

Tribalism and Transformation

Romans 12: 1-21

I have spent my spare time in recent days watching too much cable news political coverage and reading William Golding's 1954 novel, Lord of the Flies. It isn't a combination that I can recommend, as it has left me unsettled and more than a bit saddened, with a sense that something truly DOES need to change in the politics of our country-- and more deeply than any change that is currently being offered by anyone.

I took up Lord of the Flies this fall because somehow, despite all my years of schooling and an undergraduate minor in English, I never had to read it. I knew it was famous, knew it was considered "important" in the way that certain books are—but I'd never made the time. So when I learned that a number of our high school youth were reading it to start the school year, I felt I should read it too. Share in the learning, you know, or share in the pain.

It's not a cheery book, as one might guess from the title. The book concerns a group of schoolboys stranded on an uncharted island by a

wartime plane crash. When the survivors straggle together, it becomes evident that there are no adults among them, so they must find a way to fend for themselves.

Now, in one sense, the group shares a lot in common—they are all boys, they are all lost, they are all in need of the same things: food, shelter, and rescue; and those simple common needs are enough to keep the group together.....at first.

Though the needs are common, however, differences soon begin to emerge about how the needs are to be met—what is more important? Building shelters and tending signal fires, or hunting and procuring meat? The boys organize into function groups—a group of hunters and a group of shelter builders—each thinking that their function is the more urgent. Common human need erodes into competing agendas.

And from there, it goes downhill quickly—the disagreement over competing agendas becomes a bitter struggle for control,

and argument, bullying, theft, and mob violence follow.

In other words, in a short matter of weeks, civilized coexistence ceases to be possible and the behavior on the island seeks the lowest common denominator of reddened tooth and claw.

Reason gives way to tribal warfare, and when rescuers at last do arrive, they can save most of the lost boys,.....but none of the boys' lost innocence. As I said, it's not a cheery book.

Sad, how competing agendas can so completely uncivilize us.

Now, Lord of the Flies is a book, we might say, a fantasy, a piece of fiction.

We are better than that—we are better.

But put us on an island and divide us into tribes....and I wonder. It is this possibility of our sinking to Lord of the Flies behavior that actually drives the engine of the runaway train called reality television. Think

of the television show, “Survivor”—I don’t watch it, but enough people do that it is now entering its ninety-fifth season, or so it seems.

The show is the ultimate glorification of self-interest...competing players will serve the group’s needs for precisely as long as the group serves their needs.....but no longer.

Alliances shift at the drop of a hat, backbiting and backstabbing are common, and there is no ultimate reward for being nice or playing fair...those are only strategies to be used until they are no longer profitable.

Again, it is sad how competing agendas can so completely uncivilize us. Still, survivor is only a game, we might say, a show on reality television.

We are better than that....**aren’t we?** We are better.

All of which leads me to my viewing of current political campaign coverage. Now, I have my own political sensibilities just as each of

you have yours...but I do try on most days to understand the weaknesses of my own views and to acknowledge the strengths of opposing worldviews.

I think our humility is the key to our humanity. So when I watch campaign coverage, I try to watch both sides—left-handed and right-handed talk TV...but this week was just the limit for me. Enough.

I think Wednesday night, specifically, was the limit.

I flipped to one channel and saw the commentator's manufactured outrage over Senator Obama's recent campaign remark, "If you put lipstick on a pig, it's still a pig."

It's an old saying or a common expression akin to, "You can't make a silk purse out of a sow's ear." It was uttered by way of saying, "You can dress up a plan or a proposal anyway you want, but in the end, you can't change its nature."

But oh, the outrage machines! It was a sexist remark, it was an elitist remark, it was a cowardly personal smear aimed at Governor Palin.

The righteous anger and indignation poured from the television into our living room. Manufactured outrage, a tribal war dance.

Disgusted by the display, I turned the channel to one with a more liberal bias. Here, I saw a September 11th anniversary editorial, no less slanted, excoriating the Republican Party for showing footage of the world trade center's burning towers at their convention.

It was fear-mongering, shouted the pundit, it was emotional manipulation, it was playing on people's fears and pandering to a jingoistic patriotism, and it was appalling. Unconscionable.

He might have disagreed with the showing of the footage, he's absolutely free to disagree, but his vein popping, finger wagging, venom-filled speech was also manufactured outrage.

The dance of the other tribe.

Stir the pot, fuel the fire, feed the ratings.

And the next day, I woke up sad. I mean truly sad, a gray cloud over my head, everywhere I went. Sad because we have come to the place of tolerating a society and a political process where the ends justify the meanness and 527 advocacy groups set the bar for political dialogue appallingly low.

Sad because machines built to manufacture outrage do not suddenly begin to produce cooperation.

Sad because, from a beginning place of shared humanity and many shared human needs and aspirations, we have sunk to a tribalism of blue people and red people.

I don't mean to imply that we should all view the world in the same bland and artificially homogenized way—but when we overly respect our own world view and we utterly disrespect our neighbor's competing world view...that is when we lose all humility.

And when we lose our humility, next and soon, we lose our humanity.

That's what it's all coming to, I thought—we are becoming a bunch of savage children running around an island with blue face paint and red face paint. With Christian face paint and Muslim face paint. With “us” face paint and “them” face paint. It is the tragedy and the travesty of tribalism. Lord of the Flies.

We are no better than that. We are no better.

So I came, on Thursday morning, and I sat in this sanctuary for a long time....I and my little gray cloud. I didn't pray, at least not in any conventional way. I didn't think, not much. I just needed a sanctuary—a safe place. A place of refuge from all of that.

And as I sat here, on the back row of the empty sanctuary, I listened. The phones were ringing in the church office with the business of the day, but they sounded, thankfully, a long way off.

From the preschool beneath, I could hear the laughter of children, but it also sounded a long way off.

The light came through these beautiful windows with all of their symbols:

Open hands, receiving and giving the blessing of God.

Swords, either shattered or pounded into plowshares, spears twisted into pruning hooks.

Pillars of fire and of cloud, symbolizing the leading of God.

Depictions of baptism and of communion, symbolizing the calling, claiming, nurturing love of God.

Mustard seeds sprouting the kingdom of God, a hope so small, a transformation so vast.

And all around, from every direction, it seemed, doves, fire, wind, the spirit of God, the movement of God.

And on the front wall of the chancel, the cross.

I studied it, for a long time. It was beautiful—not as a work of art, though you could make a day of studying the wood grains, the wood

stains, the delicate carving, the celtic knot work. It was beautiful to me as a work of God.

Here was the symbol at the root of our faith. A symbol of how all that is meanest and ugliest, most divided and most irredeemable can be redeemed and transformed by the love of God.

God, who in Christ Jesus came to redeem and reconcile us.

God who in Christ Jesus came to save us from our sin and our separation, our triviality and our tribalism.

And as I sat and studied the cross, I heard the words of Paul from our scripture lesson this morning:

“I appeal to you, therefore, brothers and sisters, I appeal to you: do not be conformed to this world or to this age,

But be transformed through the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.

For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think (there's that humility thing that protects our humanity).

For as in one body we have many members and not all members have the same function, so we are one body in Christ and individually we are members one of another.

Let love be genuine. Hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good.

Love one another with mutual affection, OUTDO one another in showing honor. Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord.

Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer.

Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers.

Bless those who persecute you, bless and do not curse them.

Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep.

Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are (humility again!).

Do not repay anyone evil for evil but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.

It was like an instant antidote for all the venom of the night before and of the days ahead.

THAT, MY FRIENDS, IS WHAT WE SEEK HERE—SANCTUARY FROM THE WAYS OF THE WORLD, TRANSFORMATION OF THE WAYS OF THE WORLD.

Our present politics of tribalism offer no solutions, whoever our candidate may be. The longer we live there, the less fully human we become.

Do not be conformed to this world or this age or to the Lord of the Flies--but be transformed, instead, by the Lord of the Dance.

We are better than that, brothers and sisters. We are called to be better than that. And through the transforming love of Christ—We are MADE better. Thanks be to God. Amen.