

One of the things that really gets on my nerves about life in general and life in Christ in particular is that they both seldom let you remain the same, think the same. You arrive at a certain point in life, and you are feeling pretty good about how you understand it and people, and then, boom, something happens that changes or at least unsettles your worldview. I graduated from college and thought I had it all figured out. And then, boom, I went to seminary, and some of my understandings were unsettled. And then boom, I was serving a parish in inner-city Toledo, an experience that caused my understandings to evolve. And then, boom, I moved here, and the understanding that I had brought with me proved to be inadequate.

I've been thinking about this lately in light of what has been happening in our culture, in light of what a presidential election season and so much else is revealing about us and our nation. As I look back at my earlier life, I realize that I have always been a part of the group of people who were pushing the boundaries, who felt that all the strictures (restrictions) we placed on people needed to be challenged. I felt that the order that we had created was often a source of oppression of many people. I resisted that order. I wore a button that said "Question Authority." I frequently spoke of nuancing life, refusing to capture life in neat little phrases and promising to write a book I wanted to title **Beyond Cliché Living**, which would urge people to move beyond a simplistic, clear understanding of life. I thought that too much order for people who gather at the feet of the table-turning, boundary-crossing, tradition-challenging Jesus didn't make a lot of sense.

Well, I've got to say, I haven't fully changed my mind on that. Some people, without a doubt, overdose on order. Some people use authority to oppress people. Sometimes our religion is much too

rigid, too lost in order. Rigid Biblical literalism has been extremely detrimental to the church. The unnecessary guilt it has created, the limits it has placed on women, science, and gay people have been awful. I haven't changed my mind on any of that, but as I watch our current culture, I begin to wonder if we are not paying a price for a lack of awareness of the significance of order for our common lives, the lack of what Richard Rohr calls a coherent universe, a universe that is held together by something larger than the self and the narcissistic needs of the self.

Psalm 111, the Psalm appointed for today, is a very optimistic Psalm, a song that sings of the deep order built into creation. Earlier in my life I probably wasn't overly fond of these kinds of Psalms. It felt to me as if they are like cliches that make life too simple.

Walter Brueggeman labels songs like Psalm 111 as "songs of orientation." For these Psalms, the world is coherent. It makes sense. Ultimately, everything is all right. Praise God!!

In the past, I would probably argue with these Psalms, and still do sometimes. The world isn't all right. It's a mess. It's filled with deep pain. God doesn't always come through. The righteous don't always get the good stuff, and the evil don't always get punished. Life ain't that orderly.

Well, that is true, which is why there are a bunch of other psalms in which people bellyache, complain, and protest. The Bible actually gives plenty of room for lamenting. But sometimes it rejoices in order. And it may be worth our while, particularly at a time when so many people are living in such disorder, to highlight the order. Something that has enabled me to grasp these songs of order has been the realization that most of them were written to train children. And interestingly enough, many of them, including the one that is our concern today, were written as acrostics, poems that

used the Hebrew alphabet to tell their story. The first line would begin with an “A”, the second with a “B”, the third with a “C”, and so on. It’s masterful poetry, meant to enable children to memorize the teachings, so that the tradition is passed on to the next generation.

Let’s peak in at the orderly universe described by the Psalm.

Praise the Lord! I will give thanks to the Lord
with my whole heart, in the company of the
upright, in the congregation.

Order is often learned in the congregation, in the gathering of God’s people. You parents who bring your children here: congratulations. You are providing some order for your kids, some necessary order.

Great are the works of the Lord, studied by
all who delight in them.

The ways of God, the order of the universe often needs to be studied. Children need to be trained. The Psalmist says that the “fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.” Fear, or better put, reverential awe, often doesn’t come without some kind of intentionality. Congratulations parents for bringing your kids to faith formation and confirmation. There they can be exposed to the really Big, to that which will bring them to wonder, provide some order to their worlds. And way to go, those of you who continue to study as you age. You’ll never know enough, and life will become much more interesting when you sit at the feet of teachers. The gloriousness of creation, and the wonder of being human will stun you. It will give you an order that is bigger than you.

Full of honor and majesty is his work, and
his righteousness endures forever. He has
gained renown by his wonderful deeds; the
Lord is gracious and merciful.

Here is the bottom-line truth of the order of the universe. God is gracious and merciful. This is what everybody needs to know, especially kids. The world is held together by mercy and grace. And we experience that held-togetherness in the reliability of life. The Psalmist says:

He provides food for those who fear him.

Mercy and grace are seen in the everyday provisions of life. Food, housing, relationships—they are signs that the world is held together by generosity. Kids need to know that the world is reliable, that their basic needs will be met. It is helpful for them to start in order. And that is true for everyone.

Now I say that recognizing that is not where everybody starts, and that sometimes some people will need to discover that order after living in all kinds of disorder. I hope that the church can be an oasis where people who started in disorder can be discovered by mercy and grace, the order that orders everything.

One of the things about order that needs to be highlighted is that generally it does not come from the self. And we are living in an era where order is often established by the self—what I want, what I need, what I think. But true order generally comes from something larger than the self—a larger story, a larger community, authorities, leaders.

Our first lesson for today reveals Israel's preoccupation with leaders. The people in Deuteronomy are afraid that they are going to be leaderless. And so, God tells them that there will always be a prophet among them, a prophet in the likeness of Moses. The point is that they won't be leaderless. They will have what they need to pass the big story on. A leader in the tradition of Moses will enable them not to feel rudderless, not to feel that the community is just a

collection of individuals whose opinions and desires run the show. You know the chaos when that is the case.

The people of Deuteronomy want the big story to continue to be passed on. They want something big to hold their universe together. Good leadership is about that something big. It's not about the smallness of the narcissistic self.

Our gospel reading today is all about leadership. It's all about authority. Mark today takes on the authorities who were supposed to be the authorities—the scribes. He says of the people listening to Jesus teach: “They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught as one having authority, and not as the scribes.” The official authorities are getting slammed here. They teach but not with real authority.

Jesus, on the other hand, has real authority, has real power, has the ability to bring the big picture in a life-giving way. And how is his authority displayed? It's experienced in his taking on the demon that has come to church. Jesus uses his authority to free a man who is possessed by a demon. Oh, forgive the ancients. They thought many of the problems of people, including mental illness, was a matter of demon possession. We don't have to buy that to recognize that there is much that keeps us from being who we were created to be, much that alienates us from the community. And the promise is that the truly authoritative one sets people free to be who they were created to be and to enter fully into the fellowship of the community.

The best authorities in life, the ones who take us to the bigger picture, to the big stories that hold us and our world together, are not the people who use authority to keep us under their control. Rather, they are the people who help set us free. The leaders we want in our lives who help provide the order that we so badly need and want are the ones who are not preoccupied with themselves, but with the liberty that comes from the big story of mercy and grace. Jesus is

that kind of authority. He is so not preoccupied with himself that he will take the road of the cross. And that cross will reveal to us the order that holds life together: suffering love. What runs the universe, we the followers of the crucified Jesus believe, is suffering love.

And if suffering love is the big picture that holds everything together, then you and I will always be changing because suffering love is always going to be taking us to the pain of the world, to that which threatens life's order, to life's disorder. But I've said enough for today. I am going hold off on that topic until another time—maybe Lent.