

Proper 25 Year C 2016

I can't get Bryan Stevenson off of my mind.... I told you a few weeks ago that I attended a lecture recently by Bryan Stevenson at my seminary in Austin. Many of you have read his book, *Just Mercy*, in which he chronicles his 30 years worth of experiences with clients on death row, and his experiences with a disenfranchising prison system... a system which is disproportionately punitive regarding people of color, people who lack the privilege of wealth... His book is powerful testimony as to how we treat the lost of our society.... He notes that there was a time when our prisons were first and foremost correctional institutions; they included educational opportunity and job training... now, partly because of the exponential growth of the inmate population (we have twenty five times more people who are incarcerated per capita compared to any other country in the world).... Now our prison system has become a way to warehouse the throw-away people among us; and for the ones who do get paroled or get out after serving their time... paying their so-called debt to society... they have no chance in our world because of the stigma associated with being a felon... many find crime as the only means of survival, and end up back in prison... the proverbial revolving door.

For thirty years Bryan Stevenson has been an advocate for inmates on death row... the worst of our lost... I learned from him that once one has been sentenced to death row, one no longer has a right to an attorney... no advocate, no voice. In his book Stevenson tells the stories of the men he's represented... men sentenced to die at the hands of the state... the stories are heart wrenching, hard to read... He tells of the triumphs of getting the condemned acquitted because of DNA testing ; and he also tells of failures, having to inform his client that he can't help them... In Alabama alone jury sentences for life in prison are again and again overturned by judges who delight in the death penalty. Stevenson has a plate full... His work has led him from representing the condemned to working for prison reform, for fair sentencing, and the abolition of the death penalty...And Just so you know... The Episcopal Church since 1958 has spoken out against the death penalty... and that position has been reaffirmed in every single general convention since.... So if someone asks where our church stands on the death penalty, now you know.

Stevenson writes eloquently about his work, his up-bringing, his mentors... he writes about being disallowed to attend white schools growing up... his work in the civil rights movement... but to hear him speak, that was quite another thing altogether.... He is one of the most gracious, gentle souls one would ever meet.

He has every reason to be bitter... He has seen the worst of us... and he has seen the worst that society can do to people... people who are out of sight and out of mind... and yet in his erudition he is humble and kind and compassionate... and he speaks with authority... he's been there...It is an authority that I dare say I have never before encountered... So I've been thinking on that... this thing called authority... I looked up the word... the first several definitions have to do with the power of the enforcement of laws, and the institutions that enforce them,... but the seventh definition says that authority is the power to influence or persuade resulting from knowledge and experience.... A self-assured wisdom... the word has the same root as the word author... Authority has to do with the source... that ground of being that knows the truth when it encounters it.... authority comes with paying attention to and being formed by one's experience.

Stevenson lectured for an hour that seemed like minutes... the auditorium in the LBJ library was packed... everyone hanging on every word that was spoken... What I remember most from his lecture was this: ... He said that over the years, given the ups and downs of his work, the incredible burden that this work puts upon him... he thought often as to why he chose to do this work in the first place... He was an honor student at Harvard Law School... he could have worked for any prominent firm in the country, but he chose to go into the prisons,

among the lost of us, the ones condemned to die... He wondered often, he said... he wondered why... he wondered if it was because he has always had a passion for justice, that perhaps his African American heritage predisposed him to fighting for the rights of the least... but that wasn't it, he mused... he thought, maybe it was an ego thing... after all I'm good at what I do... maybe it is my religious upbringing he thought... Matthew 25... "when did you visit me in prison?" ... No that wasn't it... and finally it came to him, and what came to him didn't preclude those other reasons.... He discovered that the chief reason he chose the path he chose.... Or that the path chose him... Why he would choose to go to the most broken of our world... the reason was, he thought... that I am broken too.

In Luke's gospel the writer is describing the predisposition of the faithful... what faith looks like on the ground... in real time... Luke uses the widow as a prominent example... the widow who can't inherit the wealth of her husband, inheritance to a widow is disallowed by Jewish law,... a widow who is cut off from acceptable society... the widow who is valued least in her world... and, against conventional wisdom, it is her voice that Luke endows with authority... And then as if the example of the widow isn't plain enough, Luke uses the example of the publican, the hated tax collector... the one who collaborates with the empire... robbing the people of what meager wealth they have.

The contrast is stunning in our short reading today... Jesus is speaking of discipleship... what it means to be a person of faith... On the one hand is the institution, the Pharisee, the well-to-do, the accepted patriarch of society... he has kept the rules... does well for the less fortunate, prays regularly, goes to church... makes a good pledge... He is what people would call a good man.... And then on the other, the tax collector, the turncoat, the snitch, the extortioner... making a living on the backs of the poor... cozying with the powers that be for his own interests. So here's another reversal that Luke is so fond of... Jesus says that the tax collector is the one more justified in the eyes of God... the one who has authority... the one who is our model for discipleship.

Now most scholars of whom I am aware say this is a story about repentance, and certainly that is true, but more than that it is a story about the authority of owning one's own brokenness... It is the tax collector's willingness to look upon his own brokenness, his own otherness, that makes him a person that God can use... There comes a time in all of our lives when we have to own our brokenness, our mortality, our otherness, our utter dependence on each other... that is not weakness, but a step towards discipleship... that is not weakness, but a step towards living in God's kingdom of dignity and joy... Again Luke is breaking down the walls between self and other... We all have brokenness in common....

And Luke is saying that to go to the broken and the crushed of our world, there we find healing for our own brokenness... Our healing is intimately bound to the healing of our brother, our sister.... It is the win-win of God's world... that our salvation is bound with the salvation of those cut off from us.... Brokenness, please hear me.... Brokenness is not a defect.... We are all broken in this life.... At some point we have to embrace our broken hearts....Perhaps so that Love can be let loose?

That is what humility is... to recognize our own humanity in the brokenness of our neighbor... to recognize that we need each other... that there is a sacred dignity in sharing in the same plight... If we really believe that all humans are made in God's image, then we know that God is broken too, like us... that God is heart-broken. That is the authority of the Cross.... The authority of love.... That God is in solidarity with our common wound, our common desire... and that solidarity reaches all; it is all inclusive... including murderers on death row... Our salvation is tied to theirs.

According to Luke God chooses, dares to speak from the broken of our world: the widow, the tax collector, the poor, the unlovable; They, contrary to conventional wisdom... they bear God's authority... And we must find a way to

love them ... we must find a way to love them for our own sake... the coming of God's reign depends upon it..... It is, after all, the broken body of Christ... and his blood shed that redeems.... And just as we bless and break bread at this altar... we too are blessed and broken and given for the world's sake.... We are as Henri Nouwein says... the wounded healers... So good people claim and bear your wounds with courage and dare I say, joy... and go into the world...go into the dark and broken places..... bear your brokenness to the world, and know this... that we are only broken, broken open, so that we more perfectly Love.