

They will see and understand something they had never known

Isaiah 52:14-15

March 1, 2015

There are people in our world right now, rightly or wrongly, drawing inspiration from their holy texts to do unspeakable violence to fellow human beings and to the fabric of human civilization itself. Rightly or wrongly, they are drawing inspiration from their holy texts. Some argue, rightly or wrongly, it doesn't matter. Since holy texts are used all too often to incite and to justify violence, they say, then humanity would be much better off without them.

Do you think so? Do you think we would be better off guided by our own wisdom, our own collective human wisdom or the wisdom of our political leaders? Do you think we would be better off trusting our own innate sense, and our neighbor's own innate sense, of what is right and what is wrong? Do you think we would be better off drawing on our own built-in capacities for mercy and compassion and goodwill? How do you think we would do? How have we done?

Rightly or wrongly. It does matter. It does matter what the holy text says and it does matter how we hear it, because these texts can and do give shape to a shared consciousness of meaning and purpose deeper and broader than the foundational stories of any single nation or race or generation. So we need to listen before we judge, before we rid ourselves all too easily of the words that do teach us and shape us and judge us. We need to listen carefully and hear rightly our own holy text.

He was so disfigured that he hardly looked human ...

Who? Who is the prophet talking about? He has already told you -- Israel! The people of Israel, as a people, as a nation, were so disfigured that they were hardly human.

How so? How disfigured? Disfigured by the humiliation of exile, the destruction of community, the degradation of culture, the suffering of slavery, the atrophy of grief.

It is hard for us to imagine their suffering. We are simply too distant from them in culture and in time. But we do have a clear picture in our minds of another time, a nearer time, when the descendants of Abraham suffered as a people, when indeed "many people were shocked when they saw him" -- saw him hauled off to Dachau or Auschwitz or Buchenwald, wrenched from home, wrenched from family, starved, emaciated, abused, exterminated, so disfigured they hardly looked human.

But, of course, this time it wasn't just them. It wasn't just Jews sent off to the detention camps. *But* it has never been just them. It has never been just about them. In their own holy texts, the people of Israel never saw themselves as a separated people, but as a witness people, a servant people, a people through whom all nations may see and understand, may see and understand something they had never known.

And, the prophet says, it is here, looking at the disfigured one, that they will see. What will they see? What will they marvel at? What will they understand now that they had never known?

They know, we know, about winning and losing, but they never knew that losing could be winning.

They know, we know, about suffering, all about ways to try to avoid suffering, and all about ways to inflict suffering, but they never knew suffering might itself be the way.

They know, we know, about power, about success, about needing to overcome obstacles and overcome enemies, and they always assumed, and we always assumed, that God, any God worth acknowledging, would be an overcomer, supreme in power, supremely successful, utmost in surmounting every obstacle and vanquishing every enemy, but they never knew, they never imagined, this God -- this God who shows most fully who God is, to his own people and through them to all the world, in the midst of suffering.

It is this God, our holy texts say, that is embodied in Jesus. Many people were shocked when they saw him: hated, resented, betrayed ... ridiculed, beaten, murdered ... defeated.

Defeated? We are healed by the abuse he suffered! We have been set free by the death he died! For us, this is not defeat, but victory.

This is something to marvel at -- a different way, God's way, something we had never known -- that God loved the world so much that God gave Jesus to the world to die, for the world ... that all we have, all we want to have, comes to us as God's gift this way, by way of God's love, by way of God's sacrifice, by way of God's defeat, by way of the cross.

By way of the cross, the cross that is the emblem of our faith. It hangs at the front of our sanctuary, it is emblazoned on our banner, we honor it in our songs, not a memorial, but an emblem, an emblem of the way, the way of the Lord's servant, Jesus' way, our way. Jesus said: "You take up your cross and follow me!"

What does that mean? What does it mean to take up the cross? It means at least this: that many people will be shocked -- when we choose to love our enemies, when we choose suffering over retaliation, when we choose sacrifice over winning, when we choose humility over honor, anonymity over praise. It means, God willing, that when people look at us, they will see and understand something they had never known, that we live, for Christ's sake, not for ourselves, but for them, for all of them, and that when we seem to be losing, it is they -- and we -- who are winning!

You have now heard our holy text. What inspiration will you draw from it? To take up arms? Or to take up the cross? And what will that mean? What will it mean for you to take up your cross, to choose for yourself the way of the cross? Let me offer you one example, well-known to many of you ...

"Many people were shocked." You could say that about the circumstances of Tyler Greene's birth and the resulting trauma-induced cerebral palsy that has meant that many of the daily tasks of living that most of us take for granted present him daunting challenges -- moving, eating, speaking.

But when we see him now we marvel, not because he has managed to bear it, to live with it, to make the best of it, but because for him there is no "it" at all, just him! Tyler chooses his life, values his life, lives his life to the fullest, as he is. He would not choose, even if he could, to be anything other than the man that, by the grace of God, he is.

What a beautiful thing! What a powerful witness! Wouldn't it be freedom for you, wouldn't it be joy for you, and wouldn't it offer a most powerful witness to your neighbors, if you could say that, even if you could, you would not choose to be anything other than the person that, by the grace of God, you are?

This is something that the world had never known, that what seems to them like misfortune and weakness is actually blessing and great power, that it is exactly in and by what seems to be loss that real blessing is gained and real blessing is given.

This is what we see, this is what we understand, when we know Tyler: that God has blessed him and that God has blessed many, many people by him.

But his is just one story, and you have your own. How has God blessed you? And how can you, how will you, by the grace of God, bless the world? How will you show them, by the grace of God, by the presence of Christ in you, something they had never known?