriating another is Jesus' recommended pattern for daily life. The Gospel is God's great give-away program in Christ. Disciples are little Christs replicating it in daily life. Relinquishing the rewards of law-keeping and giving them to the poor (the ochlos) is not the new legalism of discipleship, but is done "for the sake of the Gospel" (29). Winning eternal life by such losing is the only way to be a winner—in this age and in the age to come. Granted, we may expect persecutions (30), another kind of losing. But the end is "eternal life," the only life that lasts. Disciples engaged in Christ's give-away program may well become the world's "lasts" (31). Not to worry, among the "lasts" they share what makes anybody a "first," the very Gospel that continues to sustain them there in last place.

III. A BRIEF LOOK AT THE SECOND LESSON: Hebrews 4:12-16

INTRODUCTION: The opening verses of Chapter 4 specify that God's Sabbath promise from way back is yet open. So, dear Christians, do not stop for your own chosen Sabbath before you arrive at the one of God's promise. Faith is entry into that promise. Ancient Israel's entry into the Land did not close off the promise. Thus the Sabbath rest is still open, for us too.

STAGE 1.

Pilgrims at the border, or already over the border, of faith burning out: tempted not to hold fast to the confession, beset by weakness, being tested and failing the test.

STAGE 2.

The heart of the matter is unfaith, Christians relinquishing God's Sabbath promise. The Word of God exposes these "thoughts and intentions of the heart."

STAGE 3.

When such faithless hearts are "laid bare to the eyes of God," there is no escape. "We must render account." Having abandoned God's promise which gives access to God's mercy, we are now speechless before the judge.

STAGE 4.

Jesus, the Great High Priest, goes before the judge on our behalf. He suffers with us [sym-pathy] in our weakness, is tested as we are tested—all of which culminates in his self-immolation to give sinners access to God's mercy. Because this priestly action "counts" before God, Jesus as God's Son [see last week's Hebrews matrix] "has passed through the heavens" to present this offering to his Father. From now on the entryway is always open.

STAGE 5.

Faith's entry into promise = receiving the High Priest's benefits. See 14b and 16a.

STAGE 6.

Boldness in coping with burnout. The daily routine proposed in v. 16.