

### WRESTLING WITH GOD

--There's a saying out there that the Church exists for the purpose of comforting the afflicted, and afflicting the comfortable.

There's no doubt about the fact that we like the first part of this clever play on words. We are grateful to know in advance that, when our times come for being tested and having to suffer, there is someplace to which we can go, and someplace from where, we can confidently expect consolation, solace, and support.

Understandably, we are totally on board with the comforting-of-the-afflicted.

Now, concerning that second part of that saying, well, that's a bit more problematically complicated. To begin, we don't really like to think of ourselves as being numbered among, you know, the comfortable (which most certainly we are!). And we surely deplore the thought that we, for any justification at all, are deserving of a bit of afflicting because of it. After all, we're such terribly nice people (and we clearly are!), so why would we be deserving of anything even remotely unpleasant?

What sort of audacity, then, would translate itself into a mission on the part of the Church, on the part of any church, to afflict its own? And beyond that, what sort of God would set out with purpose to stress and to dis-comfort a great group of folks such as we?

Fair but troubling questions, don't you agree?

--Let's begin to untie this tangled knot of meaning, shall we?

Here's the crux of it: As "the comfortable," we are basically disinclined to change, even if it would represent a change vastly for the better. Where we find ourselves is good, maybe great, so why in the world would we ever be motivated to mess with that? We probably wouldn't, meaning that, unless something interrupts or challenges, upsets or disrupts our status quo, we shall continue to indulge ourselves in maintaining life as it has been, dedicated only to making things go on and on just as they have been going. Why would we ever choose otherwise, right?

That's perfectly understandable from our very-human side of the equation.

However, the comfortable can get stuck in their comfortableness, and that can be a huge problem.

Therefore, if we consider the other side of the equation--which is to say, the situation from God's perspective--there surfaces an obvious issue. If the comfortable continue to fill their cupboards and pantries and refrigerators with foodstuffs of every imaginable sort, while looking away from the millions of unfortunates who, day after day, barely have enough to eat just to stay alive, there is something wrong with that picture.

If the comfortable wash their cars, spray their lawns, and even flush their toilets with perfectly good drinking water, while people in poorer countries every day must walk miles to fetch water that most likely is still not safe to drink, there is something wrong with that picture.

If the comfortable relax in their spacious, climate-controlled apartments and homes, made more pleasant with all sorts of electronic gadgetry and time-saving devices, while too many other human beings remain consigned to mere hovels and huts that we wouldn't put our barn animals in, there is something wrong with that picture.

And in our world it goes on like that, with the comfortable "have's" possessing the most and the best of everything, and with the rest of the world getting whatever may be left over--and that's usually not very much and not very good.

--In virtually every situation, then, where there is something wrong with the picture, the tipping point to correcting it is to be found in making the too-comfortable a bit less so. Without some motivating of the comfortable--who, remember, are inherently disinclined to change anything--the situation for the poor, the not-haves, the disadvantaged, will not improve in the slightest. That is the reason for the afflicting dimension, which occurs whenever one's conscience is pricked, whenever human awareness of the injustice is increased, and whenever a challenge to action is issued that will require sacrifice, or at a minimum some selfless generosity and sharing.

The transparent bottom-line is that, if something basic does not change within the hearts of the intractably comfortable, then the unfortunates of our communities and of our world will simply be abandoned to their plights, with no hope at all of a qualitatively different future. That is not the sort of future that God has imagined for them, whoever they may be, whatever they may look like, whatever language they may speak or culture they may share in, wherever in the world they may live.

Loving humanity as a whole, God regards that as unacceptable and even inexcusable, especially when we have it wholly within our power to create a brighter, healthier, happier future for all. Truly, that is the realm of God--in older language, the kingdom of God--about which Christians make such a big deal. This realm, this kingdom, is literally and practically within our reach, if we can simply grow out of and just get over all sense of entitlement to our personally exclusive comfortableness.

--All this brings us to that wonderful old story from Genesis that was read this morning. It's hard to know for how many generations it circulates before, some 3,000 years ago, it is finally written down. Its sheer age suggests how fundamental a message it carries for humanity as a whole.

Jacob, we are told, struggles violently with the spirit that has the task of protecting the Jabbok Ford--a place of crossing in the river, a place of transition from one solid shore to the opposite solid shore.

What occurs is very much a hands-on scuffling, one which continues all night--which is to say,

throughout that period when things cannot be seen clearly. It is a fighting which ends in a blessing for Jacob; it is also one which leaves him changed. Because of it, he is wounded, described as limping away from the scene.

From this old tale, we are to understand that the life with God is a struggle. It's supposed to be. Because that is so, Jacob is accorded a new name--"Israel," which means, says the account, "he who struggles with God." In that regard, we are all "Israel."

For all of us, then, the life of faith in relation to God is a constant wrestling match. It's supposed to be--as God goes on working to transform us from what we are to what we can be, and as we spar against our lower comfort-seeking natures and, in doing so, give birth and expression to our higher selves. That never occurs without some mighty tussling.

We, the comfortable, are forever wrestling with God about the best way not to be lulled to sleep by our comforts, and the best ways to utilize our advantages and privileges, our power and resources, to be of service to those who lack them. Otherwise, if we aren't disturbing ourselves, if we aren't challenging ourselves, if we aren't pushing ourselves out of our comfort zones, then God will have to provide for it in some other manner. Why? Because, if we remain too comfortable, we are in the way of where God would have us go, and how God would have the world look. And being in God's way is no place to be!

Oh, I'm so sorry. Wherever are my manners?

I forgot to ask: Are you comfortable? I mean, are you comfortable?

If the honest answer is "yes," then you may regard this as your afflicting for the day.

You see, sometimes "bad"-feeling things happen to perfectly good people, in the interest of getting good people to do better things.