

November 15, 2015 / Season after Pentecost / David L. Edwards

### **Death Throes, or Birth Pangs?**

Psalm 16     *"You are my Lord; I have no good apart from you."*

Hebrews 10:19-25     *And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds....*

Mark 13:1-8     *"...This is but the beginning of the birth pangs."*

This morning I want to connect the Mark and Hebrews passages. This became somehow important to me this past week, particularly in light of the killings in Paris. How do we respond as followers of Jesus to the violence of others? How do we respond to our own violence as a society and nation, the perpetuation of war after war? How do we look at life when things are falling apart, or are in transition, however you want to put it—institutions, systems, religious or societal structures? How do we work with things in ourselves that become shaky and begin to crumble? The things we thought were so important. The ways of seeing and acting that we cannot hold onto any longer. As we grow older, the ways we begin to perceive how much of our lives we spent on things that do not really matter, that were even false, or did not bring us the happiness or sense of fulfillment they promised. In other words, how do we as a spiritual community in the tradition of Jesus, live within a human world that is so often driven by things that have nothing to do with what Jesus taught or who he was, or who he revealed God to be?

I saw two things in our readings, though there is certainly much more in them. First, we are called to be a community that perceives, that sees through, what is false, misleading, and not of lasting value in the world around us. We are called to see deeply into things, to perceive not signs of disaster but of the possible birth of what really matters, of new ways of living, the ways we were really created to live. Second, we are always called back to being a community of God's love, doing the often hard spiritual work of our inward journey, of our own rebirth, of growing in our capacity to be part of a community of love, and engaging in actions, in ministries that are the instruments of God's own love for the world. Simply put, we are called to see differently and we are called to live differently.

Jesus sees through all the "great things" humans build for themselves, whether in religion or politics or society. There are two important words to use in this regard: ultimate and penultimate. Ultimate is what really matters, what is finally true. Penultimate is everything before that, everything that does NOT last, is not ultimately true. As persons of faith, we are called to

keep in mind what is ultimately real and true, and to distinguish between what is ultimate and what is penultimate. The disciples are wowed by what is penultimate—the grandeur of the temple in Jerusalem. Jesus tells them that what they are so impressed will not last. It's very nature is to come tumbling down, or just waste away. The historical backdrop of this teaching may be the actual destruction of the temple in the year 70 CE by Rome. It was a crisis for the Jews, including Jesus' followers. There was too much spiritual dependency upon the actual building. When it was gone, everything seemed to fall apart. The temple, we might say, became god, when in reality, it only pointed people to God. Jesus is speaking of more than just the Jerusalem temple. He means any human structure in which we invest so much meaning, even religion. Religion is to help us toward what is ultimate—the reality of God and our relationship with God, and how we live out of that relationship. Religion itself is not ultimate, but penultimate. It is important, but not in an ultimate way. Jesus wants his disciples to see beyond and beneath, to what is most important and lasting.

Four of the disciples ask Jesus in private about what he just said. Jesus is sitting on the Mount of Olives, which symbolizes his viewpoint—a sacred vantage point from which he sees things in the perspective of God, from what is ultimate. When are these things going to happen, ask the disciples? Jesus' answer is basically, Quit speculating about when it is all going to happen. There will be wars and rumblings of war. That is the way the human world habitually works. Endless wars. Endless factors that always lead to wars. There will be leaders claiming to be authentic and promising great things. And many will allow themselves to be led astray because they are ready to believe anything that makes them feel good and right. There will be international tensions and conflicts, and earthquakes, as well as famine.

Then this section ends with peculiar words: “This is but the beginning of the birth pangs.” I read and studied this passage for many years before I really READ those words! The things that are happening are not death throes, but birth pangs. The falling apart, the collapsing of what we thought was so important and lasting is, or can be, the birth of what is most important, what is real and true. The violence can be the birth pangs of non-violence and the end, finally, of hate. Religious conflicts and arrogance, leading to violence, either spiritual or physical, can be the birth of what religions, in their essence, are pointing us to—the life of love, the life of honoring the sacred dimension of the world and of all people. The collapse of systems built on and toward power—financial, military, political, religious—can be the birth of a human society that is compassionate and just, that respects all people, and is focused on meeting the needs of people instead of promoting the well-being of only some. That is the meaning of *shalom*, and it is THE biblical picture of God's dream for the life of the world. Within ourselves, the images we

have tried so hard to project, the painful and unsatisfying efforts to meet the demands that others put upon us, to which we have enslaved ourselves at the expense of being our real, true selves, at the expense of our feeling loved and accepted for who we are...the collapse of these things in us can and will bring the birth of our true self, the self that is beloved by God, that is cherished for its uniqueness and the gifts it has to offer to the world. Birth pangs, not death throes.

When Jesus is talking about the “end”, he is not talking about what is popularly portrayed, and marketed, as “the end of the world”, the destruction of the world by God. He is talking about fulfillment. That is the meaning of the word used in the Greek--*telos*. It means end in the sense of fulfillment or completion or maturing. It is about growth, about growing up. It is about growing out of the obsessions and attachments we have to penultimate things, which fill us with fear, hate, materialism, violence, greed, and the grasping of power. The “end” is about growing up and into our true identity as God's children, created for love and created to love. Birth pangs, not death throes. So, when we experience terrible events going on in the life of the human family, our response is to look deeply and see the signs pointing to new life, to the possibility and necessity of living in new and different ways, to the becoming of who we were created to be.

Jesus' message is not that we are to be indifferent to the suffering going on around us. And it is certainly not a call to detach ourselves from the realities of human living, and just wait until we go to heaven! Jesus calls us to live within the penultimate as those who are hungering and thirsting for, and living our lives out of, what is of ultimate importance. And in our scriptures that ultimate dimension has one name—LOVE.

Let's look briefly at the reading from the Letter to the Hebrews with this in mind. The writer is speaking about how we are to live in light of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. After using some lofty images to describe Jesus as the great high priest who has offered the ultimate sacrifice of his own life, this is what the writer says we need to do. First, “hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, because God is faithful.” Our hope is not ultimately in human strength or ingenuity or power or violence or systems. Our hope has to do with life that is infinitely more expansive than just the human race! Our lives are set within the whole of creation, and we are to live harmoniously grounding ourselves in the Source and Power of life. We follow one who lived that hope in spite of and even suffering from the penultimate things that found him to be a threat—violence, hate, greed, political and religious power. So the first thing is to shift our hope from the things that cannot hold it to the Reality in which hope can be grounded and thrive. That is the work of our inward journey, to see where we are treating and clinging to

penultimate things as ultimate, and thus “multiplying our sorrows” as the psalm says.

Second, the writer says a very simple and yet profound thing, actually two related things. “Let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds”, and “not neglecting to meet together...and to encourage one another.” What do we do in the face of all that happens to us and around us? We go back to our work of being a community of God's love. We go back to our work of embodying God's love in our own lives, in our life together, and in the world. We do that by “provoking one another to love and good deeds.” When I read that, I thought: This is what we mean by accountability. We hold each other accountable for the life to which Jesus calls us, the life of love, of seeking and doing what it is we are called and gifted to do, and thus being the channels of God's redeeming, healing love for the world. The word “provoke” here comes from a word that means both to encourage and to incite, or stir up. It is reminding one another who we are really created to be, so that we more and more shed the things the culture around us tells us we should be. It is helping each other grow in both the inward and the outward dimensions of the life of faith, of true spirituality. It is not just about our own salvation or awakening or enlightenment. It is about our relationship with the world around us and the people in it, their needs and our responding in ways that increase healing, peace, goodness, and just living.

The other thing is that we are to “not neglect meeting together” and we “encourage” one another. It is about community, about not neglecting to be together—for prayer, in our work together, in our worship, in our times of conversation when we share with each other the sacred mystery of our lives. Here is one of the great gifts of this community. You have always understood that perhaps the primary work we have is to learn how to really be in community, a community of God's love. It involves the honest confession that we do not really know how to do this. We want to change people and the community to meet our ideas of how everything and everyone should be. That is the destroyer of community. Being and growing in a community of love and encouragement takes humility, a willingness to learn, and a willingness to be changed, to drop our demands that others be as we want them to be. The spiritual work is hard, but the payoff is extraordinary. We come home to our true, God-created selves, and we do so within a community that upholds us with love and encourages us to grow continually into the persons God created us to be.

We live in a wonderful, beautiful, terrible, and sometimes horrifying human world. Yet as a human family, we live within a wider world of God's expansive and infinite creation. We are called and created to live within what is penultimate with our hearts and minds always open to the ultimate. In this regard, I think of the performance Randy Layne and I have been giving this

fall. “Dana—The Song of the Sea” is composed of readings from the book by Richard Henry Dana, Jr., Two Years Before the Mast, published in 1840. Some of you have seen the show. I hope more of you will do so when we perform it for the last time January 15. Dana suffered a bout of the measles when he was a student at Harvard. He took time off on the advice of the doctor. He decided to ship out as a common sailor on a trade ship called the Pilgrim, and spent two years sailing from Boston around Cape Horn, and back. Dana's journal of those years and experiences show someone who had a heart and mind open to the grandeur and sometimes frightening beauty of the creation. He learned what it meant to be closed up in a fairly small ship with a dozen other men for two years, all the tensions and struggles, as well as the growth in respect, even love, that happens in such circumstances. He witnessed and experienced the wage slavery conditions of the sailors and the tyrannical power wielded over them by ships' captains. Through all of that, he found a way—we might say, felt a call—to do something about what he saw. Within the penultimate of human affairs as he witnessed and experienced them, he glimpsed the ultimate value of treating human beings with dignity and justice. When he returned, he finished his studies in law and dedicated himself to correct such injustices, not only in the maritime world but also with regard to slavery.

Death throes, or birth pangs? As followers of Jesus, we are called to see within the penultimate the ultimate, and to be part of the birth, or re-birth of life as God created it to be and to be lived.