

SERMON: "Tragic World/Comic Vision"

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In one of his tall tales, Mark Twain tells how exercised he had become about discord among God's creatures. He took matters into his own hands.

I built a cage, and in it, I put a dog and a cat. And after a little training, I got the dog and the cat to the point where they lived peacefully together. Then I introduced a pig, a goat, a kangaroo, some birds and a monkey. And, after a few adjustments, they learned to live in harmony. So encouraged was I by such successes that I added an Irish Catholic, a Presbyterian, a Jew, a Muslim from Turkestan, and a Buddhist from China, along with a Baptist missionary whom I had captured on the same trip. And in a very short time, there wasn't a single living thing left in the cage.

We live in a world of conflict, large and small, major and petty, at all levels of human interaction -- from the national to the personal. It feels as if religious, political and ideological confrontations are escalating. Though much of human history seems to be the history of tragic conflict, in the present world, advances in science and technology raise the stakes.

Those who live out of a tragic world view see life as a battlefield of contending forces: good against evil, right against wrong, truth against error, light against darkness, God against the devil, or simply us against them. The tragic world view is dualistic by nature. The mere fact of human difference invites conflict. Two parties which find themselves in opposition to each other -- from Israelis and Palestinians on the geopolitical level to husband and wife on the personal level -- are tracked on a collision course.

A major strength of the tragic world view has also been its greatest weakness, namely, an exultation of warrior virtues: courage, loyalty, duty, honor, indomitable will, unquestioning obedience, stubborn determination, passionate involvement, uncompromising dedication. How brave and wholesome these virtues have sounded to us. And how indelibly aspects of this world view have defined our understanding of what it means to be genuinely human! And yet they have often led, indirectly if not directly, to all manner of war and pestilence and conflict.

Alongside our most sacred concerns and deepest convictions is our easy tendency to transform intensity into intolerance, assertiveness into aggressiveness, and vitality into violence. Thus, one of the ironies of history is that religion has been among the primary sources of tragic conflict. On the one hand, religious beliefs are offered as the true basis for harmony and salvation. On the other, they have served equally well as the basis for alienation, hostility and destruction. The defense of holy lands became justification for

atrocities. The Word of God became a vehicle for dispensing grace to those who agree and damnation to those who disagree. The Christian cross, symbol of mercy and forgiveness, has too often been used as a banner under which to parade into battle.

W.C. Fields received this letter from his Catholic niece in Ireland some decades ago. It captures the irony of the tragic vision as well as anything I have seen or read:

Your cousin Hughie Dougherty was hung in London last Friday for killing a policeman. May God rest his soul and may God's curse be on the informer, Jimmie Rogers. May his soul burn in hell.....The Black and Tans (Protestants) are terrible. They go through the country in their lorries and shoot the poor people down in their fields where they are working. God's curse on them. Your Uncle Danny took a shot at one of them yesterday from the hedge, but he had had too much to drink and missed them. God's curse on drink....PS Things might be worse than they are. Every police barrack and every Protestant Church in the country has been burned to the ground. Thanks be to God!

In contrast to all this tragedy and angst and conflict, there is an alternate vision of human relationship. It is the comic vision. When human being loses all sense of the comic in relation to themselves and their convictions, tragic confrontation seems inevitable and we become consumed by our violence. When we learn to take ourselves less seriously, and our ideologies and beliefs less absolutely, then we have a chance of softening tragic extremes and tragic extremism. If nothing else, people with a sense of humor about themselves are less inclined to kill one another.

What characterizes the comic vision? Playfulness, childlikeness, humility, flexibility, adaptability, geniality, friendliness, a willingness to compromise and collaborate. The comic vision is grounded in an appreciation for the muddiness of human condition, even in its noblest aspirations, and the ambiguities of truth and goodness. People and events and situations are rarely divisible into neat categories of right and wrong, superior and inferior. That is much too simplistic. The great British philosopher, Alfred North Whitehead, once said, "Seek simplicity, then distrust it." Life is much more complex than our limited experience of it. And therefore, we all need a good dose of humility. The comic vision challenges all rigid categories and fixed identities.

Perhaps the following exercise will make my point. I have five questions for you. If you think I am English, raise your hand. If you think I am Irish, raise your hand. If you think I am Scottish, raise your hand. If you don't know, raise your hand. If you don't care, raise your hand. The comic vision challenges all rigid categories and fixed identities.

The success of the television show *MASH*, I suspect, was due to the presence of a comic hero who succeeded in introducing confusion in the ranks and on the battlefield. Distinctions between friend and foe, right and wrong, generals and privates, became fuzzy and ill-fitting. The comic figure occupies a kind of DMZ between competing forces, and discovers a humanity common to both. It is the same logic that makes the best mediators those who are not identified with either side of a dispute. My all-time favorite

was a Lebanese who died some years ago named Philip Habib, a mediator between the Israelis and Palestinians, who was raised Christian in a Jewish neighborhood in New York City!

Comic heroes display a distinctly different and more difficult heroism than tragic heroes. They are more interested in persons than in principles. They are more interested in your life than in your ideas. They are more interested in hungry people than in Sabbath laws. While the tragic spirit transforms conflict into battle, the comic spirit transforms conflict into a game, a sport, or a school yard fracas. If fight we must, let's at least have fun!

I remember a story about a small Lutheran Church in North Dakota. It's eighty members had fallen into bickering over some minor issues to the point where sides were chosen, names were called, threats and innuendoes were hurled and war seemed inevitable. Call in the consultants, and after listening for several hours, the consultants announced a time out, took a break, and returned with two large cases of marshmallows. They invited the opposing sides to face each other, and fight it out, with marshmallows. When the laughter ceased, the consultants went home. The Church is doing just fine!

It has fallen to the comic spirit not only to celebrate reconciliation, but to find reconciliation. Early on, writers of Greek tragedy began to debunk tragic extremism and its heroic virtues, and to propose comic solutions to tragic dilemmas. One of my favorites is Aristophanes comic compromise in bawdy, anti-war *Lysistrata*.

Athens and Sparta are involved in what seems to be an interminable war with each other. The women of both cities grow weary of watching their husbands and lovers always trooping off to war, sacrificing the normal joys of life for patriotic ideals and military codes of honor and ambition and self-glory. So, led by *Lysistrata*, the women deliver to both sides an ultimatum for unconditional surrender. No more bag lunches and no more sexual favors, unless the men drop their weapons, abandon their flag-waving, give up their vain bravado and return to bed.

The result is that the men go home. "Make love, not war." Life returns to the simple pursuits – home, children, work and sex. While tragic heroism makes absolute claims for itself, the comic vision counters by protesting such arrogance, by debunking human pride and pretension.

The comic vision topples our idols, punctures self-righteous causes and deflates pomposity. It calls into question our professions of self-importance and self-righteousness. It reminds us of our humanity, our finiteness, our fallibility, our foolishness. Those with logs in their own eyes are cautioned against trying to remove specks of dust from the eyes of others. Scribes and Pharisees are passed over in favor of publicans and sinners. The tragic vision is exclusive; the comic vision is inclusive. Falstaff is invited to the final feast in Shakespeare's *The Merry Wives of Windsor*. Caliban is reprieved in *The Tempest*. Angelo is allowed to live down his disgrace in

Measure for Measure. In the comic world, we are able to embrace each other simply as bumbling lumps of humanity.

The tragic vision is prevented from such magnanimity because of its consuming interest in nobility and honor and prestige, in heroism and superiority and saving face, in being number one – and in pride, specifically that pride which goeth before the fall. Comedy is the great leveler. Kings become slaves; beautiful people end up with a pie in their face; Cinderella is fitted with a glass slipper. "Blessed are the poor, the meek, the merciful." David knocks off Goliath with a small stone. Jonah is vomited out of a whale's stomach. A judge named Gideon defeats the Midianites with three hundred men and a few good shouts. Queen Esther is an orphan and a harem girl. Jesus is born in a cattle stall. He spends lots of time with prostitutes and the lame. He rides in triumph into Jerusalem on a donkey and wears a crown of thorns!

Perhaps the best and most succinct statement of the comic vision is that of Charlie Chaplin at the end of his silent film, *The Great Dictator* (1940). As a refugee Jewish barber fleeing toward the Austrian border, Charlie is mistaken for the German Dictator and is chauffeured to a nearby Nazi rally where Adolf Hitler is scheduled to speak. Hesitatingly and haltingly, Chaplin begins:

I'm sorry, but I don't want to be an emperor. That's not my business. I don't want to rule or conquer anyone. I should like to help everyone – Jew, Gentile, black men, white. We all want to help one another. We want to live by each other's happiness – not by each other's misery. We don't want to hate and despise one another. In this world there is room for everyone. The good earth is rich and can provide for everyone.

AMEN.