

Ministry as a Subversive Activity

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Exodus 19:1–9

I am reading from UC Berkeley Professor Robert Alter's new translation:¹

On the third new moon of the Israelites' going out from Egypt, on this day did they come to the Wilderness of Sinai. And they journeyed onward from Rephidim and they came to the Wilderness of Sinai, and Israel camped there over against the mountain. And Moses had gone up to God, and the Lord called out to him from the mountain, saying, "Thus shall you say to the house of Jacob, and you shall tell to the Israelites: 'You yourselves saw what I did to Egypt, and I bore you on the wings of eagles and I brought you to Me. And now, if you will truly heed My voice and keep My covenant, you will become for Me a treasure among all the peoples, for Mine is all the earth. And as for you, you will become for Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.' These are the words that you shall speak to the Israelites."

And Moses came and he called to the elders of the people, and he set before them all these words that the Lord had charged him. And all the people answered together and said, "Everything that the Lord has spoken we shall do." And Moses brought back the people's words to the Lord. And the Lord said to Moses, "Look, I am about to come to you in the utmost cloud, so that the people may hear as I speak to you, and you as well they will trust for all time." And Moses told the people's words to the Lord.

Dignitaries, luminaries, colleagues, families, friends, guests, and especially you dearly loved members of this graduating class: this is a day to remember. I will remember this as a day I finally graduated from PLTS along with the graduating class. But especially I will remember this day as my last opportunity to see you particular graduates all together and to recall how blest we faculty and staff have been to have known you and to have shared in your good and gracious humanity during these past years. I know I speak for so many others when I acknowledge that we love you with a deep respect and affection, and we will miss you.

Last evening's baccalaureate service commemorated and maybe brought some closure and peace to an event that punctuated in a particularly emotional way the time that most of you graduates have spent at PLTS. It was the death two years ago during this very month, as many of you were about to venture out on a year of internship, of Tim Lull, our president, whose charisma, brilliance, and potent presence had energized, inspired, and touched the lives of all of us. He died so suddenly, so unexpectedly, so inexplicably, that the stability and coherence of our world threatened to break apart.

But Mike Gutzler reminded me a couple of weeks ago that Tim's death was not the first time that the "slings and arrows of outrageous fortune" had struck your class. He reminded me that when he and many of you arrived at PLTS four years ago, the year was 2001. And you had barely begun to get your bearings in your first month at PLTS when the World Trade Center was destroyed and the Pentagon attacked on September 11th – the 11th day of your first month at seminary! So your first semester of seminary life was darkened by an utmost cloud of that deep

¹ Robert Alter, *The Five Books of Moses: A Translation with Commentary*. Norton 2004, pp. 422–4.

gloom and fear that assaulted all of us in the months after those terrible images filled our TV screens and our nightmares. I was on sabbatical leave when you arrived on campus, and I was home that morning. My grandson Sammy came over that day, and I turned the TV off and played with our little boy instead of watching the planes hit the towers again and again all day as maybe some of you did. But the events of that day pretty much derailed my sabbatical and changed my life as it no doubt did yours. And for many of you graduating today, that day set the stage for your time in seminary.

Two years later, Tim's death meant that many of you left on internship under a new cloud, and when you returned here a year later, it was to a different seminary, with an interim president and an interim dean, many new staff members, and a new class of students who couldn't always understand and sometimes resented your continuing rehearsal of your losses from the past. And in November, of course, George Bush was re-elected, about which I shall say no more.

Of course, midyear Phyllis Anderson arrived, a new president with a new vision, the harbinger of new hope and renewed vitality, and all was looking up for your last semester, when one of your absolutely most favorite professors was struck down with a dire illness and it looked like another tragedy in the making, a personal disaster to mark the ending of your time at PLTS as a national disaster had marked its beginning.

Not all of you graduating today have experienced this story in the same way as those of you completing four full years here, but all of us have been touched by this history in ways known and unknown, conscious and unconscious.

And so, while graduations are always marked by both the elation of a task completed and a new future about to open and also by the grief that comes as we say good-bye to friends and relinquish the familiar for the sake of the unknown, this graduation weekend seems to have a more than ordinarily wistful and even melancholy tone to it, symbolized by the sketch of the sinking ship on the cover of the baccalaureate folder last night.

You may well have come to this mountain-top campus expecting an experience of transfiguration, and instead you have been thrown out on the high seas, or, to use this afternoon's metaphor instead of last evening's, you have been thrown out into the desert, to be tested, to be tempted, buffeted by life's misfortunes instead of delivered from them.

But I want to propose this afternoon that you have received a better seminary experience in the desert than you would have enjoyed safely withdrawn to a mountain-top. Like Moses and those desert wanderers in the Torah portion that I read, you have become Exodus people. Like them your journey took you into the barren wilderness, where the trails are unmarked, your provisions may well run out, your destination is unknown, your survival uncertain. And still, like them you have been borne on wings of eagles safely to this day. Like them you have become God's precious treasure, named a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. You have been converted, I think, into "God's subversives."

These Israelites were, you remember, political dissidents in Egypt, opponents of the pharaoh's oppressive rule, who escaped by the skin of their teeth into the desert, where they faced endless ordeals rather than political asylum. When they finally made their way to the base of Mount Sinai, and Moses climbed the mountain to talk with God, God adopted these ragtag revolutionaries as a special treasure exactly because they were dissidents. They were to be a kingdom of priests, not a kingdom of warriors, but a community at prayer, a collective of the devout communing with God. And they were to be a holy nation, not a nation like every other nation engaged in power plays to dominate, control, and gain privilege and power over others, but a *goi kadosh*, a people set apart, a cadre of critics who could see through the power plays of others

even as they refused to engage in those plays themselves. At Sinai I think God established their permanent identity as subversives to the nations of the world.

I got thinking about the subversiveness of ministry when I picked up an old copy of a book I read years ago before I had even heard much about PLTS, let alone landed here. It was a book that emerged out of the '60s, and it was called *Teaching as a Subversive Activity*. The authors, Neil Postman and Charles Weingartner, said their book was based on two assumptions: The first was that “the survival of our society is threatened by an increasing number of unprecedented and, to date, insoluble problems.” The second was “that something can be done to improve the situation.”²

The authors offered a list of the insoluble problems they had in mind, and many of them seem timely and current today. One of them they mentioned was “misinformation,” which “takes a variety of forms, such as lies, clichés, and rumors, and implicates everybody, including the President of the United States.”³ This, in a book published in 1969! If anything, the problem is worse today, when, in commercials and increasingly in public, political, and even religious life, language is used day in and day out to obscure and distort facts, manipulate emotions, and hoodwink the innocent and unsuspecting into support for one’s commodity or cause. Flagrant misinformation is presented in the media as gospel truth, and then commentators often use air time discussing how effectively the latest politician’s specious comments might influence public opinion, rather than attacking the inaccuracies and distortions in the comments themselves.

Religion is not exempt. The National Association of Evangelicals has published a document detailing their understanding of the Christian’s role in public life. It’s called *For the Health of the Nation: An Evangelical Call to Civic Responsibility*.⁴ When the document describes the rationale for Christian civic engagement, it uses the language of dominion: “We engage in public life because God created our first parents in his image and gave them dominion over the earth. . . . To restrict our stewardship to the private sphere would be to deny an important part of his dominion and to functionally abandon it to the Evil One.” This approach to public life, which pictures the world split between good and evil and challenges Christians to assert their God-given dominion over an otherwise evil world, has been called “Dominionism.”

In this month’s issue of *Harper’s Magazine*, Chris Hedges writes from the annual convention of the National Religious Broadcasters at the Anaheim Convention Center, where he encountered more radical versions of this dominionism, James Dobson being one of its more prominent advocates. Hedges writes, “A decades-long refusal to engage in politics at all following the Scopes trial has been replaced by a call for Christian ‘dominion’ over the nation and, eventually, over the earth itself. . . . America becomes, in this militant biblicism, an agent of God, and all political and intellectual opponents of America’s Christian leaders are viewed, quite simply, as agents of Satan.”⁵

Today’s *New York Times* editorially commemorates the courage of Air Force chaplain, Captain MeLinda Morton, an ELCA pastor, who this week exposed for the press the unconstitutional proselytizing of Air Force Academy students “by evangelists whose efforts were blessed by

² Neil Postman & Charles Weingartner, *Teaching as a Subversive Activity*. Dell 1969, p. xi.

³ *Teaching*, p. xii.

⁴ http://www.nae.net/images/civic_responsibility2.pdf

⁵ Chris Hedges, “Soldiers of Christ II. Feeling the Hate with the National Religious Broadcasters,” *Harper’s Magazine*. May 2005, p. 58.

authority figures in the chain of command.” One chaplain apparently had “instructed 600 cadets to warn their comrades who had not been born again that ‘the fires of hell’ were waiting.” Captain Morton was removed last week as executive officer of the chaplain office.⁶ She told the press she knew her military career was over.

I’m recounting all this because I’m visualizing the ministries you in your various roles might engage in the context of a world glutted with commercial, political, and religious claptrap. Postman and Weingartner describe “an interviewer . . . trying to get Ernest Hemingway to identify the characteristics required for a person to be a ‘great writer.’ As the interviewer offered a list of various possibilities, Hemingway disparaged each in sequence. Finally, frustrated, the interviewer asked, ‘Isn’t there any one essential ingredient that you can identify?’ Hemingway replied, ‘Yes, there is. In order to be a great writer a person must have a built-in, shockproof crap detector.’”⁷

Can we say that, in order to be a faithful minister of the Gospel—in whatever role you may find yourself—you must have a built-in, shockproof crap detector? that, as a minister of Christ—whether that is a ministry in daily life or a ministry in Sunday worship—you are called to deconstruct, that is, to subvert and expose the “misconceptions, faulty assumptions, superstitions, and outright lies” to which people so commonly devote themselves?

That was certainly how Jesus conducted himself. In the Gospels he is portrayed as the master crap detector, the one who exposed the hypocrisy of the conventional pieties of his day, the one who punctured the pretenses of the proud and powerful. “You have heard them tell you from of old, . . . but I tell you. . . .”

I am not suggesting that Lutheran congregations should become the local caucus of the Democratic Party at prayer. (Though I can imagine worse ideas!) All political parties and every religious community has its fair share of deceptions, delusions, and just plain idiocies to debunk and dethrone.

Luther Seminary NT professor David Fredrickson has written that congregations should become what he calls “communities of moral deliberation,”⁸ and I think he is just right. I would like ELCA congregations to be communities whose members care enough about the public life of their towns, their counties, their states, their country, and their globe that they will, first of all, pay attention to what is going on. They will read the papers and watch C-SPAN and listen to NPR and become familiar with what their representatives in government are saying and doing. And then, secondly, they will have their antennae out eager to pick up the vibes and detect the hidden and the concealed messages behind the rhetoric and the fine phrases. They will sniff out the baloney. They will alert one another to the crap. And then, third, they will confront their representatives with their discoveries. Some will take on one issue; others may focus on different issues. Some will go it alone. Others will form or join coalitions of folks who are dealing in depth with a single problem. They will write, phone, email their representatives on the city council or in congress and find their public voice, even if it is just to inform their leaders they have paid attention and they have noticed that their statements the other day didn’t square with the facts.

⁶ *New York Times*, May 14, 2005, A26.

⁷ *Teaching*, pp. 2f.

⁸ David Fredrickson, “Pauline Ethics: Congregations as Communities of Moral Deliberation,” in Karen L. Bloomquist and John R. Stumme, eds., *The Promise of Lutheran Ethics*. Fortress 1998, pp. 115–129, 200–204.

In *A Church for An Open Future*,⁹ an interesting little book that was the published version of his D.Min. thesis, ELCA pastor Jack Lundin described post-service coffee hours in his congregation as a kind of fair, where individuals could freely set up tables to promote their favorite issues and locate others who might join them. Can you imagine a church where some members decide they want to work on the issue of the future of social security, others on health care, others on peace or world hunger? Or maybe your church is one that would better focus on local issues—the quality of the schools, making sure that evolution and modern science are actually taught in science classes, zoning issues, public utilities, roads and public transit, maintaining the public libraries and parks—local issues are huge and immediate.

Another subversive activity, in addition to engagement with our governmental representatives, might be to assure that our worship ritualizes our opposition to prevailing cultural norms. Instead of griping and complaining, and cursing government, I would love to see a congregation incorporate into its Sunday worship on or around April 15th each year a ritual to celebrate joyfully the opportunity we have as citizens to pay our taxes in support of the public good.

It would be the time to reinforce and applaud our commitment to our common life and not only to our own individual and private acquisitiveness. Maybe it would get us off of the selfish, self-centered, self-serving mantra, “No new taxes,” and onto slogans like “No child without adequate food, shelter, and health care,” regardless of what it costs! It is a distortion and a lie to portray taxes as though the State extorts from us our hard-earned wages in order pay off “special interests.” Taxes are the means by which citizens choose to support the common interest and the common good through shared financial responsibility for the quality of life of the whole community. Worship becomes subversive when it attacks self-serving distortions and creates a vision of a better way.

To be an exodus people, a priestly kingdom, a holy people, a treasure for the common good, we can't be content to just go along compliantly with whatever we are told. To commune with God means to raise critical questions about every human claim. To be a people set apart is never to fit too comfortably or complacently into the assumptions and conventionalities of any group or nation. To be an exodus people is to be a people on the move, never established once and for all, never having figured everything out at last, but alert, awake, always exploring, always investigating a future that is always open.

There is another way I think we are all called to ministry that is subversive. A common view of the world is that it is a dangerous place. Lurking everywhere are enemies and threats against which one must constantly bolster oneself. In Florida the legislature has now made it legal for individuals not only to carry guns, but to use them in public places for self-defense. According to the law, you're not even required to run away if you sense some threat. Just stand your ground and plug your potential assailant and anyone else who might get in the way.

We Christians are called to subvert and depose this paranoid view of the world and replace it with the trust that the God who means us well will provide for us what we need, indeed, provide us with life abundant. So this world, in which merchants of terror attack and disease sometimes kills and dreams can sometimes be shattered, remains nonetheless a good world and a gracious home. To engage in a ministry of subversion is to turn the world upside down so that all can see God's goodness in, with, and under the wretchedness of the moment. I catch that subversive vision so often when I play with Sam and Ben, those 5-year-old and 2-year-old grandsons you have so often heard me prattle on about. Sam will exclaim, “Oh, look, grandpa, a snail!” His little brother Ben will come running over for a look and add his own, “ ‘Nail, Bunka!”

⁹ Jack Lundin, *A Church for An Open Future: Biblical Roots and Parish Renewal*. Fortress 1977.

And as I have often quoted Sam and Ben, I want to quote again what I think may be my favorite poem, Gerard Manley Hopkins' subversive poem, that cuts beneath the crap to the deep grandeur of God's goodness:

The world is charged with the grandeur of God.
It will flame out, like shining from shook foil;
It gathers to a greatness, like the ooze of oil
Crushed. Why do men then now not reck his rod?
Generations have trod, have trod, have trod;
And all is seared with trade: bleared, smeared with toil;
And wears man's smudge and shares man's smell: the soil
Is bare now, nor can foot feel, being shod.
And for all this, nature is never spent;
There lives the dearest freshness deep down things;
And though the last lights of the black West went
Oh, morning, at the brown brink eastward, springs —
Because the Holy Ghost over the bent
World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings.

In your subversive ministry and Christian life may you ever be warmed at the Spirit's breast and borne along on ah! bright wings.