

## SPIRITUAL BUT NOT RELIGIOUS

### PHILIPPIANS 3:17-4:11

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When he stepped off the Greyhound bus and walked to the corner of Harrison and Jefferson last Tuesday, he was not hard to spot as an ex-convict. If you know what to observe, most of them have similar clothing (donated by the State of Illinois upon their release: an ill-fitting suit, crepe-soled dress shoes, a blue shirt), they carry a small bag of clothing and their eyes have a haunted look that never diminishes.

My friend had spent the last thirteen years in Menard State Prison for armed robbery. Because he has a difficult time following anyone's rules and because he has a hair-trigger temper, he spent a lot of those thirteen years in solitary confinement in a eight-by-six foot cell, out of which he was allowed for one hour a day. When he stepped on to the snow-laden sidewalk, he was immediately nailed by a couple of Chicago police officers. The ensuing conversation could probably not be characterized as harassment but it certainly was not friendly in nature. After half an hour the cops realized they had no grounds on which to arrest Bobby—after all, he had not yet had time to get in trouble, having been out of prison for fourteen hours, most of which was spent on a bus.

So, Bobby called me: a friend from years ago in Waukegan where I had helped him get a job at Johns-Manville, a job which ruined his lungs while it paid him a decent wage and kept him out of jail—at least for a while. Our subsequent conversation left me angry about our so-called justice system, heartbroken for Bobby yet again and anguished because there was so little I could do to help my friend.

The current issue of *Harper's Magazine* printed parts from "A Sermon for the Fourth Sunday of Advent," delivered by the Rev. Tim Jones on December 20, 2009, at the Church of St. Lawrence in York, England. Although we have never met, Father Jones is a soul-brother. "The life of the poor is not an idyllic life of simplicity," he told his congregation on the Sunday before Christmas. "It is a constant struggle, a constant minefield of competing opportunities, competing responsibilities, obligations and requirements, a constant effort to achieve the impossible. For many at the bottom of our social ladder, a lawful, honest life can sometimes seem to be an apparent impossibility."

What advice, Father Jones wanted to know, should one give to an ex-prisoner who was released with about \$100—like Bobby in the U.S.—and no financial support? "This is just the situation that presents itself at the vicarage door."

What presents itself at our Lenten door this morning is not all that different. Paul urges the Philippians to imitate him, even as he himself imitates Christ Jesus. It's an admonition that makes Protestants like us, shaped by Luther and Calvin, nervous. It seems to presuppose that Jesus was a moral exemplar who like any other heroic figure is to be imitated in order that we might earn our salvation. Luther famously

called such efforts by the derisive name of “works righteousness.” The gospel can easily be turned into a form of moralism which flings salvation by grace alone through faith right out the window.

Tiger Woods said that his marital failures and his sexual exploits came because he failed to emulate Buddha. Martin Luther King and James Lawson and many of their followers in the non-violent Civil Rights movement emulated Gandhi’s example.

The theme in Scripture is undeniable. Both Paul and Jesus knew that true moral and spiritual formation depends on learning to follow the habits and practices of one who has become proficient in a particular trade or skill. Indeed, this is the precise meaning of the word “disciple”: a learner or pupil. If you want to learn, for example, to play football, you do so under the tutelage of a coach. If you want to become a good swimmer, you don’t just jump in the water; you are taught by someone who knows swimming’s strokes and techniques.

Paul declares that an appropriate response to the daily challenges confronting Christian existence is found in imitating a certain pattern of living, Christ’s way of living. “For [Christ’s] sake I have suffered the loss of all things,” he wrote earlier in this letter to the Philippians, “and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I might gain Christ. . . .sharing his sufferings. . . .becoming like him in his death” (Phil. 3:8-10). Mimesis (imitation) is not slavish reduplication of a pattern. It is emptying oneself. Sacrificial love for others becomes the gold standard of Christian conduct.

O.K. I truly believe that and I pray every day that I can live sacrificially for others. But, to tell you the truth: I live in the same quandary in Chicago that haunts Father Tim Jones in York, England. I am confronted every Sunday morning and every other time that the lights in my office are on by five needy people (and often by two or three others). The “regulars” come each week with the same stories: no job, no money for food or medication, wounds from assaults, bus fare, AIDS related illness, kids who have no gifts for holidays or birthdays. It costs me a lot of money to come to work at University Church. I hate to say no, but I have to choose between real charity and response to begging.

What should I tell them? Go see a social worker? Go to the Department of Children and Family Services? See a probation officer who is already overworked? Continue begging? Find the nearest Salvation Army post? What would you and I do when every legal avenue had been exhausted?

“My advice as a Christian priest,” writes Father Jones, “is to shoplift. I do not offer such advice because I think that stealing is a good thing, or because I think it is harmless, for it is neither.” So, this benighted Anglican priest tells the people who knock on the vicarage door to steal from large national businesses—not from small family businesses—knowing that the costs from the big one are ultimately passed onto the rest of us in the form of higher prices. Do not take any more than you need, he advises, and do not steal any longer than you need to.

Hmmm. We only have one Walmart in the city of Chicago but that evil behemoth is trying to bribe enough aldermen and cajole the mayor to allow them to open in neighborhoods across the city. I hate Walmart. They are anti-union, they exploit their employees by denying adequate health benefits and shortening their work week so that they don’t have to pay a living wage while five of the Walton family

are counted among the richest people in the U.S. and their executives are paid exorbitant bonuses. Thus, if I imitate Father Jones, I would welcome Wal-Mart into our community and advise my begging friends to shoplift from those stores.

But that is not what Paul advises. Paul, of course, never knew Jesus personally. His call to ministry came after crucifixion and resurrection. He knew the Christ but the flesh and blood Jesus he never experienced. Still, I think Paul may have been the first person to wear one of those little WWJD bracelets which remind some of his followers to ask, "What Would Jesus Do?" And to tell you the truth again, I don't know the answer to that question concerning my friends who come every week for a handout.

When Tim Tyson was ten years old and living in Oxford, North Carolina, a small tobacco-market town near Durham where his father was pastor of the Methodist Church, one of his playmates whispered to him, "Daddy and Roger and 'em shot 'em a nigger." The boy was recounting an incident that occurred on May 11, 1970, when Henry Marrow, a twenty-three-year-old black veteran walked into a crossroads store owned by Robert Teel, a rough man with a criminal record and ties to the Ku Klux Klan. Teel had started out as a barber and he won the trust of a number of Oxford's bankers and landowners. Those connections helped him buy a large lot at Four Corners, literally across the tracks from the rest of Oxford in the heart of a community known as Grab-all.

He operated a coin laundry and a grocery store in the roughest part of Grab-all where many houses did not even have indoor plumbing let alone washing machines. His convenience store offered his African American customers basic groceries at high prices. He also owned gas pumps, a car wash, a Yamaha motorcycle dealership and a barbershop. The money was rolling in. Between 1969 and 1977, Teel was arrested many times, charged with at least a dozen different offenses, including driving under the influence of alcohol; two separate counts of assault on a police officer; assault by pointing a gun; assault and battery; aiding and abetting murder; assault with a deadly weapon; assault on a female; and assault with a deadly weapon with intent to kill.

When Henry Marrow, known to his friends and family as "Dickie," ran from that crossroads store that day, Teel and two of his sons chased him, beat him unmercifully and killed him in public as he pleaded for his life. Like many small Southern towns in 1970, Oxford had barely been touched by the civil rights movement. But in the wake of the murder of Henry Marrow, some people began to imitate Jesus. Young African Americans took to the streets, led by twenty-two-year-old Ben Chavis who would later become President of the NAACP. The Klan and returning black Vietnam veterans set up opposing bulwarks on Oxford's town square during the trial of Teel and his sons.

The Reverend Vernon Tyson, Tim's father, had grown up in North Carolina and he had attended Guilford College, a Quaker college in Greensboro where he had been overtaken by the powerful logic of A.J. Muste, the dean of American pacifism. When he attended a meeting of the Lions Club with the father of the girl he intended to marry and he refused to say the Pledge of Allegiance to the flag because he did not believe that the United States practices "liberty and justice for all," you can imagine how welcome he was in that family. When he began to read Reinhold Niebuhr, his former pacifism was shot full of holes, and then when he encountered Martin Luther King, Jr., who blended the nonviolence of Gandhi

with the political realism of Niebuhr, he realized that good intentions were not good enough. Love without power remains impotent, and power without love is bankrupt.

So, when Vernon Tyson urged his all-white Methodist congregation to widen their vision of humanity and pushed the town to come to terms with its bloody racial history, he was forced out of Oxford, North Carolina. He learned the truth of Emerson's words in his essay on "Self-Reliance" that "to be great is to be misunderstood." But he took to heart the advice of Bernice Johnson Reagon, the guiding spirit of Sweet Honey in the Rock: "If in moving through your life, you find yourself lost, go back to the last place where you knew who you were, and what you were doing and start from there."

So, we are thrust back on the pattern of Christ who emptied himself (Phil. 2: 5-11). Paul's hymn to the nature and work of Christ is foundational in his theology and his emphasis upon the Christian's imitation of the Lord. In fact, the very nature of emptying ourselves as Christ did is indispensable for our journey of authentic discipleship. If Christian existence is based upon the life of Christ, then we are to have a mind-set of humility and grace just as he did. Jesus did not regard his relationship with God as something to be hoarded and clung to. He poured himself into the form of a servant. Sacrificial love for others then becomes the gold standard of Christian conduct.

That form of life, dear friends, is antithetical to the kind of Joel Osteen/Eddie Long/Focus on the Family/Willow Creek theology that prevails today, the kind that embraces those who say, "Well, you know, I am spiritual but not religious. My job is to be true to myself, to develop my own spirituality. Organized religion demands too much and it interferes with my own self-development. My church doesn't pay enough attention to my individual needs."

Discipleship is marked by suffering, even death, never boasting and arrogance and self-regard. It is the antithesis to a materialistic approach of living. It is antithetical to the kind of gluttonous life which measures everything in terms of dollars and success and achievement, the kind that automatically translates "needs" into "rights."

In his Larger Catechism, Luther wrote, "It is the trust and faith of the heart alone that makes both God and an idol. . . .Anything on which your heart relies and depends, I say, that is really your God." If we want to know who our god is, we need only ask ourselves: on what do I depend?

Of all the poets I read and re-read, James Wright holds a special place in my spirit. A wandering, troubled brilliant alcoholic for many years, Jim Wright spent a good deal of time in flophouses on West Madison Street in Chicago before he got dry and found his beloved Annie. In a poem entitled "Saint Judas," he brings today's text into focus:

When I went out to kill myself, I caught

A pack of hoodlums beating up a man.

Running to spare his suffering, I forgot

My name, my number, how my day began,

How soldiers milled around the garden stone  
And sang amusing songs, how all that day  
Their javelins measured crowds: how I alone  
Bargained the proper coins, and slipped away.  
Banished from heaven, I found this victim beaten,  
Stripped, kneed, and left to cry. Dropping my rope  
Aside, I ran, ignored the uniforms:  
Then I remembered bread my flesh had eaten,  
The kiss that ate my flesh. Flayed without hope,  
I held the man for nothing in my arms.