

Recognizing Demons

January 31, 2021

This past Wednesday was International Holocaust Remembrance Day, and the New York Times ran a story by a woman named Sylvia Foti. Foti is a Lithuanian American from the Chicago suburbs, who told of how proudly her family passed on their Lithuanian heritage, telling of how they sang Lithuanian songs, recited Lithuanian poetry, and even went to “Lithuanian School” on Saturdays.

When her mother died, Foti took up the baton of writing a biography of her grandfather, Jonas Noreika, who is honored across Lithuania. Noreika was executed after leading a plot to overthrow the Soviet Union which had quickly transitioned from being Lithuania’s liberators to being an occupying force at the end of World War II. However, amidst her research, Foti discovered that the grandfather who had been the object not only of her hero worship, but who is beatified in Lithuanian culture as a martyr, had an ugly, even evil past. It turns out that this man who had been portrayed as a savior was actually a Nazi sympathizer and collaborator, having ordered that all of the Jews of his area of Lithuania be rounded up, sent to a ghetto, beaten, starved, and tortured. Foti says that this knowledge called everything she had ever known into question – what her heritage was, what her culture was, what her story was.

In trying to reconcile the stories she received from her family and her culture – stories that made up a substantial portion of her identity – with the reality she had uncovered, she says she has undertaken a journey toward understanding, “the power of the politics of memory and the importance of getting the recounting right, even at great personal cost.” In bringing the truth to light as an effort of healing and reconciliation, she’s been vilified and called an agent of Vladimir Putin. Sadly, she reflects, that despite empirical evidence all too many “believe their country’s identity depends on holding onto its heroes, even at the cost of the truth.”

For most of us the complexities and contradictions of our own origin stories do not play out amidst one of the greatest atrocities in human history. Nonetheless, Foti’s story is compelling not only as a piece of history but also as a morality tale. Despite how alluring it would be to tell her grandfather’s tale as she received it, how alluring it would be to tell that tale and maintain her cultural pride, how alluring it would be to hold on to the sense of self she received from the mythology of her grandfather as savior and superhero, she came to understand that the only way to sustainable health was to tell the truth and to do her part to leverage that truth toward greater socio-political health.

While this story has wide-reaching relevance today, I share it because I think it intersects profoundly with both of our scriptures today. In the passage Betty read for us from First Corinthians, Paul writes about whether or not to eat meat sacrificed to idols. His argument goes: You and I know that idols are not actually God, and therefore don’t hold any power. Therefore, someone with this knowledge may rightly think that it’s okay to eat meat sacrificed to idols. But, because others may not have that knowledge and eating meat sacrificed to idols may influence them toward believing in those idols, the faithful thing to do is to refrain from eating those sacrificial offerings. In short: think not only of how your actions affect your own faith and life, but also about how they will affect others’ as well. Paul is telling us that in a life of faith, we need to refine and restrict our exercise of our freedoms so that our behaviors don’t lead others astray.

In Bible Study this week, this led to a wonderful conversation about participants' experiences and practices in partaking in Jewish, Hindu, and other interfaith prayer and cultural experiences, and even in how we approach partaking in Communion in other churches. Do you follow the rules out of respect, or break the rules in order to honor relationships?

The gem in Paul's argument is in the first verse, "Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up." In the story of Sylvia Foti coming to terms with her grandfather's Nazi past and choosing to use that as a conduit of healing rather than clinging to the false narrative she inherited, we have a powerful example of letting go of culturally received knowledge for the sake of love.

Then, in our Gospel, we read the first of several stories in Mark about Jesus interacting with someone who has been possessed by what some translations call an unclean spirit, others an evil spirit. What always fascinates me in this story is that the unclean spirit recognizes Jesus. While the gospels often portray everyday folks as clueless as to Jesus' identity and significance, there's something worth exploring in the idea that many times in the gospels evil recognizes Jesus, the earthly manifestation of Divine Goodness. I wonder if evil is able to recognize Jesus as the Holy One of God because it has spent so much time and energy fearing being changed by Divine Love and Goodness.

This brings to mind an experience I had with a friend years ago. He called me one day in the midst of a deep family crisis, seeking guidance and a sounding board. It seems he and his husband were in the midst of the worst fight they'd ever had. They were fighting about parenting and family dynamics, and his husband was so upset he had, for the first time, talked about divorce.

My friend called me, broken and terrified, from his father's house where he had fled with their daughter. In what would turn out to be an unexpected experience of grace, his father engaged in a myriad of the old, unhealthy behaviors with which my friend had been raised. I said this was an experience of grace, because it was like a neon sign had started to flash in my friend's brain!

You're doing this!
You're doing this!
You're doing this!

The specifics were different, but the underlying unhealthy relationship dynamics that he had received in his family of origin, the ones his head knew were unhealthy but were still at work in his behaviors, were suddenly on full display in front of him. In the terms of our gospel writer, the "unclean or evil spirit" at work in his being was able to finally give voice to its presence. He had been so fearful of the possibility of losing some of who he was if he allowed love to transform him that he had instead invested a terrifying amount of psycho-spiritual time and energy on maintaining control and staying as he was.

(This idea of maintaining control is a rich area to be mined for those who seek to lead a spiritual life – rich enough that we'll get back to it as a whole service some other day.)

I'm happy to report that, having recognized the "evil spirit" he had been carrying around in his being for decades, he and his husband have been able to call it out, tame it, address his fears, and are doing remarkably in their continued journey of healing and growth.

Friends, we're celebrating our church's 185th Annual Meeting after worship today. In that, we stand on the shoulders of brave men and women who were willing to do things differently, of faithful people who had knowledge, but who, rather than allowing that knowledge to puff themselves up, chose to build something up by accepting "the religion of love and service which Jesus lived and taught." We stand on the soldiers of more than 18 DECADES of followers of Jesus who recognized evil for what it is, and had the humility to seek the good, rather than bolstering their fears.

No one needs to tell you that it's been an interesting year. Our forebears in 1836 could NEVER have imagined the events of this year or how we are being church right now. And, I am confident that in exercising deep truth telling, we will be agents of Jesus' transforming love. In recognizing and naming both the personal and societal evil among us we will build up, rather than merely puff up.

In her article in the New York Times, Foti concludes that engaging with a difficult "past is always traumatic. But we will never achieve clarity and healing if we base our history on lies." My prayer for us this week – for us as individuals and as a church and as a society – is that we will have the wisdom and courage to live lives rooted in truth and love. If we do so, despite the fact that it will at times be painful to do so, we, too, will be able to count ourselves among Jesus' healing stories, and our lives will leave a lasting legacy of grace.

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1 Corinthians 8:1-13, Mark 1:21-29
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