

The Oppositional Role

Ephesians 3:1-12; Matthew 2:7-12

The story of “we three kings of the orient are” is known by many. James Taylor sings of it in his song titled Home By Another Way:

*Those magic men the Magi, some people call them wise. Or Oriental, even kings.
Well anyway, those guys. They visited with Jesus, they sure enjoyed their stay.
Then warned in a dream of King Herod's scheme, they went home by another way.
Yes, they went home by another way, home by another way.
Maybe me and you can be wise guys too and go home by another way.
We can make it another way, safe home as they used to say.
Keep a weather eye to the chart on high and go home another way.*

It's a significant story in the Christian tradition has spawned what Barbara Brown Taylor calls one of the seven major feasts or festivals of the Church, the festival of Epiphany, a big word that means “manifestation” or “revelation.” What has been revealed is that this “new born king” is not just the king of the Jews or a corner of the Roman Empire but of the whole world. The magi were Gentiles, pagans if you will, with little prior acquaintance with Jewish law or custom. They came and worshipped a toddler, a male of less than 2 years of age. We assume that by the other king, Herod, ordering all males under 2 years of age to be murdered.

Notice how these pagans knew not to go back to King Herod and tell them what they had seen: they received a dream. Just like Joseph had received a dream to not put away his fiancé, the magi received a dream to, as James Taylor and certain translations of the Bible says, go home another way.

Herod's response to the “newborn king” is a sad story of jealousy, rage, and flight. (Parts of the Church remember Herod's violent order on December 28th with a day called Holy Innocents. (it's a day like September 11th and now December 2nd when we remember those too young to die.)

It's also a story of what happens when God breaks into the world. This is where my heart is drawn, and I hope yours will be, too. The truth is when God does a new thing some people get angry. Some people don't want to see the status quo changed. They are even willing to go to any lengths to stop God's work. Herod filled that role back then, but there are modern day Herod's as well.

The thought of this is not an especially pleasant one. And this is a special challenge for Presbyterian and Reformed Christians in our society. We've become players/participants in the larger social order. To think that our faith might be cause for offense is foreign to us. There are two reasons why this is so.

Marilynne Robinson, the novelist and instructor at the Iowa Writer's Workshop says "in a democracy you need to give people the benefit of the doubt about their beliefs and show goodwill to all." These days that goodwill includes Mormons and Muslims, Democrats and Republicans, Tea Party people and libertarians. As we've recently seen, "the other" is our neighbor, and (through marriage) even our family members.

How are we supposed to be "oppositional" toward the Herod's of this world when we're taught in school and church to be empathetic, accepting and open to new ideas? Marilynne Robison says that's difficult.

The second part of the challenge is the nature of our "brand" of Christian faith.

When I was an undergraduate we were required to take a class and read a book called *Christ and Culture, the book* by H. Richard Niebuhr. We were taught there are five postures toward the larger culture within American Christianity:

Christ against Culture. Christ of Culture. Christ above Culture. Christ and Culture in Paradox. Christ Transforming Culture.

Presbyterian and Reformed Christians are mostly in the Christ Transforming Culture camp. We have an optimist's view of our faith affecting change in the larger social order. We've always been closely allied with the democratic (small "d") State.

The city council of the John Calvin's Geneva doubled as the churches of that city's Session. The university he started became the University of Geneva, a state run university. Today, this works into a strong support of the public schools system. And although it may seem disconnected, we have a pretty relaxed approach to things like alcohol consumption. We see fermentation as one of Nature's God's good gifts. The Baptists and Methodists, on the other hand, were leaders in the fight to ban alcohol.

So the first reason being oppositional is difficult is the natural tendency American tendency to be accepting of others. The second is an optimistic view of Christ's ability to transform culture.

If our vision of the world is that God is more and more transforming the culture to what God intends for all humanity, the reign of God, "when all tears will be wiped away", why get worked up with the Herod's that are out there?

We get worked up because God is grieved when evil prevails.

We get worked up because there are some things that break God's heart.

We get worked up because we believe God created, redeemed and sustains all flesh, and no person, child or class can be cast aside. Simply put, God loves all.

I'm thinking of two men as I consider the oppositional role that our faith sometimes requires us to take.

Bennett was a mission co-worker in Peru with the same program as Kristi Van Nostran is with, *Joining Hands Against Hunger*. The program works with local non-profits to promote healthy and local food production. One of these non-profits told Bennet about 15 years ago that there was a smelting plant that mined and refined lead from the hills around their community. It was their only employer. Children were showing up with lead poisoning, which, as we know, kills the development of health brains.

Bennett thought this grieves God's heart. And he said something, and said something more and lobbied Peru's Congress and ours to shut down the smelting

plant. Needless to say Bennett did not make a whole lot of friends in Peru's local chapter of the Chamber of Commerce.

It turns out the owner of the lead factory lived on Long Island, New York. The state of Missouri was shutting down his lead mining plant there so he was looking to go someplace where there were fewer regulations. But why is a Peruvian baby and child's brain any less precious than a Show Me State's child's brain? What does God think, and feel?

What would you or I do? Answer: we'd probably cave. We'd rationalize "well, people have to make money somewhere?" or "better them than us." But Bennett didn't get that memo. He just kept at it until they closed the plant or got the test results back that showed that infant, toddler and children's brains weren't being deformed by the lead fouling the air around the smelting plant.

Or consider another man, a Dominican friar named Plattes. He's an economist by training. (This Frenchman was asked what the difference between a friar and a monk is. Both take vows of poverty and celibacy. He said, "Monks pray more.") But after a priest friend died after fighting the fight for 10 years Plattes left his native France to go to the eastern parts of Brazil to "raise Cain" (as we say) about modern-day slavery. I've heard from the Redlands PD how pimps ply unsuspecting teenagers to enter prostitution, one form of modern slavery. But I didn't know there were millions of people who are not trafficked but simply not paid or kept in homes which they'll never be pay back to do agricultural or fishing work around the world. As our own embassy in Thailand says, "if you've ever eaten shrimp from Thailand you have almost certainly benefitted from slave labor." (*Vanity Fair*, November 2015).

Both Bennett and Plattes used where they were and what they had—relationships, training, friendships—to make a difference where God had planted them.

You and I don't want to think about how big the problems are, like Boko Haram, Al Qaeda or ISIS. "They're too big. They're too far away. It's somebody else's job: someone younger, someone of a different gender, someone who has the

stomach for conflict.” But the dream we receive requires us to do something. We cannot sit idly by while the Herod’s of the world do their dirty deeds.

How do we? How do we “make music in the heart” as Howard Thurman says in his inspiring poem *The Work of Christmas* while speaking up for “whatever is true, noble, just and pure, all that is lovable and attractive, and whatever is excellent and admirable.”?

We must begin with forgiveness. We cannot blame ourselves for what we haven’t seen, or been aware of? You and I are not at fault that one of our neighbors harbored hate and collected and practiced with weapons over years, not months. Neither are all Muslims at fault. Evil sometimes rears its ugly head, but goodness is stronger.

We must also begin small.

The small thing I believe I’m called to do in this month is go the Rotary Peace Conference in Ontario. Anybody who thinks we can fix what is broken in the Muslim world overnight is delusional. It took decades to get there—it will take decades to teach “the ways that make for peace.” Pick what you already care about and, as one missionary said, go to where the people are and sit down. And listen. Then speak up. Act, do, don’t just plan and contemplate.

And finally, do two things, not just one. My wife and I were recently helped by Maryann Mickibben Dana who in her *Gate of the Year: A Workbook and Playbook for 20015, 2016 and Beyond* . She says research shows that people who (1) not only join a gym *but* also (2) immediately work out after joining are more likely to stick to their new year’s intentions than those who simply join.

Today we begin by meeting around a Table. We meet knowing that we are free to speak our mind and heart, because God has already spoken in sending us a Son. (As the choir sang, it was Love that Came Down at Christmas.) We meet in humility that we’ll never get it all right. Do what you can, going from this Table, and God can & will come alongside.

The Herod's *are* out there. The world does not take change or God's new thing sitting down. Neither should we. It's OK not only to be opposed but to be oppositional. Some things take a heaven sent dream, and then going "home by another way. Safe home, as they used to say." Amen.