

20th Sunday after Pentecost
Sermon 10.11.15
Scripture: Hebrews 4:12-16
Mark 10:17-31

I'm reading a book called *It Spooks: Living in Response to an Unheard Call*. According to the explanation on the cover, it's "a book of visual, poetic, and written responses to a paper by John C. Caputo." Caputo is a recently retired professor of continental philosophy, philosophy of religion, and deconstructionism a la Jacques Derrida, at Syracuse University and it seems he has quite a following.

He is entirely new to me.

I tend to read the theologians that mainline Protestants tend to read, these whose theology fits in nicely with this permutation of the church, which is both a conservative enterprise and a progressive one. We Mainliners tend not to be too innovative when it comes to the forms by which we gather, but we can be quite forward-thinking when it comes to how we engage the stories of the faith and how we set our minds to the task of *metanoia*, of imagining God's reign and even living in its midst here and now. Given this, I'd venture to say that we Mainliners aren't so attracted to deconstructionism of the sort Caputo's engaged in because we don't really need it: our faith isn't so fixedly constructed as to need deconstructionism as a corrective.

Here's what I mean. Taking issue with the idea of God as a supernatural super-agent in control of all things and concerned with every detail of history, nature, and human doings, Caputo claims that God does not exist, that God instead insists. God is a haunting, a spook. God doesn't exist; God insists.

Going further with his tendency to turn common phrases against themselves, he claims that it's not the case that Jesus saves, but that we must save Jesus: we must make his death not to have been in vain, we must make his life continue to speak.

Further still, he claims his project, as a theologian, is not one of ontology, which explores the nature of being, but is a hauntology, which is to be haunted by the infinitival "it" that "spooks."

He writes, "There may be something saving about God, but we in turn have to save God... God, being merely infinitival, needs concrete finite bodies...to conjugate

this infinitive. The unconditional to-come is asking us to come to its aid, to fill up what is lacking in its spectral body, soliciting us to give its spectrality reality...God needs us and we are the ones God is waiting for...We are the ones this specter expects... [and] the name of this spectral call we call God is the name of a call to which the only testimony is the response, the only evidence is the answer, the only proof is the action. What I call religion, if there is such a thing, is like answering a call we never heard.”

It strikes me as dodgy, and then suddenly true; obstinate, and then enlightening. Most of, all it strikes me as unnecessary, an unnecessary explanation of what faith in God is all about—faith and not fixity, God and not some superhero-Santa Claus in the sky.

This is what I mean when I say that we Mainliners aren’t so attracted to deconstructionism of the sort Caputo’s engaged in because we don’t really need it. But you know who apparently does? Young people who were brought up in evangelical congregations and fundamentalist families, who were homeschooled and steeped in an ideology whose vocabulary is religious, and even Christian, but whose use of those words and conceiving of their implications couldn’t be further from the way I know.

This is the makeup of those writing in response to Caputo’s paper. It’s such as these who are the poets, artists, and writers whose work is featured in this compilation. All white, all straight, mostly young (and hip and good-looking, according to the pictures), and largely from the American Midwest from as far south as Arkansas and as far north as the Dakotas, these are the people who were invited to be a part of this project.

And so it is that as I read *It Spooks*, I feel like I’m eavesdropping on a conversation made up of words I recognize, but not their usage. The concerns being overcome as regards God and God’s claim on us aren’t my concerns and never have been (purity, right-thinking, fear of punishment). The assumptions called into question aren’t my assumptions, and never have been (that God is as eager to condemn as he is to grace). And there are moments of clever insight, even provocative brilliance. The reading of it, though, is also at times amusing, or infuriating, or more than a little embarrassing. (Young people who want to be taken

seriously can be especially difficult to take seriously—which I would know since I once *was* one.)

All in all, though, I admire the project. I admire the work these young people have embarked on, trying to shed a set of ideas that simply doesn't work, not for thinking adults who wish to live in the world as it actually is (lovely and terrible, inviting and revolting), shedding the ideology like a skin they've outgrown, bursting out of Christianity as if it were a piece of clothing straining and splitting at the seams. Having tested the orthodoxies of their childhood religion, they've each discovered on their own that life will never fully, fixedly, and unchangingly conform to human ideas about life, and (worse) that what we call God will necessarily conform even less so.

"Tell me what I must do to inherit eternal life," a man has run up to Jesus to ask him. It's a man whom we learn later has many possessions.

"Go, sell what you own," Jesus tells him, "give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me."

You know, this must have been a hard thing for this man to hear—and I don't mean the second part ("Sell what you own") but this first part, this insight: "You lack one thing." After all, he seems to have been a man who likely spent a lot of time acquiring, keeping. Why, look, the story even says, he *had* many possessions and he *kept* all the commandments. Granted, in some translations it's rendered that he "obeyed" all the commandments. But here it's "kept," so I'm going with that and with its further implying that here is a man who must have spent time and energy on acquiring and keeping. Yet now he learned that he lacks one thing. And I imagine it was hard to hear—that he could lack anything at this point.

Not long ago, someone came to my house for the first time. "This is cute little place," she said. I don't have a lot of house pride, but I did feel diminished by her comment.

Longer ago, when I was first engaged to be married, an acquaintance noticed my ring, featuring three diamonds that equal two karats, handed down to me from a step-great-grandmother. "I'd want my engagement ring to look like that," this woman

said, thinking likely about her long-time boyfriend, “but I want mine to have big diamonds.” I don’t have a lot of diamond ring pride but I did feel cut down by this.

“You lack one thing,” Jesus said, and it might have cut into this man in a particular way.

The thing he lacked, it seems, was treasure in heaven. The thing he was missing was participation in the kingdom of God.

And here’s why I think he lacked it: he was so used to owning, but this thing that he now wanted (and *wanted* it he did, as evidenced in his running up to Jesus, *running* up to him), this thing that he now wanted, isn’t something you *can* own, it’s something you enter that it might own you. It’s not something you can lay claim to, but something that lays claim to you. Really, he lacked it, I imagine, because he was so used to possessing, but this thing that he now wanted isn’t something you possess but is something to which you give yourself that it might come to possess you.

Because something will, you know. Something will possess you—and I’m not thinking about *The Omen*, here. I’m not thinking about *The Exorcist*. All those scary movies that I didn’t see as a kid and yet that scared me anyway, all those scary movies with graphic depictions of what demon possession looks, had at least this right (if not more)—that we do become possessed. The question, then, is, by what?

By what spirit will we be possessed? By what spirit will *you* be possessed?

This man who ran up to Jesus—ran up to him!—is the only person in all the gospel narratives that Jesus is said to have looked at and loved. We can *imply* love in a lot of Jesus’ responses to a lot of different people. We certainly do interpret love into much of what he did with his life. But this man is the only person of whom the narrative voice is clear to tell us: “Jesus, looking at him, loved him.” Yet in spite of this—in spite of this man’s own enthusiasm, having run up to Jesus; in spite of Jesus’ response to him, having looked at him and loved him—the man went away grieving, for he had many possessions.

Possessed by them, you might say.

Which is, perhaps, why Jesus advised him as he did. Because it’s significant that Jesus didn’t say this to every rich man he came across. This great challenge—“Sell everything you have and give the proceeds to the poor”—isn’t something he said

to everyone with wealth whom he came across. Not even the disciples were required to sell everything they had. Yes, they left their nets, their boats (as Peter in particular was eager to point out later on); but they didn't sell them off. Yes, they left their homes, their families; but they didn't disown them, nor were they (as far as we know) disowned by them. It's just this man to whom Jesus is remembered to have issued such a dramatic challenge. And why, we might wonder.

Here's what I have supposed in the past: that for this man worldly wealth and eternal life were indeed mutually exclusive; for this man *having* in this world and *participating* in God's kingdom were truly and terribly at odds with one another.

This time, though, I'm entertaining another option, another suspicion. Perhaps this man truly believed his money would save him—would heal him of whatever wounding he suffered in life, would safeguard him from hardship or toilsome work or the dehumanization of poverty. Perhaps this man truly believed his money would make him seem worthy—of attention and respect, of admiration and envy; worthy instead of worthless. Really, it's possible this man believed in money that, with it, he hedged his bets when it comes to the gamble of faithful living.

Not long ago I visited a new acquaintance's home, one of the old Berkshire cottages, for a birthday party. Though the house was in good condition, my friend was spending mightily to bring it up to date, which had it so big equipment and raw materials were all around outside. As for the guests, one was his father, who was a physician nearing retirement and who struck up a conversation with Jesse, all about the sort of medicine they practice, and where.

They were engaged with each other for quite some time.

Meanwhile, the homeowner grew increasingly agitated. Though he worked hard against it, he fell into a competition with Jesse for his own father's attention and approval. Standing in his multi-million dollar home, I watched this successful financier be reduced to his earliest and most gaping emptiness—that of a son who wants his father's love and feels himself not to be getting it. It was in pursuit of that love, I could now see, that he was building this castle. "My God," was my thought. "He believes in money." It was the saddest thing I've seen in some time.

I wonder if that man from long ago, he who ran up to Jesus—*ran* up to him—so believed in money that what once seemed appealing as to having him running toward it—Jesus, the kingdom of God, eternal life—now seemed too scary that he had to slink away. How could he give up the thing he was certain would save him in preference of something that simply demanded faith?

How do you give up certainty in preference for faith?

I really don't know the answer to that because I've never had to try. Don't get me wrong: of course, there are ideologies that we as a whole country believe in and of which I think we'd resort to violence before giving up (if we haven't already resorted to violence in their defense). Militarism, consumerism, an economy whose growth will know no limits, the moral and intellectual supremacy of those with light skin: I think many are the ideologies that we as a society would fight to uphold, are perhaps fighting to uphold. But I personally haven't had to give up certainty in favor of faith. I personally haven't had to shed an ideology that promises safety, even salvation, to shed it that I might be free.

The fact is, I'm just not that certain of anything. (See? Skepticism is essential to faith.)

All this said, I realize I admire people who emerge from the strictures they've been told will surely save them, will definitely keep them safe. I admire it when people come unbound from what binds them that, though terrified, they seek freedom and eternal life.

As I read *It Spooks*, the overwrought intellectualism and the self-involved fascination of recovering fundamentalists, I find myself wondering if it's ever too late truly to free your mind if it had previously been wrongly bound. I wonder if there's a point of no return when it comes to what ideological constriction will cost a person.

Chinese girls brought up under the now past aesthetic ideal of small feet and so the practice of foot-binding: there comes a time when, though you've unbound the foot, it will not grow. Those women would never walk right. They would certainly never run free.

Gays and lesbians who spent their lives in the closet: some still can't name this truth about themselves, though now old, though times have changed. The closet has bound them, a terrible injustice.

My Czech friend, Petr, tells of his parents who were born and raised under the Soviet regime. They cannot imagine why he has traveled all the way to the U.S., and they can't imagine *how* he's done it—how he managed it, how he survived it. And I'm not speaking metaphorically: they literally cannot imagine it. It's as unimaginable to them as going to Mars would be for me. Their minds cannot be freed to take them there.

Of course, we don't know how old that man was, that man who ran up to Jesus—*ran* up to him. We also don't know what came of him after he went away. Perhaps he woke the next morning with new resolve. Perhaps he heard the following year of the crucifixion and the resurrection, and he decided, "I missed following him, but his people are on fire. Maybe I'll join them." Perhaps his belief in wealth to save wasn't so gripping that he couldn't shed it for something far grander.

Or perhaps it was—and his going away grieving is something he spent his life doing.

If so, then let him be redeemed and restored by means of our resolve to come out from the darkening shelter of all that we're certain of, to come out because now we see also how these keep us in the dark, restricting us, demanding even our slavish service of, and obedience to, them.

"Come out, come out, wherever you are," children shout when they're at play and all is safe now for those who'd been in hiding.

Maybe you are such a child and you must hide no longer.

Come out! Come out.

Thanks be to God.