

Thursday Theology: January 17, 2019

How God's Law Works: Epiphanies from a Fiction Writer

Co-Missioners,

Bruce Modahl is the editor of our quarterly Crossings newsletter. He is also an avid reader and cultural observer who keeps his eye peeled for theological themes in what others might regard as strictly secular material. He recently signed on as a regular essayist for Thursday Theology, with the specific assignment of passing along what he's spotting as he reads and observes. We are so very pleased this week to bring you his first contribution.

Bruce retired a few years ago from a lengthy call as senior pastor at Grace Lutheran Church, River Forest, Illinois. He lives in Florida now. Cascade Press is due this summer to release a book he recently wrote. The title is "The Banality of Grace." We join you in looking forward to it.

Peace and Joy,

The Crossing Community

The Terrible Clarity of Hurshel

by Bruce Modahl



We read the fiction of writers who tell a great story. One of the marks of a great writer is the author's insight into the human situation. Writers are servants of God's law in as much as they diagnose the human condition.

One of the best diagnosticians in my opinion is Robert Olen Butler, the author of 16 novels, six short-story collections, and one volume of essays. He won the Pulitzer Prize for the volume of stories *A Good Scent from a Strange Mountain*. These stories are told from the point of view of Vietnamese people who immigrated to the United States after the Viet Nam War.

Butler writes the stories in *Had a Good Time* from the point of view of the signatories of post cards Butler selected from a collection of post cards he has accumulated over many years. The

post cards are reproduced front and back at the beginning of each of the fifteen stories.

In one card, postmarked from Sparta, Tennessee on February. 15, 1909, Beulah Hudgins wrote Miss Maude that she had read the Bible to her husband Hurshel, who cannot read. She read it to him every night until, as she reports in the post card, "Hurshel said he had the Bible up by heart and was fixing to go preaching." Butler takes it from there.

For his preaching Hurshel resolved to give them the word of God unvarnished. He is not going to leave out the hard parts as other preachers do. For, he says, "This is a fierce neck of the woods, the planet earth. And God's a roughouser all right."



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al tent in a meadow outside of town. He posts flyers. When the day comes, a couple hundred people show up. He plants two friends in the congregation to start off the amens. "And," he says, "I start to tell them all the holy words that have been running around in me for weeks, about the people of Midian and of Bashan and Hesbon . . . and about all the other cities that

were destroyed down to every last woman and child... And I am careful as I preach all this to quote the words in the books and the chapters and the verses that's in the holy scripture, and the first few times that I say something like 'we took all the cities at that time and utterly destroyed the men and the women and the little ones,' Ernest or Roy would give me up an 'Amen,' but that soon stops... [A]nd I go on to tell them about how even if you're worshiping the one true God, you got to watch yourself. 'Cause God said if a guy gathers some sticks on the Sabbath, kill him. If a guy curses, kill him. If a child is stubborn kill him. There are no amens about this... [A] few are starting to slip along the rows, kind of ducking a little, heading for the exit." On he goes in that same vein, "But now they're running from the tent."

With this story and the others in this volume Butler exhibits his imaginative and narrative skills. He tells an entertaining tale which illustrates the way the law makes renegades out of us. We probably will not take flight from a revival tent or hide in the bushes like Adam and Eve but we flee from blame with our rationalizations and dodge the fault by pointing the finger at others.

One of the elements keeping this story from being a caricature is that Hurshel realizes the impossible predicament the law puts us in. The diagnosis digs deeper when he says, "These are the words of God, what you're supposed to do. There's nothing in the Bible to take them back. Jesus himself said, 'Think not that I am come to destroy the law or the prophets.' The Bible don't tell you to do some of this all the time and do some of it when you're of a mind to."

Hurshel quotes passages about loving the neighbor and the prohibition against sowing a field with mingled seed, wearing garments with mixed linen and wool, cutting your beard and

prostituting your daughter. He says, "And me standing here bare-faced, I know. I'm afraid for all of us. And some of you shouldn't even be in church. If you was born out of wedlock or your daddy was or your granddaddy, all the way back ten generations. You got to get on out. Which is probably me too,' I cry. 'My own granddaddy was none too reliable in that way.'" They do get on out and so does he.

His wife leads him out as he talks about the offering he forgot to gather. "'God asked for five golden hemorrhoids once as an offering, It's there in First Samuel, chapter six.'

"'Let's get on home,' Beulah says, 'We're fresh out of golden hemorrhoids.'"

You've got to love that woman. I checked First Samuel chapter six. The NRSV chooses to translate the Hebrew text as tumors but my Hebrew lexicon calls them hemorrhoids. Butler also leads us to adore Hurshel's little boy. The two of them have a special language they speak together. Hurshel's friends are an enjoyment especially as Hurshel tries to get them to succumb to a foot washing as he considers starting a church of humility.

The diagnosis contained in Hurshel's sermon intensified from noting that the law makes renegades out of us to realizing how it puts us in an impossible situation. The diagnosis the story offers grows more stark than that.

Hurshel thinks he is being visited by God. This visitor wears a white linen suit, has a great head of hair, and smokes cigars. He quotes scripture, showed up one time after Hurshel had a close encounter with a rattlesnake, and on one visitation Hurshel says, "I smell his cigar smoke, though he doesn't seem to have one lit."

After the disastrous preaching episode the visitor comes to

call. In the course of the conversation the visitor brings up Genesis 22, Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac, as Hurshel's next assignment. My reading of the story turned to horror. I addressed the author, as if Butler were present. I said, "No, Butler Don't you do this. You made us laugh and enjoy the story. We like Hurshel with his earnest and simple ways. We love his wife and son and wish we had friends like his. Don't you do this. That would be evil for you to have him kill his child."

It is like addressing God. The author was just as visible as God. The author is god, omniscient and all



powerful over his story and the people he creates. He can do whatever he wants with them. Is his universe a moral one? Is the one in which we live a moral universe?

I'm certainly not going to tell you how this story turns out. That's the way life is, isn't it? It takes unexpected turns. We are laughing one day when life suddenly becomes deadly serious. We read good authors because we enjoy a good story and because good authors offer insight into the human enterprise. They do not, for the most part, offer a satisfying prognosis. We do.

We might say, "Hurshel, you have the Bible up by heart. Remember the promises God spoke to Abraham. God counted Abraham's faith as righteousness. The purpose of all the scripture you have up by heart is to point to Jesus, the very righteousness of God who died and rose again for us. You say you want to save souls from the wrath of God by them hearing and heeding his true and holy word unvarnished. That unvarnished Word is Jesus. Preach Christ. Call people to trust him. Tell them to take their sins to Jesus and he will give them his righteousness. They can do that again and again. There is no limit to God's mercy. Faith in Jesus crucified and raised trumps God's wrath. God promises this to us."

So might begin a conversation with Hurshel. It is an ongoing conversation also with ourselves because in truth we prefer the law. It seems to us predictable and in our control. We'd rather trust our own righteousness. If only it wasn't so ragged. Our own righteousness cannot soothe our troubled consciences and certainly cannot secure God's blessings. God's blessings are freely given in Christ. Jesus offers us his righteousness as a gift.

I take it as a daily and sometimes several times a day task to take my sins and remorse to Jesus and hand them over to him. The remarkable thing is he wants these things. He gladly takes them. In their place he hands over to me forgiveness, his righteousness, and every blessing that comes from being his by-baptism sibling, a fellow heir of God.

In this way we make use of Christ as Philip Melanchthon recommended in *The Apology of the Augsburg Confession* ([Article IV, par. 69](#)): "For how will Christ be the mediator if we do not use him as mediator in our justification and believe that for his sake we are accounted righteous?" Ed Schroeder takes up this paragraph in his essay "Is there a Lutheran Hermeneutics?" He

writes, "We need to be taught to use Christ against the wrath of God which threatens our old Adam." Schroeder points to Melanchthon's favored phrase, *Christus manet mediator* [Christ remains the mediator], as a necessary response to the more well-known *lex semper accusat* [the law always accuses.]

Thursday Theology: that the benefits of Christ be put to use

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