

Good Friday
April 10, 2020
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Isaiah 52:13-53:12

Psalms 22:1-11

Hebrews 10:1-25

John 19:1-37

GOD ON STRIKE

In his poem “If God Should Go On Strike,” Walt Huntley thanks the Lord that God has never stopped being God and shut off the sun, or the moon, or the oxygen. He concludes:

Men say they want a better deal,
and so on strike they go,
But what a deal we’ve given God
to whom all things we owe.
We don’t care whom we hurt
to gain the things we like;
But what a mess we’d all be in
if God should go on strike.

It’s the same sort of lovely sentiment as “God never sleeps,” or “God never stops working for us,” both of which are true. But I think there was (at least) one time when God did go on strike. Today.

The crucifixion is God on strike.

We who mark and worship on this Good Friday must understand this strike and heed this worker’s call to change.

Work-To-Rule

There is a kind of a strike called a work-to-rule strike. You see, workers can be punished in various ways for refusing to work or for slowing down their work in protest, so, in a work-to-rule strike, workers do only and exactly as they’re told. After all, how can you punish someone for doing their job? Taxi drivers, for instance, can follow the rules of the road exactly, and the result is traffic for miles. Customs agents exhaustively search every car that passes through a checkpoint, and the result is traffic for miles. Factory workers operate machinery exactly as indicated, setting aside all the improvised systems that make the line really move, and the result is, you guessed it, back-ups for miles.¹

¹ “Work-to-Rule,” Wikipedia, accessed April 10, 2020, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Work-to-rule>. I first heard about work-to-rule in, and the above description is based on, James C. Scott, *Two Cheers for Anarchism: Six Easy Pieces on Autonomy, Dignity, and Meaningful Work and Play* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012), 46.

And this kind of strike works. The resulting drop in productivity forces change by demonstrating the danger or, at least, the absurdity of the rules. You can try it yourself. Only answer emails from your supervisors during the usual working hours. Do only and exactly what your significant other says when it comes to the dishwasher. Ignore your children's dinner requests until they submit the proper forms at window #4.

Suddenly, Jesus the Messiah's silence, meekness, even cooperation isn't so strange. He's working-to-rule.

The prophet Isaiah describes the suffering servant: "He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth." And, sure enough, we are told that, when questioned by Pontius Pilate, "Jesus gave him no answer." Faced with imminent death, Jesus offers no defense. He could have forced his tormentors to drag him to Golgotha. Instead, he carries the cross. There's no reason for him to participate in his own humiliation, but, we're told, "Jesus came out, wearing the crown of thorns and the purple robe." Jesus doesn't try to escape, and he doesn't play on his divinity and annihilate the lot of them in divine fire.

Instead, the innocent Jesus stays and submits *exactly* to the judgment of those around him.

It's a work-to-rule strike.

The Protest

But what is this work-to-rule aimed at? Sin? Maybe, but Jesus had already been teaching people about how to live a better, more virtuous life. Death or violence or something? Perhaps, but Jesus has already performed numerous healings and resurrected Lazarus. There doesn't seem to be much in Jesus' death that isn't covered in the signs and wonders of his life.

Jesus' last earthly act is aimed at our avoidance of responsibility. Jesus knows that we will look for a way to avoid the implications of his teachings for our own lives. We will ignore the call. We will ignore the responsibility. Sin is something other people do. Jesus' reply: No, sin is something you do.

Consider that the agents in the Gospel story don't seem to be trying to avoid sin so much as attempting to avoid responsibility for it. First-century Judea is something like the world's worst office: everyone working toward a disastrous product launch without being the one stuck with the blame. "Success has many fathers," it is said, "but failure is an orphan." Everyone wants Jesus dead, but no one wants to be the one who crucified him.

Think about how we too avoid responsibility for the awful:

- We order someone else to do the dirty work. In the very first sentence of our passage, Pilate orders Jesus flogged.
- We hide behind these orders, legalism, and appeals to power. The soldiers are just following orders. Authorities distance themselves from the death sentence they themselves can't issue, even as they push for it, goading Pilate with appeals to the emperor. This is to tell the bound man before us that he is mistaken about his condition. It is, in fact, our hands that are tied.

- We distribute responsibility and avoid decisions. By increasing the number of decisionmakers involved, responsibility is diluted, and no one person can be held accountable. Pilate appeals to the crowd: “Shall I crucify your King?” Better still, if no one makes the decision, no one can be blamed for it. “Let us not tear it, but cast lots for it to see who will get it.”
- When we do something bad, we do it quickly, and try to get it out of sight. “Since it was the day of Preparation, the Jews did not want the bodies left on the cross during the sabbath... So they asked Pilate to have the legs of the crucified men broken and the bodies removed.”
- We hide in words. We use the passive voice. “Then he handed him over to them to be crucified.” By whom? We are vague. “They crucified him.” Who’s they?

Jesus’ crucifixion is a work-to-rule strike against this avoidance. God refuses to play God for us. Instead, God takes on humanity and lives by our human rules. In doing so, Jesus proves himself Lord. He demonstrates the faithfulness of our God, a God who would submit to the life lived by those he loves. He demonstrates the cruelty, absurdity, and moral bankruptcy of the political, economic, social, religious, and cultural systems under which we labor. Remember, all this was done in broad daylight, likely an early April day like today. What was done was done legally, in accordance with the political, social, cultural, and religious mores of those present, and the result was the death of an innocent. Such is the end of all purely human endeavor. By fatally submitting to every last human order given, Jesus implicates us all in that death, in that sin. God did nothing that afternoon but what we ourselves ordered. The result was our doing. We can blame other people or groups for worldly ills, we can blame spirits and devils, we can blame systems and structures all we want, but we are always and already radically responsible. Each of us, all of us. Right now, all the time.

The Family at the Cross

We see in Pilate, the religious authorities, and the crowd what avoidance looks like, but what might radical responsibility look or sound like?

In our collect, we ask God today to “behold this your family.” We must do the same: “behold this your family.”

“When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing beside her, he said to his mother, ‘Woman, here is your son.’ Then he said to the disciple, ‘Here is your mother.’ And from that hour the disciple took her into his own home.”

Jesus beholds and re-creates the human family, renewing radical, mutual obligation amid fatal indifference and apathy.

The murderous Cain refused to acknowledge that he was his brother’s keeper, and we too deny our obligations, we too avoid our human family. They can’t be our responsibility, we say. It’s too much to ask of us to care for others, we insist.

No, says Jesus. Here is your child. Here is your parent. We remain siblings, mutually and forever responsible for one another, and, with God’s help, we can bear that awesome responsibility.

It's not enough for us to imagine that she is someone's daughter, Jesus says. She is our daughter.

It's not enough for us to drive as if our kids lived in the neighborhood, Jesus says. Those are our kids.

It's not enough for us to see if we can get our friends to call their elderly parents, Jesus says. They're our parents.

It's not enough for us to wonder what we would say if it were our parent on the ventilator, Jesus says. That man is our father.

It is not enough to say it is a natural disaster for which no one can be blamed, not when we avoid confronting the human disasters—the poverty, the inequality, and the injustice—that compound the natural ones.

It is not enough to insist “we are all in this together.” We must work to make that a fact.

In his crucifixion, Jesus comes for our excuses, for our empty apologies, and for our self-deceptions when it comes to what we owe to one another. He strikes against our half-measures, our violence, our faithlessness. He invites, he commands instead the radical, mutual, inalienable responsibility of family.

Huntley's poem wonders what would happen if God went on strike. The Gospel reminds us that we know what it looks like when we go on strike, when we refuse to work with and for our family. It is the crucifixion.

Jesus went on strike to end our strike, and so we might conclude with something different today:

People demand a better deal.
They manipulate the law;
And so God, though still heavenly,
Became the man we saw.
Jesus showed us all the horror
Of doing just what we like.
What will come of the dreadful day
The Messiah went on strike?