

The 15th Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 20. September 21, 2014. St. Augustine's in-the-Woods, Freeland. Nigel Taber-Hamilton

Whose been watching the series on the Roosevelts? Amazing, isn't it. Three remarkable people: Teddy, Franklin, and Eleanor, who changed this nation's history, don't you agree?

If you agree, then likely you fit quite nicely into a 19th Century understanding of the nature of History called "The Great Man" theory. Today, scholars of the philosophy of historical study would probably rename it "The Great Person" theory. Either way this theory claims that history can be largely explained by the impact of "great men", or heroes.

Think back. If I said "Reformation" does a name immediately jump into your mind? Henry VIII (the dachshund in my office is named after him!); Martin Luther; John Calvin. Those of you who have studied a little more would mention Zwingli, Tetzl, and so on.

If I said "Council of Nicea" you might say Constantine.

If I said 1st. Century Palestine: Jesus. If I said Corinth, or Rome or Philippi? Paul.

This way of approaching history is particularly attractive to us in North America because this culture is so starkly individualistic. We don't think about history in community, or movement terms, or broad cultural change, we think almost always in terms of individual people.

No one in biblical times would ever have thought that way! More and more biblical scholars now talk about "The Jesus Movement" rather than focusing on Jesus in isolation from his context. Jesus, they say, could not have "happened" outside of a communal context.

We don't focus in that way - and as a consequence we end up interpreting "Jesus" in individualistic terms, instead of seeing him as the most prominent person in a much broader reform movement within Judaism that was implacably opposed to the Imperial domination system.

There's several major problems with this individualistic view - for one thing it becomes much too easy to spiritualize what Jesus said, to think of it in personal terms as having to do with "my relationship with God through Jesus" rather than "My relationship with God through everyone else in this movement."

Another problem is the ease with which we can miss societal change, cultural challenges, or the systemic dysfunction of institutions, because when we make our history about individuals we can distance ourselves from the struggles or disagreements we see in them.

Hence a common tactic when different views of how to deal with concerns surface is to identify two people who represent different views - let say Jack and Jill - and reduce the disagreements to them: "Oh, its just about Jack and Jill." That's pretty convenient, because then we don't ever have to deal with the issue - as we go merrily on our way down to the depths of destruction!!

Paul's whole argument in his 1st letter to the Corinthians is a challenge to exactly these problems of the individualizing of disagreement and the spiritualizing of relationships as only between the individual and God without also understanding that those relationships also have to be about each other. The wealthier people in that community paid little attention to the poorer people - the slaves, for instance. Hence he talked about the body of Christ crucified, which was an appeal to those wealthy individuals to drop their narrow self-focus and engage the poorer members as equals, all the while embracing the radical diversity that always comes with healthy community. **In any conflict within a community it's almost never just about one or two individuals, it's almost always about different views how change should be addressed.**

This is why "Great Man" theory is such a problem: it masks context and undermines relationship, and threatens communal health and vitality.

The alternate way of understanding history is this: the events and circumstances of history create contexts in which individuals are catalysts for change or growth.

- Hence FDR's context was the Depression and the 2nd World War. He lasted so long because he was able to connect - even I, as a European, have heard of the "Fireside Chats"!
- Luther's context was the ever-present fear of the Turks at the gates of Europe, the threat of the Ottoman Empire and a connected belief that the world was in the "end times." Luther's Augustinian view of the helpless state of humanity, the pitiless message of sin and death, and the unmerited restoring grace of God could not have been more perfectly timed.
- Jesus' context was increasing Jewish opposition to the Roman occupation of Judea, and the reform movements within Judaism itself, such as those of the Essenes, or the Pharisees. Like FDR and Luther, one thing that marks him out is that he could connect with people.

There's something else about the context these three that's particularly important: they lived in times of great anxiety - anxiety that seemed like it might be world-ending, in the sense that each society in which they lived feared that societal death was not just possible but likely.

No one in the time of Jesus, of Luther, or FDR talked in terms of anxiety, even though the world of each was awash with it. That made it all the harder to try and find ways to address anxiety.

We live in a time when some of the descendants of the Ottoman Empire - an empire known as The Ottoman Caliphate - seek to rekindle the 14th & 15th Century fears of world-ending cataclysms through the re-adoption of that title - the Caliphate. ISIS/ISIL. Russia is again engaged in saber-rattling- invading US airspace, challenging its European neighbors, invading their countries, threatening a new 'cold-war.' Ebola threatens to become the next Black Plague. These are anxious times. When an individualistic culture gets anxious it tends to look for a hero, a "great man" to save it. And if, as is likely in this ever more complex world, there is no such person, then we as a culture start looking for scapegoats, and usually they are our leaders. I think it's no accident that our presidents age before our eyes!

Not only is there this broader anxiety about the state of our world, there's also some anxiety

within our own community here around money - there's a big hole in the 2015 budget.

If we want to embrace the "Great Man" theory we're going to get sidetracked into looking for a knight on a white horse charging in to "save us". So I want to tell you I am not that person!

What the individuals I've mentioned did most effectively in the face of anxiety was to say this: the future is in my hands, or your hands, but our hands. All the gifts, skills, and resources, are right here, because **we** are those gifts, skills and resources.

Our faith tells us that all will be well, because we are in God's hands. It also adds, that God is not that "Great Man" on whom we solely rely to ride in on a white horse and save us. We cannot be a part of the problem; we have to be a part of the solution.

May it be so with us all.