

Proper 9 Year B 2024

Just before we left for vacation two weeks ago, I decided I would take John Steinbeck's novel, "The Grapes of Wrath" with me to the beach. I don't know why Steinbeck. I'm sure I was supposed to have read *The Grapes of Wrath* at some point in my academic career. Maybe I read the Cliff notes, but to be sure I didn't remember much about it. What can a ninth grader know? Looking among our bookshelves it just seemed meet and right to read a quintessentially American novel. I was not disappointed. It is a masterwork; truly one of the best novels I've ever read. The prose is as majestic as it is precise. The novel captures the vast and tragic mythology of the American experience. At its heart it is prophetic, certainly in light of our failing democratic republic.

The novel, in its day, published in 1939, was in no small way controversial. Steinbeck, in fact, was accused of being a Marxist. It came on the heels of the Great Depression, the worst economic catastrophe in our history. The novel is a forceful condemnation of our capitalist system which harbored, and harbors, predatory lending, and favored mega-corporations over family farms and businesses. Steinbeck's great question was: How can it be that we, being the wealthiest nation in the world, could still have people among us who are starving. The novel follows the lives of the Joads whose family farm has been foreclosed upon by the bank. The Joads set out from dusty and barren Oklahoma headed toward California to seek a better life; to

pursue the American dream of prosperity and abundance... only to find that the squalid system has preceded them even in this mythological land of plenty; homelessness, joblessness, shame, the shame of poverty. They learn that in a capitalist system, the poor will always be poor, and the rich only get richer. This novel was also written on the heels of the New Deal which, under Roosevelt, embraced the economic theories of John Maynard Keynes, the father of macroeconomics. Keynesian economics was a theoretical system in which the government plays an energetically influential role in the economy, stimulating economic growth and jobs, regulating financial institutions, encouraging organized labor, subsidized undercapitalized enterprises, and a progressive tax structure. It was a means to harness the persistent tendency of capitalism to favor the prosperity of the elite at the expense of the poor and the fragile middle class. So Steinbeck focuses his critique on the capitalist system itself, but not so much the government, because in his day the government was taking regulatory steps to tame the beast of Capitalism. Little did Steinbeck know that beginning with the presidency of Ronald Reagan, the Republican Party would systematically dismantle the government's influence, guidance, and regulation of the economy, thereby setting the capitalist system free to have its way, unbridled. Today our government, both national and state, have become infrastructure for big American corporations. 90 percent of wealth in this country is held by less than five percent of the population. The rich are

getting richer; the poor are getting poorer, and the middle class is fading. Corporations are now “citizens” by law, with the unalienable right to exorbitant profits. In such a system the first casualty is justice, and given the Supreme Court’s recent appalling ruling granting a president virtual immunity, it will be next to impossible to retrieve a fair and accountable economic and governmental system, because the two now, Government and Corporate America, have a dark covenant driven by the insatiable monster of Greed. Keynes’ dream of a compassionate modern socio-economic collaborative democracy has been dashed.

But the world has seen this before, my brothers and sisters. We live in a world, at least since the fourth century B.C.E..... We live in a world controlled by empire, the powerful, the corrupt.... An empire serves its own interests at all costs. It is insatiable, and its victims are many. We, in this country, are now having to come to terms with the fact that we are no better than the empires that have preceded us. Greed, violence, injustice, now our calling card. What shall we do? For us, who call ourselves the people of God, what shall we ever do in a world losing its sanity?

“We hold these truths to be self-evident that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness; ...That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed.”These, of course, are the

first words of the Declaration of Independence. Most of us at some time or another during our primary education had to memorize these words. They present an imaginative idea, a bold possibility, a vision not original to the founding fathers....they got this language from the imaginations of John Locke, Adam Smith, and Voltaire...this language emerged from the rarefied air of the Enlightenment... and these philosophers, also... borrowing their ideas from the tenets of classical liberalism, of Plato and Aristotle, the best of our philosophical history...addressing the immemorial question of how then shall we live together justly?...A question that should forever be on our lips... But alas... power corrupts... that has been true of every known empire that has ever existed. That is because empires are founded under the rubrics of dominion, ownership, coercion, and hierarchy and violence. No matter the lofty idealic words of our beginnings, our means are our ends in the making. It's not what we say; it's what we do.

The gospels have something to say as well about this ultimate political question.... "How then shall we live?" The Gospels present a vision of a life of mutuality and collaboration, and sacrifice, all serving the cause of justice and shared abundance among equals.... "All are welcome at the banquet table," the metaphor...all have access to healing and wholeness...and safety....It is a vision of a life of dignity and well-being. Dignity and well-being are for the New Testament scribes synonymous with salvation.... In God's world no one is above the other.... everything is shared..... The

difference between the empires of man, and the empire of God is that the way of God is founded under the auspices of Love alone....and then the problem: Empire, despite its ideology, or its good intentions, will oppose such a vision, because such a vision will undermine the self-interest of power; such a vision seeks not to dominate, but to elevate all into God's abundant favor. When Jesus refers to seeing Satan fall like lightning, he is making a not so veiled reference to the Emperor. He is referring to the power of the status quo...So, also in the Gospel vision, namely in the teachings of Jesus, is the critique of the powers and principalities that would undermine such a life of gracious communion.... Critique, a decided and necessary edge to the gospels.... And make no mistake the critique in the Gospels is levelled at political power... and self-interested wealth. Jesus, after all, was put to death as a political and social activist.

Jesus sends out his disciples two by two to enact this vision for the world This is an incarnational and a collaborative image, that the people of God, the faithful of the Jesus Movement, you and me, the remnant of the truth, perhaps, are commissioned with authority to do the work of Jesus himself... bearing the Good News of how God intends things to be... and bearing critique... speaking Truth to Power, as it were. Love means that we engage in the ongoing perfection of our society; never perfect, but we persist in the process, to enable its transformation; to hold it accountable. If we don't speak up in the face of corruption and deceit, and the abuse of power,

then we are not doing our jobs as baptized Christians. So I say again, ours is a vocation of witnessing to the truth, keeping vigil for it. We must speak out for legislation to repair and dismantle our racist social, economic and political system. I say racist because, in truth, racism is at the heart of most of our inequities. It is perhaps the most urgent Gospel issue of our time.

Racism is the means of keeping people consigned under a rigid hierarchy of injustice. Indeed, the vast majority of our poor are people of color. Racism fuels the zero sum theology of scarcity... that notion that if resources are shared, then we who have, will have less. That is a lie. There is enough for all of us in this world. Racism coupled with the greed of a failing unchecked capitalist system fuels voter suppression. It informs our broken immigration system. It hamstring our will to address climate change. It spurs gun sales, for God's sake. It is the engine of our paralyzing divisions. It is our original sin as a nation. And it affects all of us.

We, brothers and sisters, are to be Gospel patriots...true to our native land, a land that holds up justice for all... land that is *public* property... We are, as Isaiah puts it, repairers of the breach, restorers of streets to live in....but to be true, we also have to be critics...informed critics who have honed their skills to speak the truth in love....In the glowing light of the gospels, the Declaration of Independence becomes a declaration of interdependence....this declaration viewed in light of the gospel is a call to equality and freedom and mutuality... for all people, not just white male

landowners, and the corporations they have become... serving always the good of the whole first, the greatest Good for the many.

And in this our beloved United States of America we have lost our way, and still a long way to go, don't we? ...A long way to go before this vision of a dignified way of life for all, all people, in every station, is perfected. To participate in the process of perfection is to be "caught up in paradise," as Paul puts it...It is for the people of conscience, people of faith...all faiths... to make the dream of equality a reality... to engender heaven on earth.

This beautiful country in which we live... and this planet, for that matter, belong to all of us in a sacred and intimate trust...We are in truth merely sojourners here on this earth and we need each other in a profound interdependence to make into reality God's gracious and imaginative will for this, God's creation, that groans still for equality and freedom and happiness and dignity.....we must bear up the least of us...the poor, the sick, the friendless, the imprisoned, the dispossessed, because none of us are saved until all are saved.....We, citizens of the United States of America, can no longer speak of our being apart and unique... exceptional...That world is no more. In truth, that world never was...We live in one interdependent community...and we need each other living for each other... Our American religion of self-interest, of manifest destiny is destroying us...The truth is that we are all so interconnected that the good of our sister and the good of

our brother bear on what is good for us.... We are all of the same family, the family of God. If the nation fails as all nations do; we can't... because we belong to Love. Empires are temporary. Love is forever.

In our Gospel today the disciples are called on to share in the awesome power of Jesus, the opposition notwithstanding. Jesus is opposed even by his own family...When we collaborate, and act and think as community marked by humility and sacrifice and empathy, we are the wiser... and we are effective.... Our very presence, I believe, is transformative. Sometimes words aren't enough, but the mystery of presence is. And true power, the power of Love itself, becomes exponential, ramifies beyond our knowing.... In our mere acts of love and sacrifice and advocacy... Satan falls like lightning. The emperor of the world is toppled by the emperor of Love.

Don't get me wrong, to be a responsible and grateful citizen is an honorable and good thing...but we brothers and sisters are first and foremost citizens of the kingdom of God...we must persuade and influence...we must sacrifice... we must, most of all, choose courage, because courage is contagious....all this for the good of the whole, and in particular the outcasts and the least among us...we must act for sacred change for the better, which is the very process of God's beloved community in its becoming.

The world is in a mess, good people, but the church I believe, is at its best when things fall apart. In Steinbeck's novel, in spite of the brutality and

cruelty of a failed system, Love becomes the resilient protagonist. It is only Love that can bear the horrors of man's inhumanity to man. I don't quite know what to think as to where we are now, or where we're going as a nation, but I do know this: fear is not an option.... We are called to Love... and Love is stronger than the powers and principalities of our world... and Love will stand in the end... Ours is to act with all that we are, as if that is so.