

Call Down Fire

In mid May, shortly after Donald Trump had all but tied up his party's nomination, John Boehner, the recently retired Speaker of the U.S. House, settled old scores by impugning Senator Ted Cruz's birth in language I will leave you to surmise. No one in the Senate likes Cruz. There was a time though when that kind of language would have occasioned a duel, but no more. Maybe just a rap Broadway show at \$400 , now \$800 or more a scalper seat!

The ugliness is something many of us may feel, but having reservations about such language may not say - still a wish to call down fire - about any number of things on the political landscape. Maybe it resonates with our gospel story.

Jesus was completing his walking ministry through Palestine, on his way to Jerusalem, and passing through Samaria, where he had usually found hospitality, was this time shunned. The text does not make this plain, except that the Samaritans realized that Jesus was fixed on going to Jerusalem, its ancient enemy. May-be it was because he wasn't pausing to heal anyone this time through. So, old hostilities bubble below the surface. The disciples, probably hungry and in need of a good bath, respond in kind, remembering the prophet Elijah, who hundreds of years before had called down fire on the evil king Ahaziah of Samaria, consuming him and one hundred of his men (you can read about it in 2 Kings 1 - as Donald Trump might say). Call down fire, said the disciples.

The response of Jesus is a rebuke: the old way no longer holds. You cannot justify war by citing the Old Testament we might say, and the text turns to the meaning of discipleship. Three occasions suggest its meaning: An eager infatuee says "I will follow you wherever." Jesus says life could be barren. To another he says, get on with life, let the dead bury their dead; to another he says if you take up the plow, you have to fix your eye on the far border, not the post behind you.

Let me suggest three applications.

1. The late Edward Said, Palestinian American and professor at Columbia University tried to help his Palestinian refugee people understand how to deal with their lot, the *Nachba*, or forced exile from their lands. He said, there is no return home, there will not be; homecoming is out of the question; give up that hope. Rather than call down firebombs learn what it means to live in the freedom of being an exile. Let no borders, no national loyalties, no family ties, fence you in. No piece of property is ultimate. Old categories are just that: old. Move on, you cannot return home, but keep the values of that original place and let them shape you.
2. We are an immigrant country. Almost every second generation immigrant has confronted its first generation, sometimes with angry language, with the fact that old ways, language, foods, can be treasured but new ways must be lived. Why is it that the politics of the day has forgotten our immigrant history? Calling immigrants rapists and building walls is a way to call down fire because of other problems we cannot solve. Perhaps the anger is because it used to be in immigrant Chicago, it was considered very important to learn English and to assimilate. Speak Swedish or Polish at home, but not in public.

The naive narrative was that we had been invited into the great American project. That naivete has faded for us and immigrants. Sadly, concentrating on its loss fixes us in the old boundaries rather than bringing a new vitality, the gifts immigrants bring.

The historical truth is that Pope Leo of our morning prayer saw the Vandals and Huns as only destructive of his world. They were bad. But they offered new life to a regime that had grown old, and they wore trousers as well!

3. I am in debt to Jim Juhnke for his review of Alan Kreider's book, *The Patient Ferment of the Early Church*. Kreider's insight is that the church grew not by powerful missionary preaching as has been the popular view, not by argument, or even by its worship life which was closed to outsiders. It grew by the patient, quiet life, lived in a time of ferment. Patience, not hurried, but rooted in God's character. In consequence the early Christians lived in countercultural ways, caring for the neighbor, the widow, the poor. Seekers were baptized only after year's long study. A change came as the Emperor Constantine used the Christian religion as a force to unify the empire. Even Augustine, coming along shortly after, led the church from patient ferment to impatient force. I think these verses from Luke's story fit well with Kreider's thesis. We are in a time of ferment, we need to live quiet, patient lives.

From the Constantinian point forward some have gotten to thinking of the West as Christian with a kind of lordship over the culture, calling down fire on those who do not recognize that lordship.

It is an easy enough thing for us to say to the Palestinians and immigrants in our midst: give up the past, the old home sites, live as an exile; but miss its meaning for ourselves. In many ways we may feel we are exiles. Out of step with the way things are. We may feel the Vandals and Goths are again at the door as Pope Leo saw it in the fifth century. The challenge for us as it would be for the disciples is to live as exiles, to hold the old values and move on, to keep our eye on the far border. To serve joyfully in godly quietness as a congregation as Leo prayed. Such discipleship may find us in barren spaces. We may have to find new ways to actively honor the dead while not living among their tombs. As our black communities have been challenged, we have to keep our eyes on the prize.

I would say Amen, but actually, on occasion I do use John Boehner's language about the politics of our country and Jesus rebukes me.

Donald Steelberg
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