

BORN AN OTHER

THERE ARE DISTINCT LIABILITIES BOTH IN BEING AND IN LIVING WITH A TEACHER --- PARTICULARLY A MUSIC TEACHER. THERE ARE ALSO MANY ASSETS INVOLVED IN TEACHING, ASSETS THAT FAR OUTWEIGH THE LIABILITIES. PRIMARY AMONG THEM ARE THE FOLLOWING: IT IS VIRTUALLY IMPOSSIBLE TO TEACH MUSIC WITHOUT TEACHING ABOUT LIFE, ABOUT RELATIONSHIPS, HUMAN COMMUNITY, AND VALUES SUCH AS LOVE, PEACE, JUSTICE AND UNDERSTANDING.

SECONDLY, THERE MAY NEVER BE A SUBSTITUTE EXPERIENCE FOR THE GRATIFICATION THAT COMES TO THE FACE OF ONE WHO UNDERSTANDS, INTERPRETS AND MASTERS A DIFFICULT FEAT FOR THE FIRST TIME OR FOR THE THRILL THAT COMES TO THOSE WHOSE JOINT ACCOMPLISHMENTS FAR EXCEED THEIR INDIVIDUAL EFFORTS AND EXPECTATIONS.

AND FINALLY, BOTH TEACHERS AND THOSE WHO LIVE WITH TEACHERS ARE CONTINUOUS RECIPIENTS OF THE EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCE --- AT THE DINNER TABLE NIGHTLY, ON TRIPS, IN BED, AND ALMOST ANYWHERE ELSE ONE IS, TO A REASONABLE DEGREE, A CAPTIVE!

TO ILLUSTRATE MY POINT, I WANT TO SHARE AN EDUCATIONAL HAPPENING WITH YOU THIS MORNING, A TRUE STORY, AN ACCOUNT THAT OCCURRED IN A TEACHER'S CLASSROOM AND WHICH I BELIEVE SHEDS LIGHT ON THE MEANING OF THE LECTURES FOR THIS ADVENT-CHRISTMAS SUNDAY. LIKE THE BIBLICAL STORY IT ELUCIDATES, THIS ACCOUNT IS ONE OF THE MOST SIMPLE, MOST TOUCHING, MOST PROVOCATIVE EXPERIENCES I HAVE EVER ENCOUNTERED. THE ACCOUNT IS A DIALOGUE BETWEEN A STUDENT AND HIS TEACHER. IT HAS THREE SCENES AND OCCURRED OVER A THREE-DAY PERIOD.

SCENE I: CHAUNCEY, AN EIGHTH GRADE STUDENT ENTERED HIS MUSIC CLASS TEN DAYS LATE, TEN UNEXCUSED DAYS LATE! THE FIRST MUSICAL KNOWLEDGE HIS TEACHER IMPARTED WAS TO INFORM HIM STERNLY THAT, SINCE THIS WAS A PARTICIPATION CLASS, ONE'S BODY HAD TO BE PRESENT DAILY AND THAT, IF HE EXPECTED JUST TO PASS THE COURSE, HE WOULD HAVE TO BE PRESENT AND TO DO "A" WORK EACH REMAINING DAY OF THE MARKING PERIOD. CHAUNCEY NODDED GRAVELY, AND THEN, WITH ONE EYEBROW RAISED IN THAT CONTINUOUSLY BEMUSED EXPRESSION HE WORE, HE GRINNED AND SAID, "YOU SURE DO LOOK PRETTY TODAY, MRS. V."

THE ASSIGNMENTS WERE GIVEN AND THE STUDENTS DISPERSED TO PRACTICE. NEAR THE END OF THE CLASS PERIOD, UNDER THE GUISE OF HELPING ONE ANOTHER FORM CHORDS, CHAUNCEY TOLD CURTIS, A FELLOW STUDENT, THAT EARLIER IN THE DAY HE HAD BEEN SENT TO THE PRINCIPAL BY ANOTHER TEACHER FOR DISCIPLINARY ACTION. FURTHER, HE INDICATED TO CURTIS THAT THAT TEACHER, IN FILLING OUT HIS REFERRAL FORM, HAD CHECKED THE APPROPRIATE BOX UNDER RACE AS "BLACK." "NOW CURTIS," CHAUNCEY SAID IN REASONED TONES, "THAT WAS FAR MORE IRRITATING TO ME THAN BEING SENT TO THE OFFICE. I AM, AFTER ALL AN OTHER!"

THE MOST IMPORTANT APPENDAGE FOR ANY TEACHER IS A BIG EAR, OR SAID DIFFERENTLY, A TEACHER'S GREATEST LIABILITY IS A HEARING DEFICIENCY! "EXCUSE ME, CHAUNCEY," THE TEACHER BROKE IN, "DID I HEAR YOU SAY YOU ARE AN OTHER?" "OH YES," REPLIED CHAUNCEY, "I'VE ALWAYS KNOWN I'M AN OTHER. TAKE A LOOK AT YOURSELF --- NO MISTAKE ABOUT IT; YOU'RE WHITE. AND LOOK AT CURTIS, HE'S DEFINITELY BLACK." THEN HE PAUSED, PUT ONE HAND ON HIS HIP AND HIS EYEBROW SHOT UP AS HE SAID: "THE WAY I FIGURE, I COULD BE WHITE, I COULD BE BLACK, OR MAYBE I'M INDIAN, OR MAYBE CHINESE."

“WAIT A MINUTE, CHAUNCEY --- NO WAY ON THE CHINESE.” “O.K., HE LAUGHED, “MAYBE I’M NOT CHINESE. I’M JUST SAYING THAT EVERY TIME I HAVE TO FILL OUT ONE OF THOSE FORMS THAT SAYS RACE -- - BLACK, WHITE, OR OTHER – I ALWAYS MARK OTHER. I’VE ALWAYS BEEN AN OTHER. (END OF SCENE 1: I’LL LET YOU IMAGINE OUR DINNER TABLE CONVERSATION THAT EVENING!)

SCENE II – AS POIGNANT AS BRIEF: AS CHAUNCEY WALKED INTO CLASS ON HIS SECOND DAY, HIS TEACHER STOPPED HIM AND SAID: “CHAUNCEY, ALL NIGHT I THOUGHT ABOUT OUR CONVERSATION YESTERDAY. I KNOW I’M AN OTHER, TOO, AND . . .” CHAUNCEY INTERRUPTED, “OH, MRS. V, I’M SORRY, YOU HAVE TO BE BORN AN OTHER.” THEN HE SMILED AND SAID, “BY THE WAY, YOU REALLY LOOK NICE TODAY.” AND WITH THAT HE SAUNTERED INTO CLASS, SLUNG A GUITAR OVER HIS SHOULDER AND PROCEEDED TO THE PRACTICE ROOM WHISTLING. (END OF SCENE II: WHO WAS THIS CHILD WHO MADE US THINK EVERY NIGHT AND OCCUPIED ALL OF OUR CONVERSATIONAL TIME? SURELY BEING AN OTHER HAD TO BE MORE THAN JUST AN ACCIDENT OF BIRTH!)

SCENE III: THE NEXT DAY A CACOPHONY OF SOUNDS MET THE TEACHER UPON HER ENTRY INTO THE ROOM AS TEN STUDENTS TUNED AND STRUMMED THEIR GUITARS. SHE PAUSED AND THEN RESOLUTELY WALKED OVER TO CHAUNCEY WHO WAS SITTING BY HIMSELF. “CHAUNCEY, LAST NIGHT I WAS SPEAKING WITH MY FRIEND, BRENDA ABOUT BEING AN OTHER, AND WELL, WE WERE WONDERING, ARE THERE OTHER QUALIFICATIONS FOR BEING AN OTHER BESIDES RACE?”

CHAUNCEY STRUMMED QUIETLY FOR SEVERAL MOMENTS WITHOUT ANSWERING. THEN HE LOOKED UP QUIZICALLY AND ASKED, “THIS BRENDA, DID SHE LIKE THE IDEA OF OTHERS?” “OH YES, CHAUNCEY, SHE WAS IMPRESSED BY THE CONCEPT. WE TALKED ABOUT IT FOR A LONG TIME. SHE WOULD LIKE TO MEET YOU. SHE THINKS YOU ARE THE ORIGINATOR OF A VERY SPECIAL IDEA!” HE SEEMED PLEASED AND WAS SILENT AGAIN FOR A FEW MOMENTS.

THEN HE SAID, “WOULD YOU SAY THAT THIS BRENDA COULD BE AN OTHER?” “OH YES, CHAUNCEY, I BELIEVE SHE IS.” “WHY?” “BECAUSE SHE IS A VERY LOVING, CARING, SENSITIVE KIND PERSON WHO REALLY WORKS FOR WHAT SHE BELIEVES. SHE SPENDS A LOT OF TIME WORKING WITH PEOPLE WHO ARE POOR, LONELY AND HURTING.”

FIFTY MINUTES LATER, AFTER SOME NEW CHORDS HAD BEEN LEARNED AND THE VALUE OF A DOTTED QUARTER NOTE HAD BEEN FAITHFULLY TAPPED OUT BY HANDS AND FEET, CHAUNCEY AND HIS TEACHER WALKED TOWARD THE LUNCHROOM. “MRS V, I’VE BEEN THINKING -- YOU AND I -- WE COULD LOOK FOR OTHERS, O.K.? TELL BRENDA SHE CAN LOOK, TOO. BUT REMEMBER, YOU MUST BE VERY SPECIAL; THERE ARE VERY FEW OTHERS AROUND TODAY!”

CHAUNCEY THEN LEFT TO JOIN HIS FRIENDS IN THE LUNCH ROOM. AFTER PICKING UP HIS TRAY, HE RETURNED FOR ONE FINAL COMMENT: “AND REMEMBER, MRS. V, IF ANYONE ASKS, ‘AM I AN OTHER?’ YOU KNOW RIGHT AWAY THEY ARE NOT! IF YOU’RE AN OTHER, YOU KNOW! YOU KNOW AND NEVER HAVE TO ASK!” (END OF SCENE III AND THE STORY)

WHENEVER I REFLECT ON THIS ACCOUNT (WHICH IS EVERY ADVENT AND IN BETWEEN), I FIND MYSELF IN ABSOLUTE AWE OF THIS EIGHTH GRADER’S UNDERSTANDING OF HIMSELF AND OF THE IMPLICATIONS OF HIS COMMENTS FOR OUR WORLD. CAN YOU IMAGINE WHAT THE WORLD MIGHT BE LIKE IF EVERYONE MARKED THE CATEGORY OTHER ON THE FORMS OF LIFE BECAUSE SHE/HE KNEW THEMSELVES TO BE OTHERS? AN ENTIRE WORLD OF OTHERS – INHERENTLY RICH IN TERMS OF CULTURAL DIVERSITY; A WORLD WHERE INTEGRITY, COMMUNITY, HARMONY, JUSTICE AND PEACE REIGN – A WORLD

WHERE SHALOM ACTUALLY MEANS A HARMONIOUS, PROPERLY FUNCTIONING, LIFE-GIVING ORDER FOR ALL HUMANKIND.

I BELIEVE CHAUNCEY'S INSIGHTS POINT US TOWARD THE TRUE MEANING OF ADVENT AND CHRISTMAS -- TOWARD THE HEART OF THE CHRIST EVENT. THIS ACCOUNT IS PERTINENT FOR THE SYMBOLIC MANNER IN WHICH IT REMINDS US OF ANOTHER: ". . . AND A LITTLE CHILD SHALL LEAD THEM. . . AND HE SHALL BE CALLED HOLY, THE SON OF GOD."

AND YET, IN THIS DAY AND AGE OF VIOLENCE, SUFFERING AND DEATH, OF UNCERTAINTY AND FEAR, DECEPTION AND GREED, WHEN SO MANY OF GOD'S PEOPLE HAVE HARDLY AN ANGEL IN THEIR SKY, IS SUCH AN IMAGE MERE FANTASY OR HYPERBOLE? OFTENTIMES, WE ARE INCLINED TO JOIN THE PSALMIST IN BEGGING OF GOD: "HOW LONG WILL YOU BE ANGRY WITH OUR PRAYERS? COME, RESTORE AND SAVE US." OR IS GOD'S TRUE MESSAGE JUST POSSIBLY THE SIGN DEPICTED BY THE PROPHET ISAIAH WHEN HE SAID, "HIS NAME SHALL BE IMMANUEL, THAT IS, GOD WITH US." --- TO WHICH MATTHEW ADDED, "HE SHALL BE NAMED JESUS FOR HE WILL SAVE HIS PEOPLE FROM ALL THAT WOULD ALIENATE THEM FROM GOD AND ONE ANOTHER."

OUR CONTEMPORARY CHILD, CHAUNCEY, WAS DEAD RIGHT ON ONE OTHER COUNT. "YOU HAVE TO BE BORN AN OTHER." GOD SO LOVED THIS WORLD THAT GOD CAME TO BE WITH US -- IMMANUEL. BY VIRTUE OF THAT BETHLEHEM BIRTH CENTURIES AGO, WHICH WE CONTINUE IN SOME MEASURE TO OBSERVE ANNUALLY, THE REALITY AND POTENTIAL OF OTHERNESS IS HELD OUT TO HUMANKIND.

WHETHER IT HAPPENED THE WAY EITHER MATTHEW OR LUKE SAY IT DID, WITH MAGI, ANGELS AND THE STAR, IS BESIDE THE POINT, BECAUSE THE ONE THING THAT BELIEVER AND NONBELIEVER ALIKE CAN BE EQUALLY SURE HAPPENED, WAS AN EVENT THAT CHANGED THE COURSE OF HUMAN HISTORY. AND IT WAS A PROFOUNDLY HUMAN EVENT --- THE BIRTH OF A HUMAN BEING, BY WHOSE HUMANNESS AN ASTONISHING VARIETY OF PEOPLE OVER AN INCREDIBLE PERIOD OF TIME HAVE MEASURED THEIR OWN HUMANITY. THERE HAVE BEEN THE WISE AND THE SIMPLE, THE SOPHISTICATED AND THE CRUDE, THE RESPECTFUL AND DISREPUTABLE, PEASANTS AND ARISTOCRATS, SAINTS AND SINNERS --- SOMEWHERE ALONG THE LINE, SOMETHING DEEP WITHIN THEM SPLIT STAR-WISE AND THEY BECAME NOT SIMPLY FOLLOWERS BUT BEARERS OF HIS LIFE. A BIRTH OF GRACE AND TRUTH TOOK PLACE WITHIN THEM SCARCELY LESS MIRACULOUS IN ITS WAY THAN THE ONE THE MAGI TRAVELED SO MANY MILES TO KNEEL BEFORE.

AND THE SAME REALITY AND POTENTIAL EXISTS FOR US! BY VIRTUE OF OUR BAPTISM, YOU AND I HAVE BEEN BORN OTHERS. FOR THE WHOLE NOTION OF OTHERNESS, OF HOLINESS, OF BEING SPECIAL CHILDREN OF GOD IS INHERENT IN OUR BAPTISM, IN BEING MARKED AND CLAIMED BY GOD IN CHRIST. WE ARE WHO WE ARE AND WE CANNOT DO ANYTHING ABOUT THAT. TO BE OTHER-WISE IS TO DENY OUR SPIRITUAL BIRTHRIGHT. WE ARE FREE TO REFUSE, IGNORE OR FORGET GOD'S INVITATION TO BE "A LIGHT UNTO THE NATIONS" OR TO JOIN ONE ANOTHER IN LOOKING FOR OTHERS --- BUT WE CANNOT CHANGE WHO WE ARE, WHOSE WE ARE, OR WHAT GOD CALLS US TO BE AND DO. THANK GOD FOR THAT!

LIKE JOSEPH AND MARY, AND JESUS, AND A MULTITUDE OF WITNESSES BEFORE US, WE WERE BORN TO BE OTHERS. WE WERE BORN FOR A PURPOSE: TO BE MESSENGERS OF REDEMPTION FOR THE COMING OF GOD'S KINGDOM, TO BE INSTRUMENTS OF HEALING FOR RESTORING WHOLENESS IN OUR BROKEN WORLD; TO BE AGENTS OF RECONCILIATION FOR PERSONS AND COMMUNITIES HURTING AND ESTRANGED; TO BE "CHRISTS" TO AND FOR ONE ANOTHER IN THE HUMAN FAMILY. MAYBE THAT IS WHY,

FROM CHAUNCEY'S PERSPECTIVE, THERE SEEM TO BE SO FEW OTHERS AROUND TODAY. PERHAPS, WE, TOO, LIKE NICODEMUS, HAVE NEED IN THE DEAD OF THIS COMING CHRISTMAS NIGHT TO COME AND HEAR HOW TO BE BORN AGAIN AN OTHER. "FOR REMEMBER, IF ANYONE ASKS, 'AM I AN OTHER?' YOU KNOW RIGHT AWAY THEY ARE NOT! IF YOU'RE AN OTHER, YOU KNOW AND NEVER HAVE TO ASK!"

WILLIAM SLOAN COFFIN SAID THAT GOD CAME TO EARTH AS A CHILD SO YOU AND I AND EVERY ADULT MIGHT FINALLY GROW UP. DURING THIS ADVENT SEASON, MANY OF US MAY ALREADY HAVE OR WILL SEE AGAIN MENOTTI'S "AM AHL AND THE NIGHT VISITORS." AM AHL, THE CRIPPLED BOY, IS MIRACULOUSLY CURED WHEN HE HIMSELF GIVES HIS CRUTCH TO THE INFANT JESUS. THAT'S THE CHRISTMAS PRESENT WE SHOULD ALL BRING TO THE MANGER --- OUR CRUTCHES, OUR WAYS OF MAKING GOD RESPONSIBLE FOR ALL THE THINKING AND DOING THAT WE SHOULD BE UNDERTAKING ON OUR OWN. COFFIN SAYS THAT GOD PROVIDES MINIMUM PROTECTION, BUT MAXIMUM SUPPORT --- SUPPORT TO HELP US GROW UP, TO STRETCH OUR MINDS AND HEARTS UNTIL THEY ARE AS WIDE AS GOD'S UNIVERSE, TO BECOME AS FREE FOR ONE ANOTHER AS GOD'S LOVE IS FREELY POURED OUT FOR US DURING THIS HOLY SEASON AND EVERY DAY WE ARE GIVEN LIFE.

AND SO, WHEN THE CHILDREN OF OUR WORLD REMIND US OF OUR TRUE IDENTITY AND PURPOSE, OR WHEN WE SEE THE HAND OF GOD AT WORK IN THE SOCIAL FERMENT OF ANY PART OF OUR GLOBE, OR WHEN WE HEAR THE GOOD NEWS OF THE SHEPHERDS ON A GALILEAN HILLSIDE TONIGHT OR THIS COMING CHRISTMAS EVE, MAY WE PAUSE LONG ENOUGH TO EXPERIENCE AWE, WONDER AND TERROR, "TO FEEL IN THE RUSH OF THE PASSING THE STILLNESS OF THE ETERNAL."

FOR MAY THE WORD OF GOD, WHICH CAME TO JOSEPH AND MARY, COME ALSO TO US. IN THIS SEASON OF BIRTH AND RE-BIRTH, MAY THAT WORD THAT CALLS FORTH SHOOTS FROM DEAD STUMPS, A PEOPLE FROM DRY BONES, BABES FROM BARREN WOMBS, AND LIFE FROM THE TOMB --- MAY THAT WORD, MIGHTIER THAN ANY POWER, CALL FORTH FROM US A NEW CREATION! ALLELUIA & AMEN.

James Vande Berg
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St Cyprians's Episcopal Church

Ps. 80:1-7; 17-19
Isa. 7:10-16
Matt. 1:18-25