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On Practicing a Mystical Anarchist Ethic

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Isaiah 58:1–12

When my older brother went to college, I remember being taken aback when he said his roommate’s mom was an anarchist. I felt so sorry for his roommate and figured he probably had a terrible childhood. In my mind, being an anarchist meant something related to the anti-christ. It was all one category to me because I thought it was all related to the same word.

Fast forward to seminary, after I had learned to spell better and had a bigger vocabulary, and I realized the words weren’t synonymous... I heard about this website called Jesus Radicals that was coordinated by a couple people on campus at Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary. I learned that the point of the website was to put Christianity and anarchism in conversation with each other. That seemed curious to me and the people who ran the website seemed cool.

Through conversation and overtime it just started to make sense to me that people in the Anabaptist tradition would be influenced by anarchism. It was also around this time that I

realized feminist was not a scary label either. It just made sense to me that every person regardless of gender should be respected as fully-human and that people following Jesus would want to undo systems of power.

I define a commitment to anarchism is as a commitment to undoing the power-over (the hierarchies) that exists in human relationships with each other and all living beings (including our planet).

This is a different ethic than leaderless chaotic craziness. That's the caricature of anarchism and anarchy, right? Everyone is just running around like a crazy person, breaking stuff and setting things on fire. How liberating.

Putting together this sermon made me think that perhaps the caricature of anarchism in our culture is similar to the caricature of Christianity in the Bay. In both cases people are like, "What?! Why would you want to identify with that? It's just a bunch of oppressive, violent, small-minded people who think they're not accountable to broader society."

So I guess if we just put them together it cancels everything out and we're good, right??

With this sermon my invitation is to suspend your judgement as much as possible for the moment and give an anarchist ethic a chance. Obviously you don't have to agree with my perspectives but I hope you can see how an anarchistic ethic is not as far-fetched as it might initially seem.

I'm also intentionally using the phrase "anarchistic ethic" to put an emphasis on practice, or to use Christian terminology, discipleship. I do not find anarchist ideology all that useful in the same way I don't find orthodox Christian theology all that useful. Both projects try to fit everything into neat boxes, proving their impenetrable coherency. I'm not interested in that. I'm interested in how we actually live our lives as followers of Jesus.

One resource that has been super helpful in writing this sermon is a little book by my friend, Mark Van Steenwyk. It's called That

Holy Anarchist and it's a 70 page primer on Christianity and anarchism. In true anarchist fashion you can read the whole thing free online and I highly recommend doing that.

In the book he looks at the anarchist streams that run through Christian history and scripture. It may not surprise you to know that Anabaptists make an appearance there. Furthermore, in the essay on anarchism for the Encyclopedia Britannica, Peter Kropotkin traces the birth of anarchist thought in Europe to early Anabaptist communities.

Mark points out that all the movements in Christian history with an anarchistic ethic have been considered heretical, in some way, by the dominant religious groups of their time. This may seem obvious, he writes, but if a religious group is dominant, they don't like antiauthoritarian tendencies in their midst.

Am I saying Anabaptists called themselves anarchists? No. But clearly they were embodying an anarchist ethic toward the church and state officials that were trying to keep them in line. They said, "You have no authority over us. You can even destroy our bodies but that won't defeat our movement." Anabaptists were non-violent, other than aberrations such as at Münster.

Which brings up a good point about anarchism and violence. I would argue that doing violence to another body is an abuse of power and therefore contrary to an anarchistic ethic. At the same time questions remain about self-defense, property destruction and the self-determination of oppressed people. I mean, Jesus destroyed a bunch of stuff when he flipped the tables on the money-changers and made a whip of cords to, at least, drive out the animals.

For me one of the most important questions an anarchist ethic asks is, "To whom am I accountable?" If I am saying no to the established order, to what am I saying yes? In our own tradition, the early Anabaptists were accountable to their interpretation of scripture in community. If you remember from our series in the fall, they believed that they were regenerated by the Spirit to do things that

looked pretty radical: defy authorities, love their enemies, create egalitarian communities...

Lately I was reading through our congregational Core Values and Practices and lots in there is sympathetic to an anarchistic ethic. Take this part for example:

“True to our Anabaptist heritage, we believe in non-hierarchical, shared models of leadership. We therefore are committed to training members of our community in the arts of worship, social engagement, and leadership in the world and in the church. We especially value our strength in cultivating young adult leaders and teaching our children.”

But leadership can't be anarchist, right? I would say that leaders in a community committed to non-hierarchy can function with an anarchist ethic. This looks like calling people into leadership with gifts and skills that correspond with the needs of the community. It's not that any particular leader is seen as better than the other people but rather as possessing the capacity to meet needs and honoring that responsibility. In the same way, other roles and responsibilities in the community are held and honored. And the sharing of wisdom is not relegated to any one person but can spring forth anywhere in the community. I'm curious if you think that is true of this congregation.

Now, let's turn to scripture. There we also see threads, or even tapestries, of an anarchistic ethic. In the Hebrew scriptures we have an origin story where all created beings lived in harmony together in an abundant garden. We have the example of Babel where Yahweh scattered the people who had become quite impressed with their big tower. We have the practice of Jubilee redistribution. We have a king-less society until the people begged and begged and begged to be like everyone else. And then it was just a mess, but the prophets show up to set things straight... or at least to try. That brings us to Isaiah, specifically Isaiah 58:1-12 which is one of the lectionary texts for today.

It's also worth noting that the prophet is using "you" in the plural. He's speaking to the whole group, saying that their collective healing and vindication is possible. It's about a community being committed to this way of living.

When I think about actions taken by members of this congregation in the past couple months, I can see this mystical anarchist ethic. No one is telling this group what the step by step process is to embody justice in these times. No leader said you now have permission to do nonviolent direct action. You are trusting yourselves and each other and taking action and being accountable. You, we, are being transformed through this action, just as we are a part of transforming our reality.

What has this looked like among us? It's looked like developing the courage to call elected officials and creating a space for prayer and going to Standing Rock and being chained together and singing hymns and prominently displaying Black Lives Matter signs at our homes and giving money to the ACLU and teaching children freedom songs and showing up for protests and having a difficult conversation with someone who sees things differently than you and going to SFO in solidarity with detained immigrants. We have done all these things.

If this is the fast we choose... if these are the things we continue to embody

8 Then our light shall break forth like the dawn, and our healing shall spring up quickly; our vindication shall go before us,

11 The Divine will guide us continually, and satisfy our needs in parched places, and make our bones strong; and we shall be like a watered garden, like a spring of water, whose waters never fail.

May it be so. Amen.

The context for the passage is post-exilic, meaning that the people who were taken into exile have returned and are trying to make sense of their situation. They are clearly wanting some direction from God.

Let's here the first part again, which is what Yahweh is telling the prophet to say to the people:

Shout out, do not hold back!

Lift up your voice like a trumpet!

Announce to my people their rebellion,
to the house of Jacob their sins.

2 Yet day after day they seek me and delight to know my ways, as if they were a nation that practiced righteousness and did not forsake the ordinance of their God; they ask of me righteous judgements, they delight to draw near to God.

3 'Why do we fast, but you do not see? Why humble ourselves, but you do not notice?' Look, you serve your own interest on your fast-day, and oppress all your workers.

4 Look, you fast only to quarrel and to fight and to strike with a wicked fist. Such fasting as you do today will not make your voice heard on high.

5 Is such the fast that I choose, a day to humble oneself? Is it to bow down the head like a bulrush, and to lie in sackcloth and ashes? Will you call this a fast, a day acceptable to the Lord?

It's like the people are saying, "We're doing all the right things. Why aren't you answering us God? Why aren't you giving us direction?" And God is responding, "I hear your religious talk but

your actions make your religious gestures meaningless. Do you not think I can see what you're actually doing?"

Then the prophet goes on

6 Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke?

7 Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin?

8 Then your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up quickly; your vindication shall go before you, the glory of the Lord shall be your rearguard.

9 Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer; you shall cry for help, and the Divine will say, Here I am. If you remove the yoke from among you, the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil,

10 if you offer your food to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted, then your light shall rise in the darkness and your gloom be like the noonday.

11 The Lord will guide you continually, and satisfy your needs in parched places, and make your bones strong; and you shall be like a watered garden, like a spring of water, whose waters never fail.

12 Your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt; you shall raise up the foundations of many generations; you shall be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to live in.

Earlier this week our Outreach committee used this passage during our prayer time and had some discussion about it. The group

on Silent Retreat is also reflecting on this passage. What stuck out to me when we were discussing it earlier this week is how it lends itself to an anarchistic ethic.

After stating the fast, or the practices, that Yahweh desires, verses 8 and 9 caught me. Verse 8 says, "Then your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up quickly; your vindication shall go before you, the glory of the Lord shall be your rearguard."

In other words, the effects of these practices are transformative in and of themselves. It's not some weird religious formula of "do these 5 things in the right order and then God will give you what you want." No, it's "do these things and your light will break forth, your healing will come, you will be vindicated."

Then in verse 9 God shows up. "Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer; you shall cry for help, and the Divine will say, Here I am." Perhaps it's like, because you are acting in ways that embody the Divine, you're able to experience connection with the Divine. It's not about seeking a higher power to solve your problems or the problems of the world. Rather you're empowered to practice Divine love and justice, and through that practice you usher in Divine reality.

In *That Holy Anarchist* I love how Mark writes about the importance of mysticism. Most anarchist movements mentioned in the book, he says, "had early founders and influencers who were mystics. We would be wise to ground our anarchism in a real mysticism—one that embraces a sort of divine wildness that can empower us to love in an unloving world. One that gives us a glimpse of a reality that we can't yet see. That mysticism can be linked to anarchism makes sense: mystics often reject the notion that access to God is mediated."

That's what I hear communicated in this Isaiah passage, "in your action for justice, you embody the Divine. And it's not just about the people that need justice... YOU are healed at the same time."