

The Great American Chasm

9.25.16

The Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost (a liturgy in honor of the opening of the National Museum of African American History and Culture)

“I, too, am America” by Langston Hughes

Luke 16:19-31

Did you all see that yesterday? The opening of the new Museum of African American History and Culture? I wasn't there in person, though I know some of you were. I watched it live on Facebook thanks to Oprah's lives stream. “Perhaps” said the President, “it [the museum] can help a white visitor understand the pain and anger of demonstrators in places like Tulsa and Charlotte.”¹ Perhaps. That would be quite a triumph.

I've been reading about the museum. What a daunting task. For years it was opposed. My old senator Jesse Helms blocked it as a waste of tax payers' money. You'd have to start giving everyone a museum – Asians, Latinos, who knows...as if an excess of museums were a problem of some kind, as if you could even begin to tell the American story without telling the story of African Americans. But still a daunting task. The danger is how to tell the story, how to be truthful and whether or not there is transcendence in that truth. A double objective.

Steven Thrasher, columnist for The Guardian, was not pleased. He called the museum a project of American Nationalism. “What good to African Americans, is a museum dedicated to us, when we are being shot in the street daily?”² Others have various answers about what good it is, we'll have to decide for ourselves if the project is inevitably coopted by the program of empire or if it does something more – if it creates a transcendent experience.

¹ <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2016/09/24/remarks-president-dedication-national-museum-african-american-history>

² <https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2016/sep/16/smithsonian-museum-african-american-history-respectability-politics>

Perhaps the museum will help people, particularly white people, understand the current pain and anger being felt by black people in places like Charlotte and Tulsa this week. Perhaps the great chasm that sometimes divides us black and white can be crossed.

Jesus is also interested in chasms – in the great divisions that take shape in the landscape of our lives. He tells a story in our gospel today. Luke does not call it a parable. Michele spoke last week about sarcasm in the Bible. This story is bit like a political cartoon with broad caricatures and a biting punchline.

In the story, there are two parts: A rich man (he has been called Dives through the ages, but that just means “rich man” in Latin; the guy has no name and that makes him a cipher for rich dudes)...a rich man lives in sumptuous wealth. His purple cloak, fine linen are all costly imports. He eats luxurious food, feasts, not just on special occasions, but every day. At his gate is Lazarus (he does get a name; it means “God is my help”) is so very poor. He hopes to get crumbs from the rich man’s table, but gets none. He has ulcerated sores that the street dogs come and lick.

Part two: Both men have died. Lazarus goes to Abraham’s bosom – an image of intimacy and tender care; the rich man goes to Hades. Hades is not hell; first century concepts of an afterlife were all over the place. And it misses the point of the story (or cartoon) if you get caught up with the location of the rich man’s torment.

The rich man asks Abraham to send Lazarus to give him a sip of water to ease his torment. This is also cartoonish and bitterly funny. Despite his change in circumstances, the rich man still sees Lazarus as a tool, as a servant. When Abraham tells him about the great chasm

that separates them from each other, the rich man begs Abraham to send Lazarus to warn his five brothers who are still alive. Again, Lazarus is a tool to be used.

But Abraham's reply is that the rich man's brothers have all they need to reform their ways. They have Moses and the prophets. "But they will believe," the rich man counters, "if someone comes to them from the dead." "No," answers Abraham, "they will not believe even if someone rises from the dead." Abraham is not speaking of ghosts, but of the resurrection of Jesus. For Luke, justice is the aim of the resurrection. Resurrection is not some get out of jail card for believers; instead it is an event that empowers followers of the way to persist in seeking justice.

Those are the two parts of Luke's story – a before and after picture. But what if we thought of these two parts as not chronological but more of a split screen – the second part of the story is a way of seeing the first part. This is what biblical scholar Ched Myers calls, apocalyptic vision³. Apocalypse means unmasking or unveiling. It's a way of seeing through the dominant narrative into the heart of truth AND it sees the world as it could and should be. It empowers our imaginations. Apocalyptic vision means seeing differently and seeing double.

Cultivating that double vision has been the work of prophets and poets in our own history as well. Ralph Ellison's classic novel on the black experience, *Invisible Man*, begins with an epigraph from a mostly forgotten work by Herman Melville, *Benito Cereno*. Melville's story is about an American sea captain in the South Seas visiting a Spanish ship in need of assistance. The Spanish ship is carrying Africans as cargo. Captain Delano thinks they are slaves. They are not. Unbeknownst to Delano, they have risen up, murdered a good part of the crew, and have

³ Ched Myers. *Binding the Strong Man: A Political Reading of Mark's Story of Jesus* (Maryknoll, N.Y.; Orbis, 1988), 165.

commanded the Spanish captain, Benito Cereno, to return them home to Africa. The Africans are pretending to be slaves, especially Babo, who poses as Benito Cereno's devoted personal servant in order to keep an eye on him.

Melville tells the story from the point of view of the comically clueless Captain Delano. He's a liberal – against slavery. But he envies the slavish devotion of Babo. If he only had a servant like him who, in his simplicity, cared only for his master's wellbeing. When all is revealed, when the truth is unveiled and it turns out that Babo has been manipulating him; he has his own desires, his own thoughts, the liberal Delano reacts violently. His world view has been upended and he cannot bear it.

Ellison's novel *Invisible Man* uses Benito Cereno as a lens. Be careful, Melville warns. Even those who think of ourselves as open and thoughtful. We, especially those of us who are comfortable, have a tendency to see the world as we want it to be, a world that fits our purposes. And Americans have a tendency to see endless progress instead of the relentless push and pull of history. We can be self-deceptive and self-congratulatory.

For Ellison's unnamed protagonist, a black man who realizes he is invisible to the world that uses and abuses him, the pain of seeing the world as it is drives him underground, to hibernation. But apocalyptic vision is not just seeing the world as it is, but also as it could be. In hibernation, Ellison's invisible man wonders if the principle of America still has integrity even if the men who created it do not. Was there something worth affirming about our shared life? The painful narrative of discovery ends on a hopeful note. The protagonist will leave his hibernation. President Barack Obama modeled his own memoir *Dreams of my Father* on Ellison's work. From Melville to Ellison to Obama – the story of America is the story of unease,

danger, and despair in the twisted machinations of white supremacy. But the story is not without hope.

In the past week there been an unveiling, a revealing of the world as it is. With two more shootings of black men by police, the videos that showed their deaths, and the protests that followed, we are thrown once again into an alternate universe. Some of us are in that world all the time. But others of us, myself included, slide into seeing the world as basically okay. Sure it has its annoyances, but also its joy and pleasures that suit me and I am basically safe and loved and tended to.

We all have to do what is best for us and I know for many of you, not watching the videos of the shooting of Terence Crutcher and Keith Lamont Scott was an important protective, not against seeing truth, but simply to avoid trauma. I watched because I needed the cry of Scott's wife repeating over and over, "He better live; he better live" to crash into my complacency.

Her cry came across a great chasm to me, a great barrier that I hope to God we have not made permanent. I had to see Terence Crutcher lying bleeding in the street, to see no one bring him not even a drop of cool water to ease his agony. It is outrageous that any of us, including me still need this kind of wake up call.

The danger for a museum, this museum in particular, is to portray the African American story as a focused journey from the slave ship to the Oval Office. It's easy to slip into this kind of

thinking when the daughter of a slave, together with her family, and the first family, themselves descendants of slaves rang the bell to open the museum⁴. Be careful.

Apocalyptic vision is not sustained by wishful thinking. And the museum does not send its visitors out into the world persuaded that all is well. The museum has viewers end with images of Black Lives Matter and the current protest in our streets.

The Langston Hughes poem that we read today begins with grim description – the darker brother who is not invited in when company is over. But it ends with defiance: “I, too, am America”. *Defiance, not wishful thinking is the key to apocalyptic vision.*

Jesus tells us in this cartoonish gospel that we have all the tools we need. We are people who have been shaped by our spiritual ancestors, the prophets. Their words commending a life of love and justice are our spiritual inheritance. Our American prophets, Melville, Ellison, Hughes, and so many others commend relentless honesty and defiance. We have all that we need to bridge this chasm, in this life, in this world. No one is going to do it for us. Pray it’s not too late.

⁴ <https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2016/sep/24/smithsonian-museum-african-american-history-culture-slavery-dc-music>