

SERMON: 2nd Sunday of Lent 2015

Introduction

Henri Nouwen wrote a slim volume called *Clowning in Rome: Reflections on Solitude, Celibacy, Prayer and Contemplation*. I pick it up and read it in part from time-to-time.

Nouwen was a remarkable man, a gifted spiritual writer and renowned Catholic theologian. He had an ability to see what others often miss.

In the chapter entitled Solitude and Community, Nouwen begins the chapter thusly: "When we reflect on current events we realize that our world is in a continuous state of emergency." He then proceeds to give a dozen or so examples of violence and terrorism not only in Italy but also in Holland, Israel, Rhodesia, Ethiopia and Somalia. He could have given many more examples. It was 1979.

Now it is 2015. The list we could make today of examples of violence and terrorism is way too long to make. On Ash Wednesday we took note of the 21 young Egyptian Coptic Christian men who lost their lives because they were Christian. We deeply mourn their loss and the loss of all innocent life across the globe. Killing another because of one's religious affiliation is an abomination along with the abominations of killing or hurting another because one belongs to a different race, ethnicity, gender or sexual orientation or because of disability or even age.

One recent incident on the global playing field illustrates Nouwen's position that our world is indeed in a continuous state of emergency:

Russia

This past week, while ISIS continues its warpath of destruction of sacred art, artifacts, and ancient libraries and other antiquities in Iraq, a man named Boris Nemtsov, a former Deputy Prime Minister, was assassinated by assailants who jumped out of a car on a bridge

just south of Red Square. The shooting was professional and smooth, with well-aimed fire and no deaths of bystanders.

This brazen killing took place near the Kremlin.

This killing took place two days before he was set to lead one of the largest opposition rallies in Russia against the present regime's policies toward Ukraine, the current economic problems and corruption. Thousands are coming together today, March the first, to express solidarity and grief for Nemtsov's murder.

Gospel of Mark

What is pertinent to our Gospel lesson today is that Nemtsov's death comes as the price for opposing the current government in Putin's Russia. As an opposition leader, surely he knew he put himself in danger. Danger for his life.

He is hardly the first or the last of men and women who put their lives at risk for political principles, but it comes at a time when we can watch from afar, yet be quite involved, by virtue of the internet and media outlets. In the time of Jesus, only word of mouth could spread talk about the events of the day.

Jesus teaches

In today's Gospel lesson we hear Jesus beginning to teach his disciples that he must undergo great suffering. He let it be known that he would be in harm's way. He challenged not only his disciples but the crowd to follow him. But he made it clear that if they did, they too would have to suffer.

Certainly I do not equate political opposition leaders with Jesus, but I do think that those who stand up to corruption or lawlessness can draw strength from the words and teaching of Jesus. Recently we celebrated the life of Martin Luther King. He was an opposition leader for sure. He was assassinated for his leadership. And he, like Boris Nemtsov, knew that he stood in the path of potential death because he challenged the injustices of the status quo.

Jesus called crowds together to preach about the Kingdom of God and enraged the Jewish establishment as he became more and more popular. He was more than a political opposition leader, however. He was a theological opposition leader. A leader who was called to be the human face of God.

That level of calling transcends all versions of political leadership, for sure, but Jesus' calling to lead people into the paths of righteousness is inspirational to ordinary human persons propelled into leadership.

I do not know if this man from Russia was a Christian. I do know that he chose a dangerous path and he paid for it with his life. He, along with countless others, including our military serving in conflicts and war, must sacrifice living ordinary lives to serve great causes.

This particular opposition leader was not a religious leader or a military leader, but he was a brave man, who, in a recent interview with Russian media, expressed concern for his own safety. I hope today we will pray for and remember those who dare to confront corruption, violence and moral decay in our world, regardless of his or her religious adherence, regardless of which country of origin.

Jesus would be right there with them. Jesus would encourage all leaders to take the high ground and direct the moral compass toward righteousness, without violence.

Jesus would weep to see the hijacking of religions by ideologues who dare to invoke God's name to promote political agendas, and even worse, to create theocracies of intolerance as exemplified by vile terrorists of any name.

Back to Henri Nouwen

As Nouwen reminded us, our world is, indeed, in a continuous state of emergency. In such a world, where is the light? Where is the goodness? Where is hope?

He found it in Rome. Not in the bureaucracy of the Vatican, not in the glitter and gold of glorious St. Peter's, but in the shadows. He found it among those who make themselves, in the words of St. Paul, "fools for Christ." Henri Nouwen gives many examples of the one-on-one ministries of quiet persons helping one person or two, where the light of Christ is shining. Just as I see it here, among many of you, helping someone or someone(s), being the face of Christ through your ministries to and for others.

Nouwen looks away from the buildings and into the corners of the streets and finds human kindnesses of all kinds carrying on the discipleship of Christ in many forms. It is the kind of Christianity we can understand and give voice to supporting. It is the kind of discipleship to which we can subscribe.

Clowns

Nouwen uses the imagery of clowns to describe those who live and work for others. The "fools" of which St. Paul speaks are Henri Nouwen's clowns. *Clowning in Rome* captures the reality that "...Clowns are not in the center of events. They appear between the great acts, fumble and fall and make us smile again..."

"The clowns don't have it together, they do not succeed in what they try to do, they are awkward, out of balance, and left-handed, but...they are on our side. We respond to them not with admiration but with sympathy, not with amazement but with understanding, not with tension but with a smile.

Of the virtuosi we say, "How can they do it?" Of the clowns we say, "they are like us."

The clowns remind us with a tear and a smile that we share the same human weaknesses."

In the clown, psychologists have found a powerful image to help us understand the role of those who choose to care and minister in contemporary society.

In the clown and in clownishness, Henri Nouwen found hope.

For him there are four clown-like elements in the spiritual life: solitude, celibacy, prayer and contemplation. This quote gives an insight into the way he understood himself:

“My growing love for the clowns in Rome made me desire to clown around a little myself and to speak about such foolish things as being alone, treasuring emptiness, standing naked before God, and simply seeing things for what they are.

I came to feel that in this full, imposing, venerable, and busy city there must be a very deep desire to live out the other side of our being, the side that wants to play, dance, smile, and do many other ‘useless’ things.”

Lent

This Lent, this time of reflection and reconciliation, consider what clown-like dimensions rest within each of us. Consider how getting in touch with this part of our Christian self might strengthen our journey of discipleship. You may not be asked to literally give your life up for the cause of God or for a political purpose as some are called to do; however, we are all called to be God's agents of goodness in the world. If that is foolish, if that means we are clowns, then foolish clowns we be together...all for the glory of God....Amen.

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