Jesus & the Disinherited: Love Lets the Other Blow Your Blinders Off

[Hounds of Hell, Fear, Deception, Hate; Love...even love of enemy]

Love your enemy, seems like a great idea...in the absence of any actual enemies. For a WASP like me world isn’t overrun with personal enemies. Maybe that’s why my group invented the war on x-mas—we all need enemies to rally against.

Granted, I made a few enemies as a pastor. [Quite apart from being the gay guy to evangelicals] Just occupational hazard part.

Prepping a sermon on beheading of John Baptist. Dancing Salome demands and receives his head on a platter. Just then, Regional Overseer calls about a group in church upset I’m not promoting latest revival wave. Gets a complaint letter from a woman in group. I say, no biggie. He says, “Ken you don’t understand, she wants your head on a platter.” OK. That rings a bell.

Once late wife Nancy was counseling a woman in an abusive marriage—helping her stand up for herself. Woman told her husband what Nancy was advising and he became enraged and threatened to get his gun and come after her. Called police who said they would send a squad car past our house that night just to keep an eye out. I didn’t sleep that night.

For a WASP you might have “enemy episodes” at work, a toxic family member, trigger someone’s road rage. But most people in human history live under some systemic oppression.

Seminar for Salem Presbyterian in OR with Andy a transgender man, one of our founding BOF members now in Seminary in SF. Andy tells his story—kicked out of college, kicked out of his home church, Morphine drip malfunctions, “maybe the church is right and I am an abomination to God”

People are gaping. He takes Q/A. Woman asks, “What are you most afraid of now?” He says, “Well, a third of trans people subject to bias-generated assault. So that’s what I’m afraid of.” THAT’s what it’s like to have enemies.
In *Jesus and the Disinherited* Howard Thurman is writing as a black man in Pre-Civil Rights South (Morehouse). Jesus, who taught love of enemies faced brutal/racist/life-threatening oppression. Israel had crucifixion, U.S. lynching. Thurman wants to strip command to love of all sentimentality.

An enemy is someone who has been blinded by hate in one of its many forms so he can’t see you as a fellow human being.

But here’s thing: All exercise of our privilege over others, our unwillingness to step into a place of equal footing with everyone, breeds hate. He calls it “**contact without fellowship**”. “Fellow” = “**a person in the same position**” Thurman says under Jim Crow lots of contact between blacks and whites but little fellowship.

A middle-aged man can use his power to be funny/playful with the busy young waitress and she has to play along, laugh at his little jokes. That’s contact without fellowship. Contact is on his terms not hers and she can’t change rules of the interaction.

Love requires fellowship he says. “Love is only possible between two freed spirits.”

Love is only possible when there’s no fear of punishment. Difference between **love & order**. If choice between chaos and order a dictator provides, the latter may be better. Sometimes NT writers urge respecting order (obey authorities, pay taxes, slaves obey masters). But this has nothing to do with love.

Thurman is tuned in, as only disinherited can be, to how privilege and power play out in love. If we ignore these factors, we will distort Jesus teaching about love, including love of enemies.

“**It is necessary for the privileged and the underprivileged to work on the common environment for the purpose of providing normal experiences of fellowship.**” [Together we have to build a better playing field]

Because Jesus was love incarnate, he always tried to establish fellow-ship [co-personhood]. If he had privilege, that meant letting it go. If he was the underside of
the power (like the waitress) he refused to play along with the terms set by the privileged person.

**Woman caught in adultery:** To level playing field he avoids eye contact with woman, knelt down, draws in dust while he’s debating elders who want him to condemn her. He doesn’t give a rip about them—he wants to establish fellowship with the woman.

**Jesus before Herod/Pilate:** He gives both silent treatment. Herod excited to interview Jesus but Jesus stands mute. He won’t play Herod’s game if Herod won’t meet Jesus as an equal. Silence was only way to assert his own dignity as a fellow human being.

**Roman Centurion** approaches Jesus through intermediaries to heal his servant. Jesus is totally responsive because the Roman captain is not using his privilege—he’s abandoned his privilege coming to Jesus as one human needing help from another human.

**Most fascinating: Jesus and the Syro-Phonecian Woman**

*Jesus went away from there, and withdrew into the district of Tyre and Sidon. And a Canaanite woman from that region came out and began to cry out, saying, “Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is cruelly demon-possessed.” But He did not answer her a word. And His disciples came and implored Him, saying, “Send her away, because she keeps shouting at us.” But He answered and said, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” But she came and began to bow down before Him, saying, “Lord, help me!” And He answered and said, “It is not good to take the children’s bread and throw it to the dogs.” But she said, “Yes, Lord; but even the dogs feed on the crumbs which fall from their masters’ table.” Then Jesus said to her, “O woman, your faith is great; it shall be done for you as you wish.” And her daughter was healed at once. (Mt. 15: 21-28)*

One of the gifts of the Jews to the world is their commitment to understanding our shared humanity unflinchingly. Few idealized heroes in Bible. Presented at their best and their worst. To be human in Jewish understanding is to be a **glorious contradiction in terms**—between dirt & the divine. In image of God and made of clay. The Jewish understanding of perfection is not “without flaw" but complete—
filing out your humanity for all its worth. Growing into your truest self. This vision is reflected in the gospels.

In many cases, when Jesus had the privilege he quickly-easily let it go. But this time, disinherit ed woman has to pry it from him.

By Mt 15, Jesus is exhausted. Only peer is John Baptist, just murdered by beheading. Jesus is reeling. Unrelenting pressure on Jesus in Israel (from elders, who are making his own disciples cranky-critical). He escapes north to Syria. He’s had it with his own people, but now he’s on foreign soil. (You can feel frustrated-angry with your own country but as soon as you go to a foreign country you feel defensive-protective)

Cannanite woman comes yelling at him for help. First response is non-response. She is yelling at disciples too and they implore him to send her away. He doesn’t. Instead he says (to himself? To her? Not them) —“I was only sent to the lost sheep of Israel” Fact he doesn’t send her away like disciples want emboldens her to amplify her demands. Jesus says in that same exhausted voice, “It’s not good to take children’s bread and throw it to the dogs”

Middle Eastern verbal jousting using dueling proverbs. This is one of those sayings. [Under harsh occupation, Jews would refer to their Gentile captors as Gentile dogs—hard to blame them]

Woman, undeterred, matches his proverb with another one: “Yes but even the dogs get to eat the crumbs from masters table.” Verbally besting him—won’t let him have the last word….

This woman is making Jesus see her as a fellow human being. Have you seen Town Halls where cancer survivor is in face of congressman, telling her story and it affects the congressman? You can make policy decision that affect others based on ideology, but it’s another thing to face the people affected by the policy.

This woman asserts herself until Jesus sees her: a mother who is going to get her daughter some help. And Jesus does SEE her. Not because he was looking—doing his Zen thing, being present in the moment—but because she grabbed his face and made
him look at her. And then his heart opens: “O woman your faith is great” [highest compliment he ever gave anyone about their faith...]

Oppressed people need allies to gain equality. But equality only comes, if it does, by oppressed people themselves demanding it. That’s the intrinsic dignity of the oppressed manifesting

Gift of our transgender members: making us see them as they see themselves. Andy told me he knew himself to be male from as early as 2-3, even though his body and society told him he was female. (He said he had an early sense of God and this God knew him as male tho everyone else saw him as female.)

For Andy, the act of transitioning was an act of showing people who he really was. Andy had to ASSERT that self against great blindness in others and opposition.

Like this woman did with Jesus. Jesus wasn’t in a receptive mode and she took him by the collar and said SEE ME! And he did.

From a religious or theological perspective, all sorts of problems with this! We have a choice: we can either bend ourselves into a pretzel explaining how Jesus really wasn’t blinded by his own in-group prejudice.....or we can say what’s good for the goose is good for the gander. If he can have his blinders blown off I can too.

Jesus doesn’t have to be the hero in every story about Jesus. In this story Jesus is the privileged person whose eyes have been blown off by this assertive woman. She’s the hero not him. That makes me identify with him and want to follow him more.

That is the Jesus we can follow when we are having contact without fellowship. We are not seeing the other because of our blinders.

There was something Jesus did not see in this woman because Jesus was a man and Jesus was a Jew surrounded by people who didn’t see her either. But when this woman asserted herself to Jesus, then he let the blinders drop off and he saw her.
We’re all blinded by something. We absorb the prejudice of our in-group and it becomes part of us with or without our permission.

Jesus is calling us to follow him by letting other people blow our blinders off.

Jesus is also dignifying here anyone who has to assert their identity to others in order to be seen for who they are.

And that’s ultimately all of us. For any of us to be fully known means we have to tell people who we are when they don’t see us.

This process between people is part of the birth pangs of love breaking into the world.

QUIET REFLECTION

Our greatest need before God is to see what we can’t see. Sometimes that’s another human being made in God’s image before us. That’s the great equalizer—we all have our blind spots.

Brother Lawrence has this meditation to help us experience Jesus in that place of our common human need. Use it with a twist, make the beggar blind in addition to his other troubles.

“There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and lived in luxury every day. At his gate was laid a beggar named Lazarus, covered with sores and longing to eat what fell from the rich man’s table. Even the dogs came and licked his sores.”

Treat this meditation playfully, like you are in a theater class and the professor is getting you read to play a role...

Picture the scene. [Read text again]

Place yourself in the scene in the role of the beggar who among other things is blind, people have to lead you to this spot which should a good spot, near money, but for this blind rich man, who can’t see you....
Let yourself feel the resentment of the fact that this filthy rich man is blind to you...Now feel your own blindness. You’re both blind.

Now imagine Jesus and his disciples come by...what happens?

Mark 7: 24–30

Preceded by intensifying criticism by elders, failure of disciples to understand, Jesus frustrated...

From there he set out and went away to the region of Tyre. He entered a house and did not want anyone to know he was there. Yet he could not escape notice, but a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit immediately heard about him, and she came and bowed down at his feet. Now the woman was a Gentile, of Syrophoenician origin. She begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter. He said to her, “Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.” But she answered him, “Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.” Then he said to her, “For saying that, you may go—the demon has left your daughter.” So she went home, found the child lying on the bed, and the demon gone.