

Sunday, February 27, 2011
Eighth Sunday after Epiphany / Lectionary 8

Isaiah 49:8–16a
Psalm 131
1 Corinthians 4:1–5
Matthew 6:24–34
Year A

I.N.I.

He's eighty-three years old, living a relatively quiet life in Boston. You may not have heard of him, but Gene Sharp has been called "the man who changed the world," by the editorial board of the *Boston Globe*, and the "Karl Von Clausewitz* of nonviolent warfare" by Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty.

*see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Carl_von_Clausewitz

In a National Public Radio spot on Morning Edition this past week, and elsewhere in the news, I have discovered that Former Harvard researcher Gene Sharp has been an inspiration to young revolutionaries in countries such as Serbia and Egypt, where they used his manual *From Dictatorship to Democracy* and his book *The Politics of Nonviolent Action* to help guide them through what turned out to be successful — and peaceful — revolts against oppressive regimes. Last week, NPR Morning Edition Host Steve Inskeep asked Sharp if he learned anything from the young protesters in Egypt who ultimately led to the collapse of President Hosni Mubarak's regime.

"I was amazed when I saw, very early on in the Egyptian struggle, this testimony — 'we're not afraid anymore, we've lost our fear,' " Sharp says." That is something Gandhi always advocated. He said 'cast off your fear.'

"Once a regime is no longer able to frighten people — to terrorize them into passive submission — then that regime is in big trouble."

<http://www.npr.org/blogs/thetwo-way/2011/02/23/133965129/gene-sharp-clausewitz-of-nonviolent-warfare-amazed-by-egypts-youth>

Anxiety is easy enough to find. National, state, church, and family budgets are stressed. Job losses and job security are newsworthy and scary indeed. Oil prices are on the rise. Bethesda's ministry is stretched as we have passed a challenge budget for 2011 and are dipping into Special Funds to help with cash flow.

It doesn't help that our American culture is **acquisitive**, where the accumulation of possessions, stuff, the allure of success, and keeping up with the Joneses drives many to distraction.

This drive, where you need to have the latest gadget, the best car, the finest clothes, the perfect job, the highest achieving children, is not lost by those in advertising.

In the comedy film *Crazy People* Dudley Moore plays the part of Emory Lesson, an advertising executive who comes up one day with an outrageous idea: telling the truth. "Let's face it,"

Emory tells a coworker, “you and I lie for a living.” So daring to buck the trend, Emory begins to draft copy for ruthlessly honest ads. Instead of a thousand subtle deceptions about how some product will make people happier, sexier, or richer, he says things like “Volvos: they’re boxy, but they’re safe” or “United Airlines: most of our passengers get there alive.”

-Quoted in *Testimony: Talking Ourselves into Being Christian*, by Thomas G. Long (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, © 2004), p 91.

In the film, while Emory is thrown into jail, the commercials accidentally get released, and results are astounding. The public is so delighted to hear the truth that sales skyrocket.

With an acquisitive mindset, we can never have enough. We will be insatiable, feeding off lies that tell us that we will never have enough. This produces what I’ve learn to call a theology of scarcity.

But what if we believed instead in the truth? And what if the truth was, that God provides more than we can ever imagine or desire? What if the truth is that there are enough resources to sustain the world with food and clothing and all that we need?

What if the truth is that by releasing our fear, our eyes are opened to see **the** matter at hand, like the kingdom of God and his righteousness, like a regime change in Egypt and throughout the Middle East, like the power in unity, like together we can do more.

Giving into fear means curling up into a ball and moping. God says to Israel that there is compassion for those who suffer, in exuberant language:

³*Sing for joy, O heavens, and exult, O earth;
break forth, O mountains, into singing!
For the LORD has comforted his people,
and will have compassion on his suffering ones.*

(Isaiah 49:13)

Israel answers from its theology of scarcity, “The LORD has forsaken me, my LORD has forgotten me.”

God answers from the storehouse of abundance, “Can a woman forget her nursing child, or show no compassion for the child of her womb?”

When you have children, when you have a baby in your household, your focus as a parent becomes all-consuming. You can lose track of days. You can lose sleep. Life as you know it revolves around your care for the son, the daughter in your midst. For that child, dependence on mother’s milk, on nourishment and intimacy and safety is what life is about. For the mother, for the father--for me as I recall those days as a young parent, I did not know how much I would love the little ones in my life until they burst on the scene. With Kari, attending to their daily needs, offering compassion, keeping them clothed and fed, was our mission. Now that our children our teenagers, it’s still our mission!

This is how God looks at us, with more compassion and love than we can ever imagine or desire. This is reason for hope, reason for casting off fear, the impetus for us to cast aside our obsession with acquisition and instead receive the abundance of God's kingdom in our midst.

God in Isaiah says to those who are curled up in a ball and moping "Come out." "Show yourselves." Jesus says in his Sermon on the Mount "Can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life?"

And so as we clear our minds, and change our perspective, and share our resources, and release our fears, we create a space for God to act and to take root in us. Through the millennia of human history, God has acted.

Where have you seen God acting and taking root in your lifetime?

In my lifetime I have seen the fruit of civil rights non-violent action, which declared separate but equal unjust.

I have heard South African freedom songs and protest release the grip of Apartheid.

I have lived to hear of the toppling of the Berlin Wall to unite Germany and break the Iron Curtain.

I have seen and am still seeing citizens in the Middle East that are not afraid to confront tyrants with the truth of their oppression.

I have seen congregations respond to the abundance of God's mercy and Christ's invitation to abundant life. In your faces, as you receive a bite of bread and a sip of wine, I see that we are filled and strengthened. In your energy to live for the kingdom of God and God's righteousness, I see that fears are relived.

I believe that living in Christ, together with Christ, receptive to God's love and mercy, striving for righteousness and releasing our fears, we can change the world.

And that's the truth.

I.N.I.