

The Dance of Redemption and the Poetics of Obligation
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It started as an ordinary BC Friday.

A BC Friday for me is a Friday when the Ph.D. seminar in theological ethics meets at Boston College. Friday mornings I am up at 5 AM to go to the 6am prayer meeting and bible study at People's Baptist Church in Boston. I am back home by 8:30. Coffee. I finish reading the papers that faculty and students will present. I get out the door around 9:50, ready or not. It is a short drive down Beacon Street in Newton; I listen to the news, the BBC on WBUR; there is a report about world-wide childhood poverty. Thirty thousand children die everyday from poverty related conditions. That is all I hear. Thirty thousand dead. I sit at a stop light waiting to make my turn onto the campus. The young, scrubbed, healthy, privileged students in flip-flops and sneakers and UGS go about their business. It is hard to imagine that thirty-thousand children will die a needless, preventable death today. I do not see these children.

I do not remember much else from that day. Were the trees winter bare or autumn gold or spring green? Was the day sun bright or rain gray? I cannot remember. Thirty thousand children died that day. What was the other news of that day? I do not remember. What manchild, womanchild famous for being famous celebrity was doing whatever? It hardly matters. Thirty thousand children died that day. What Hollywood break up or new coupling, what new pirate, penguin, Harry Potter, Batman, Spiderman, Oceans movie was out? Do I care? Weapons of mass distraction. Thirty thousand children died that day. What ball season was it?

They are all the same to me. Thirty-thousand children died that day. What presidential, congressional, political machinations filed the air that day? That noise has escaped my memory.

Thirty-thousand children died that day. And the suicide bombs continued to explode in Iraq, and the horror of the genocide in Darfur continued, and violence in America's cities claimed more young lives, and my mind could only absorb and retain one fact that day. Thirty -thousand children died from poverty related conditions.

My teacher, theological ethicist Dr. Katie Cannon, a womanist thinker, took the Dance of Redemption formulated by her teacher Dr. Beverly Harrison, a feminist thinker, and made it her own. The dance is an analytical process, the steps of which call for both analysis and action, both theory and praxis, in a way that intends liberation. It is a pedagogical and analytical method that allows students to become their own teachers. It seeks to debunk, unmask, and disentangle various historical, ideological, theological and ethical truth claims that serve to preserve death dealing elements of the status quo (Cannon138). The objective of the dance is to clarify “obligations, values and virtues” and to infuse our humanity with sacred power (141).

There are seven steps to this dance: conscientization, emancipatory historiography, theological resources, norm clarification, strategic options, annunciation/celebration, re-reflection and strategic action. Conscientization, an awakening, is the first step of the dance. Thirty -thousand children in the world dead every day God sends was a moment of awakening for me. Where are these children? Why do I not see them in my daily life, on the television news, in my newspaper and magazines? Is the rare commercial for Christian Children's Charity enough? They are far too easy to miss or to evade with one click of my remote control. Thirty -thousand children dead everyday. This fact has no face, no smiles, laughter, tears. This fact does have

sixty-thousand parents and countless brothers and sisters and aunts and uncles and cousins and neighbors and friends. And they too have no face for me. This fact has no body, no flesh. Yet, it is a fact that stops me cold. It is a fact that strikes me with the force of thunder and lightning, that interrupts my journey on my own Damascus road, blinds me and asks me to account for my actions. And then it puts a new demand on my life.

It is a new awakening. I am a woman who is aware of the economic injustices in this world. I am a woman teaching and speaking and writing about our responsibilities to the least among us. I raise my voice very chance I get about the obscene waste that is war, and I argue for a reallocation of our nation's resources. Still, thirty -thousand dead children in one day calls for a new imperative. Such is the power of coming to consciousness. We become aware of a circumstance and aware of our responsibility to it again and again. Such is the power of awakening. We awaken anew every day. And the awakening says: "dance the dance of redemption."

The word "conscientization" derives from conscience. Conscience is related to its homonym conscious. The conscience at the root of conscientization is the "conscience" that contains within it the word science. Science is knowledge; science is learning; it is knowledge gained through experience. Conscience that contains science also calls us to become aware of the moral and ethical components of our knowing; it is that aspect of ourselves that judges our actions. Most of us have a conscience that will keep us awake at night if we do something that is too far outside our moral boundaries. The other word conscious, the conscious with an i-o-u- contained within it, means to be awake to our own existence, sensations, and thoughts. I know myself as myself. I know the world around me. What I do, I do with full knowledge of what I do.

I do not act accidentally. I intend to do what I do. Thus the first step in the dance, conscientization, causes me to come to awareness, not only of the reality of my own being in the world, but it also causes me to become aware of my moral and ethical obligations in the world. It causes me to not only become aware of the fact of thirty- thousand children dead daily, but it causes me to know that this knowledge brings with it a moral and ethical responsibility. I am accountable. I must respond.¹

The second step in the dance is emancipatory historiography. No event happens without a cause. Thirty-thousand children do not die every day from poverty for no reason, even if that reason is neglect. Humankind has produced political and economic systems that make some people rich and leave a great number of people behind. Thirty -thousand children dead from preventable circumstances is not an inevitability. It is not God -ordained. Nature does not require it. This step in the dance beckons us to consider history. And history is not one story.

We live in a postmodern moment. The postmodern moment is not only an epoch, but it is also a mode of interpretation that challenges the idea that history is one grand narrative. The postmodern challenges the Enlightenment idea that there is only one correct answer to every question. The postmodern understands that history is written by people in power, and that historians write history from a particular perspective. They ask particular questions with a particular purpose in mind. So an emancipatory historiography seeks to read and to write history

¹ See H. Richard Niebuhr's The Responsible Self

with the idea of liberation in mind. This is a historiography that not only interrogates the lives, the thinking, the decisions of people in power, but it also interrogates the lives of ordinary people as a source for historical analysis. Emancipatory historiography looks to tell a more complex story about the way power functions and shapes the lives of people whose power is not the power that manipulates the mechanics of government, of business, or of religious institutions. There is a power that acts, and there is a power that lets, that allows actors to act. The power of ordinary people is the power that lets; it is the capacity to endure the machinations of institutional actors; the power of ordinary people is an unrecognized, unacknowledged power that carries the load, does the heavy lifting, gets dirt under their fingernails, sweats and strains, prays and cries, as they do what they must do to survive.

An emancipatory historiography is a history told from a bottom-up perspective. An emancipatory historiography helps ordinary people see our lives in all its squalor and in all of its splendor. It helps us all see our poverty and our wealth. It liberates us to understand the nature of our power and to act within and to act through the power that is ours. Emancipatory historiography helps ordinary people see the power of solidarity and the liberation power in a willingness to say: “no.” To say: “no more, no longer.”

The third step of the dance is an exploration of theological resources that are at work in the event. Thirty-thousand children dead every day from poverty-related causes. What theology blesses this? What god-word names this? What faith seeking understanding explains this? What doctrine of sin and salvation, of God, of Christology or pneumatology, or ecclesiology of theodicy or of eschatology makes such a fact fit into the puzzle and the mystery that is God? The death-dealing aspects of history, theology and ethics walk hand in hand, side by side. The

theological resources look at the death-dealing aspects of our religious traditions and call them by their proper name. Evil. Theological resources help us to understand that only idols require blood. False gods crave human sacrifice, and false gods promise material prosperity for a few at the cost of poverty for many. Theological resources help to take religion past faith to love, past the death-dealing nativistic, tribalistic exclusionary aspects of faith to the transcendence of love.² At the same time, theological resources bring together all available theological means and understandings to find God and a relationship with God that is life-giving and life-sustaining. Theological resources breathe divine breath into human lives and anoints our dry drudgery with the oil of grace.

The word resource, at its root, is the Latin *re + sugere*. It is the resurgence, the resurrection of aspects of God that have been forgotten. God is Love. God requires justice, mercy and humility (Micah 6:4) God incarnated in God's humanity identifies with the least. "as you did it to one of the least of these, you did it to Me." (Matthew 25:40) Further, "as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me." (Matthew 25:45) Our neglect along with the political and economic systems we allow kills the image of God thirty-thousand times every day. God in God's childhood dies thirty thousand time every day.

² See Ludwig Feuerbach's Essence of Christianity

At the same time, theological resources reveal and resurrects the goddess. The Mother God, El Shaddai, God Almighty, the fecund God of breasts and the womb, the God that nurtures, that is always with us, the God we dare not blaspheme, the wisdom of God, the God who finds Her voice and takes Her place beside the Father God when we use our theological resources to bring Her back to life.³ She is Holy Spirit. Further, the idea of resource as surge can also be understood as fresh energy, as the inexhaustible supply of the spiritual fuel we need, so that we can do what we need to do. Theological resources helps us renew our relationship with a life-giving transcendence; it gives fresh understanding and more strength to confront the Evil that causes thirty-thousand children to die every day.

Step four. Norm clarification. The norms of a society are the customs, the mores that guide society. They are the typical, the standard behavior that becomes the yardstick by which most people measure their own behavior and the behavior of others. However, norms can be wrong. Customs can be hidebound, inflexible, intolerant, prejudiced. People standing at the margins of society raise their hands to say: "Excuse me. This is not working for me." And, very often rather than taking a hard look at its own flaws, the norms of society says to those on the margins: "Something is wrong with you." Society and its norms require conformity. Norm clarification helps us see that something may be wrong with the norms of society. Our mores, our ethos may be mistaken; very often they contain impurities.

The clarification helps us to see the impurities of our mores and helps us to see what we ought to do to remove the impurities. It is a refining process; it is a process that clears away confusion. It is lucid, easily understood. And it is a clarion call. When we see more clearly,

³ See Nathan Stone' Names of God

understand more truly, know more purely, ethics calls us to act. Norm clarification reveals our obligations in a bright undeniable light. We ignore these obligations at our own risk.

Now is the moment in the dance that requires us to think about what to do. Action comes after analysis. But, analysis cannot go on forever. Obligation requires action. It is this step where we consider our strategic options. Strategic options march to military music. The idea of strategy is the idea of a grand plan necessary to win a war. It is a plan to destroy an enemy through tactical acts. It connotes efficiency, efficacy, skill, intention and an achievable goal. At its Greek root, the word “strategic” takes us to the idea of a general; it takes us to the highest ranking officer in the army who is responsible for implementing a plan of action that will fulfill the grand strategy. The root of the word “general” takes us to the word “kind”; it takes us to procreation, birth, family, tribal groups. Again we are presented with the death-dealing and the life-giving aspects of the same idea. The obverse and reverse of the same coin. Generals can implement plans to kill an enemy for the sake of the survival of their own kin, kind, family, tribe. However, what happens when the world is the womb, when all of humanity is kin, kind, family, tribe? The general responsibility, the general’s obligation, the strategic plan ought to think about what is good for all of humanity and the world that gives it birth. Mother Nature.

There are choices. When we think of the choices available to us, we ask what is life-giving rather than what is death-dealing. And the life and comfort of one tribe or nation ought never be purchased at the cost of another. Obligation ties us to each other. As John Caputo reminds us, obligation is related to religion (*Against Ethics* 18) Obligation is kin to ligature and ligaments. Obligation binds us fast to all of humanity and requires our strategic options to be choices that are good for the whole. Then, after the options are chosen, we name and celebrate

the decision.

This brings us to the next step of the dance: annunciation and celebration. Annunciation is an announcement of what is coming. We make a public declaration. When we choose what we plan to do, we let the whole world know. There are no sneak attacks in the dance of redemption; there is transparency; there is openness. It makes an announcement so that people can know and engage in the new understanding, share in the analysis or challenge it. We make a declaration as part of a public conversation intended to build consensus. There is a risk in the annunciation. Suppose what we announce does not come to pass? What happens to our credibility when we lay out new options and the world is not with us, when the world is against us, when it questions our sanity? We may need to take another look at our options and at our plans. Or, we may need to summon the courage to go forward despite the criticism, remembering that the strategic options have come after serious historical, theological, ethical and strategic analysis. The decisions that we name and announce have not arrived casually; they have come from effort, and, in some cases, no small amount of negotiation and even compromise. So, it is important to have the courage to commit to our decisions to the extent that we can tell if humanity is making progress toward solving the problem.

Further, in this step of the dance we celebrate. We dance. We bop, boogie, bounce, bump, step, jump, jive, slide, stomp, hop, leap, pivot, shuffle, shimmy, spin, step, walk, stride, twirl. The dance is a holy dance. It is a shout. The dance is a dance intended to invoke and to evoke the transcendent. It invites the divine. The concept of celebration is a festive event, but the concept is also the religious ceremonies that we perform. We celebrate the holiness of life; we celebrate the holiness of both human and divine relationships. This is a moment for worship

that makes a joyful noise. An example of this comes from the civil rights movement. When nonviolent marchers were about to take to the street for justice, knowing they would possibly face violence, they prepared through worship. It was a moment of annunciation and celebration, a gesture to make the effort holy, to turn attention to a divine purpose of justice and equality. They sang praises. It was worship that fueled an activist spirituality and made the dialectic of the sacred real.

Thirty-thousand children dead from poverty related circumstances is nothing to celebrate. It is difficult to praise God in the face of such a fact. However, finding solutions that will stop this horror is something to celebrate with all that we can bring to the task, including our embodied religious expressions, including our prayers, our tears and our praise.

Last, re-reflection and strategic action. When we reflect, we are thinking carefully. The actions we are about to take are not uninformed. At the same time, our reflections, our thinking is a mirror. This mirror shows us ourselves in all our beauty and in all our ugliness. Our thinking is a mirror that we look into moment by moment, and we ought to work to avoid narcissistic, solipsistic error. This is why the discourse is important. This is why we ought to include in our reflections those who do not see the world as we do; this is why we ought to respect those whose views are opposite from our own. Once we reflect, then we must act.

The preparations have been made; we have rehearsed our parts and learned our lines. The curtain goes up, the drama begins; we take our place on the stage to perform our part for a moment. Shakespeare reminds us: "All the world's a stage, And all the men and women merely

players: They have their exits and their entrances, and one man in his time plays many parts.”⁴

But, unlike a play that will end when the curtain comes down and the audience goes home with little in the outside world having changed as a result, the intent of the dance of redemption and of the strategic action that results is a new world. The dance dances with a purpose, and in the presence of the fact of thirty-thousand children dead everyday, the purpose is to end this needless preventable death. The dance intends to redeem, recover, rescue, ransom, buyback, convert, set free, deliver. The dance intends to meet our human obligation to others, and by so doing to meet our obligation to ourselves.

American philosopher and theologian John Caputo, in his book Against Ethics, tells us that obligation happens. When we become awake to disaster, “dis” meaning apart from and “aster” meaning star, we become awake to our unguided existence (27). We become awake to our haplessness, to our lucklessness. We are unguided. We have been led astray. God is silent. Our moral philosophy fails us. The categorical imperative, the greatest good for the greatest number, the good, the beautiful and the true fall short; Being turn its back on us; the leap of faith leaves us suspended in midair, yet we know that we must act because obligation happens. When disaster strikes, to what extent does this indicate that the world has lost its guiding star? And in the wake of the consequences of such loss, in the event of a dying child, we come into the presence of an unyielding demand. Obligation demands that we act. Thus, we ought to act from

⁴ From Shakespear’s As You Like It

the poetry of our being. We act through the creative impulse that rearranges the world through image and simile and metaphor, through rhythm and rhyme, through tense and time that touches the emotional core of our souls with an emergent insistence that comes when we are face to face with disaster. The truth is that life is tragic, too too often tragic. How do we transform tragedy into grace?

A poetics of obligation, which is a disciple of deconstruction,⁵ reads the meta-narratives of our public discourse and looks for who is missing from the story, and it looks for the story of those who do not hold power. It looks for those who are left out, who are the least and the last. Caputo writes: “I begin where I am, from below, on the receiving end of a message from I know no where. Obligation happens” (24). Further, a poetics of obligation causes us to see our ethical responses beyond the dictates of law. Caputo reminds us: “Law always silence, coerce, squeeze, or level someone, somewhere, however small” (87). The poetics of obligation and deconstruction are kin to prophetic pragmatism that understands the tragic as an inescapable fact of human existence. The tragic is both individual and institutional. It results from both individual and institutional decision.⁶ The poetics of obligation, deconstruction and prophetic pragmatism are all prophetic in the sense that they require us to see the widow, the orphans, the strangers in the land; they require us to see the poorest of the poor. They not only require that we see them, but they require that we do them justice.

Justice has a claim on us. The equity that justice requires has a claim on us beyond anything the law requires because all too often the law is made by the powerful for the sake of

⁵ Deconstruction is an interpretive event linked to the philosophy of Jacques Derrida.

⁶ See Cornel West’s “On Prophetic Pragmatism” in The Cornel West Reader.

the powerful. The Other has a claim on us; the lowly, least, and last Other has a claim on us. And we are hostage to that claim (91). And I say: our humanity is hostage to that claim because we are human and become more human through the justice and righteousness of our relationships. Our humanity depends upon this claim. Our lives depend upon it. Our lives are not threatened by the gun-toting outlaws who say: “your money or your life.” In this scenario all the outlaw can take from us is the body that is temporary flesh living for a brief moment as fleeting as morning dew. The body is mist; it is the steam on the bathroom mirror.

However, the child who is victim of a disaster, who is victim to the disaster of poverty stops us, waylays us, holds us up with the demand that says your values or your restful sleep, your necrophilic devotion to dead stuff or your peace of mind, your money or your sanity and your humanity. Our obligation to the Other, the least Other the lowly Other only happens when we recognize that our own psychic, emotional and physical lives are at stake.

Moreover, it is important to recognize the conflict of interpretations when it comes to obligations. Such a conflict can lead to a conflict of obligations. Our unbalanced sense of obligation to one group of people and one set of principles can very well lead to disaster for another group of people or for another set of principles. How do we know? How do we decide between competing obligations? Caputo says: “we ought to tell as many competing stories as possible” (26). We choose the one that will be less disastrous. For me, this is not quite enough because we very often cannot foresee the disastrous consequences of our decisions. And then there are those times when our limited sense of ourselves makes us think that our obligation to ourselves means that someone else will have to suffer. Too bad. So sad. Tough. But, that is life.

Thirty-thousand children die daily within a global political/economic system that benefits a small percentage of the world's population. That system exists because we think our obligation to feed, cloth, house, educate ourselves and our families trumps our obligation to some faceless, nameless child either next door, down the street, across town or on the other side of the world. Our obligation to get through the day trumps our obligation to understand the politics and economics of poverty. Our obligation to live through the tragedies of our own lives trumps our obligation to respond to the disaster of Others. It is this fragmentation and this fatigue that hides the reality of obligation. This reality knows that our greatest obligation to ourselves is our obligation to others. This is true because like it or not, understand it or not, believe it or not, our lives are bound together with the child next door, down the street, across town or across the globe. My tragedies are connected to the tragedies of a starving child wherever s/he may be. The confusion and fear and frustration that lead to local violence in the United States is bound to the confusion and fear and frustration that lead to the violence of war across the globe. Obligation happens. Yet it only happens when we have a larger view of ourselves, of our lives and of the meaning of what it is to be human.

And as human beings we are not only bound to the innocent, to the victim, to the least and the last. We are also bound to the powerful. We are bound to the perpetrators of the crimes of violence and poverty. Caputo begins from below, and so do I. For Caputo, our obligation does not extend to those who create victims. He writes: "People who produce victims are not the 'Other' to whom we owe everything. The Other. . . is always the widow, the orphan, the stranger that is emblematically, the victim not the victimizers" (119). He tells us further that in the name of the victim Other, we ought to resist. I agree with Caputo that we ought to resist, but we ought

to resist in the name of both the victim Other and the victimizer Other. We resist in the name of justice. Justice requires us to inform the powerful Other, the victimizer Other of h/er own fragile state. Within the logic of differance,⁷ when we understand that one is the other different and deferred, where we know that the first shall be last and the last first, our obligation to the powerful Other is to warn h/er that disasters retreat before no one. Caputo puts this beautifully:

We are disasters all, some of us more than others, but this for me has the effect of binding us together. We are all siblings of the same dark night, tossed by the waves of the same dark sea, huddled together for companionship and mutual support, held in a fragile link by a *pathos* and proximity and *consolatio*. (54)

Thus, it is a tragic illusion and a bitter lie to think that our privileged national, economic, political, racial, religious, gender or sexual orientation status will protect us from disaster. At the end of the day, once stripped of rank and place and title and name, we are bodies. Once stripped of clothes and jewelry and soaps and shampoo and deodorant and perfume and nail polish and hair oil and gels and mousse and tooth paste and mouthwash, we are all putrid flesh inching toward death. What will be left of us on earth in history, in memory, will be the justice of our relationships. What will that history say? What will that memory be? It is an open question for each of us to ponder. It is an open question for us to consider as a nation. It is an open question for us to contemplate as the church of Jesus Christ.

⁷ See Jacques Derrida's "Differance" in *Margins of Philosophy*.

Obligation happens. The poetics of obligation helps us to know that we are bound together from the greatest to the least, disasters all. When we think about our obligation to the thirty thousand children who will die today because of poverty related circumstances, it is important to understand that poor children live inside poor families made poor by that family's ability or inability to cope with systems of economic organization that puts far too many people at an economic disadvantage. It is important to see how poverty in the inner cities, the suburbs and rural communities of the United States is linked with poverty all over the world. It is important to see how global poverty is linked to global corporate realities, to environmental degradation and war. All of this is much too much to consider properly here today. However, it is important to keep these connections in mind as we think about the problem of childhood poverty, fully cognizant of the necessity to understand the complexity of the problem. There are no easy answers here.

Obligation happens. It happens not only to individuals, but it happens to institutions that are constituted by individuals. Thus the Church has an obligation to the thirty -thousand children in the world who will die to day, and tomorrow and the day after. We ask: what is the guiding star of the Church? That star is the life and teachings of Jesus Christ.

Jesus was not an innocent man. The Roman Empire nailed him to the cross because he was a threat. Recent New Testament scholarship – the work of Richard Horsely, John Dominic Crossan, Allen Callahan, William Herzog, Obery Hendricks and others – tells a story of Jesus as preacher, teacher, leader whose ministry carried the potential to explode the status quo. Born in the most lowly of circumstances to Galilean peasants, born of uncertain parentage, with no formal education, title, or rank, this preacher/teacher taught fearlessness, economic cooperation

and radical love. When empires hold power through force and through fear because the empire has the power to take away your property, liberty or life, for people to live in and through the knowledge that there is another kingdom, another realm to which they owe a stronger allegiance, revolution becomes possible. People are no longer afraid.

One of the fears that the teachings of Jesus helps us to set aside is economic. Jesus teaches there are righteous economic relationships that ought to exist between God and H/er people and between individuals and the community. In a political economy that existed through a three-tiered tax structure – tribute to Rome, tax to Herod, the local ruler, and tithes to the Temple – peasants earning a subsistence living often found themselves deep in debt. Any little thing – bad weather or sickness – could push an individual or a family e=over the economic edge. Jesus came teaching forgiveness of debt. He came teaching a value system that did not locate one's worth in the stuff that one could store up where moths eat it away, where thieves break in and steal (Matthew 6:19). Jesus taught that salvation was in the care of the poor, the weak, those in prison, those who are sick. Jesus came preaching a new economic organization based on a shared abundance when the rich are willing to give their wealth away. He came teaching a new economic system where the poor are blessed and the rich suffer.

He made this point to ordinary people using the ordinary knowledge already available to them. William Herzog helps us to understand this. Reading Jesus' parables through the lens of Paulo Friere's pedagogy of the oppressed that says when we teach anyone – young, old, privileged or oppressed – that the student comes to the learning experience with knowledge. And, on some level teachers are learners and learners are teachers. New information is processed and absorbed through the mediation of what is already known. Herzog writes:

If the parable worked in this fashion, the task of telling parables became part of a larger learning process that encouraged and enabled peasants to interpret their world. As the parables crystallized the peasants' insights into how their rulers' practices were affecting their village life, they also galvanized the formation of the Jesus movement. (58)

So in the parable of the rich man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19-31) the world is turned upside down. The poor and despised Lazarus rests in the arms of Abraham and the rich, well-fed man languishes in torment. Wealth is not a sign of God's blessing and poverty is not a sign of God's curse. And since wealth in this world and poverty in this world are not necessarily ordained by God, then this leaves the entire economic system that makes some wealthy and makes some poor open to question. Herzog writes: "Lazarus is typical of the people who are excluded from kinship networks and village life, exiled to a social death as part of the collateral damage of the system"(61). Along with a critique of the system is a vision of something different. Such made the Jesus movement dangerous. Such made the Jesus movement a threat.

Further, beyond the radical economic component of Jesus' teaching, there is the component that calls for an extreme fearlessness. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus gives us the hard sayings: turn the other cheek; give away tunic and cloak; go the extra mile; give to those who would borrow; love your enemies; bless those who curse you; do good to those who hate you; pray for those who spitefully use and who persecute you (Matthew 5:38-48). In these hard sayings Jesus is teaching an oppressed people how to take power away from the oppressor. By giving more, by doing more than the oppressor asks, the powerless assumes h/er own power. By

praying blessing on the enemy and by loving the enemy, fear is driven out of the individual, and the power that the oppressor holds over the oppressed that is born from fear is also driven out. The bible teaches in the First Letter of John: “perfect love casts out fear” (I John 4:18). For the word perfect read complete. Thus to love the enemy means that one does not fear the enemy. Again such teaching is dangerous to an empire that holds power through fear.

Jesus taught that we ought not worry about what we will eat and drink, that we ought not worry about what clothes we would wear. Jesus taught us not to worry about tomorrow. Jesus wanted to put us in complete dependence on God. He taught us to live a revolutionary faith (Matthew 6: 25-34). He taught us that we ought not fear those who can kill only the body, but that we ought to fear God who can kill both body and soul (Matthew 10: 16 -31). This is an extreme fearlessness in the face of those who want to coerce us to this or that action with the threat that they, or some evil Other, will kill us.

Today the question becomes: how may we apply this more than two -thousand-year-old teaching to the facts before us today regarding children who live in poverty? First we can use Jesus’ teaching to correct the current value system. Enough of the theological imprimatur we put on the acquisition of stuff. A reckoning of our stuff is no evidence that we are particularly blessed by God. Moreover, possessions cannot protect us from hurt, harm and danger. Our material possessions cannot protect us from disease, disease, or from terrorist attacks. Second, human relationships matter. Allowing all human beings to know that they are important to the life and flourishing of all of the human family may go further toward protecting us from terrorists than the military and police violence that we deploy at home and around the globe in the name of security. Thus, we can make the argument that our national resources would be better spent in

eradicating poverty at home and abroad that in spending the billions that we spend to support a military/ industrial complex and a prison/industrial complex.

Finally, I want to propose a ten per-cent solution and an ethics of commensality as a strategy for the Church to use to save the lives of the thirty-thousand children who die daily. In the Old Testament literature, God commands a tithe. God's people bring ten per-cent of their income to the storehouse. God says: "that there may be food in My house" (Malachi 3:10). The tithe ought to be specifically dedicated to relieving the poor – widows, single mothers; the orphans, children of poverty; strangers in the land, undocumented workers. These people ought to be able to come to the church and get food. Further, an ethic of commensality would invite everyone to a common meal. The Lord's Supper would be as it once was, more than a crumb of bread or coin-sized wafer and a sip of fruit juice, where the elements represent the body and the blood of Jesus, that commemorates the death of Jesus. Rather, it would be a complete meal that everyone may attend to commemorate the life of Jesus, the bread and juice representing not only the body and the blood of Jesus, but also the sustenance and the joy of life that the teachings of Jesus tell us is possible on earth, in this life, at this moment.⁸

There is no reason that the Lord's Supper cannot be a daily common meal where all are welcome to at least one good meal a day. This meal ought to be a part of the worship responsibility of churches all across the globe. Thus people would be fed at the grass roots from resources that are not dependent upon politics or the whims of some dictatorial regime. It would be the product of blessed sharing at the grassroots. And when everyone in a particular location is too poor to have anything to share, it is our responsibility, it is the Church's responsibility to see

to it that they have something, even if that means, especially if that means, bringing political pressure to bear on governments.

The tithe is also dedicated to meet the economic needs of the Levites, those employed by the Church. So salaries and benefits ought to come from the tithe. The tithe is not intended to pay the energy bills or the telephone bills or to repair the roof of the church building. The biblical literature provides another offering for such purposes. God commands an offering of atonement – at-one-ment– that everyone age twenty and older pays. Everyone pays the same amount, rich or poor, and that offering is used “for the service of the tabernacle of meeting (Exodus 30:11-16). Reading this from the perspective of an ethicist looking for alternatives and not from the perspective or with the expertise of a biblical scholar, I say this passage gives us a guide to how we can meet the needs of our church buildings. This means that congregations would have to determine a figure that they can expect each person over age twenty to pay for the upkeep of the building. This would also mean that churches ought to have at least two accounting systems – one for the tithe and one for the offering of at-one-ment.

When congregations do not use the tithe for the upkeep of the building or for every bill the church must pay, then they can fund the daily Lord’s Supper, give more contributions to the poor and expand their staffs. Churches may then employ not only a senior pastor, a clerical and maintenance staff, but employ other professionals to provide services that would enhance the

⁸ See John Dominic Crossan’s *Jesus: a Revolutionary Biography*

well-being of the community. This would include lawyers, mental health care professionals, teachers, medical doctors and nurse practitioners. Thus people in the community, especially the poor can come to the church to receive legal aid, medical and mental health care, and after school tutoring for themselves or for their children. Using other free -will offerings, the church can also be a location for interest free or low interest micro loans to help people start small businesses.

I am certain that there are church already doing much of what I have suggested here, and I am certain that there are professionals willing to volunteer their services in the areas I have mentioned and in other areas that I have not mentioned. But I say that just as every church sees itself as a location to hold worship services, that every church ought to be a place where people are fed physically, intellectually and spiritually every day and not just on Sundays. For churches that are too small to provide such, the work of the denomination could be to supplement their capabilities.

In the end, the dance of redemption and the poetics of obligation remind us that we are thinking/feeling, laughing/crying creatures living in a wicked world, living in a nature that is red in tooth and claw, that we are creatures that need to touch and to be touched, needing to love and to be loved. The dance and the poetics remind us that when we come face to face with the horrors of the world around us, when news of poverty, disease and war both near and far reach us, that we can still dance; we can still sing. Our dance may begin as a slow, soulful movement that gently, cautiously, carefully, hesitantly, tentatively stretches out our fingers and hands and limbs as we lift ourselves from the ground. The poem may be a lonely lilting verse. We may think/feel that we are all alone hugging our knees in the darkness weeping helpless tears. And as we move and listen to our mind thinking, to our breath breathing, to our heart beating we can

begin to move to the rhythms of life. And as we listen to the wind in the trees, to the distant traffic, to the hum of an airplane flying overhead, to bird song and children's laughter and the barking dog, we dance to a music that beckons us to hear and to speak a poetry of the possible.⁹ We notice other people awakening to their own dance of redemption and we join hands with them and our individual helplessness turns into a force for change. We can dance redemption and allow the poetics of obligation to help us bring the realm of heaven, the realm of justice, righteousness, joy and peace to this earth.

⁹ Madeleine Albright, in her book The Mighty and the Almighty, tells us that life expectancy and infant mortality have declined between 1960 and the mid - 1990s. Smallpox and polio have been drastically reduced (93).

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