

FINDING MEANING THROUGH LITERATURE:
NADINE GORDIMER'S *LATE BOURGEOIS WORLD* AND BEYOND

A Sermon by Dean Scotty McLennan
University Public Worship
Stanford Memorial Church
July 21, 2013

“Hear this, you that trample on the needy and bring to ruin the poor of the land... Shall not the land tremble on this account, and everyone mourn who lives in it?” So warns the prophet Amos in today’s reading from the Hebrew Bible.ⁱ The gospel lesson from Lukeⁱⁱ directly follows the parable of the Good Samaritan and describes a female disciple sitting at the feet of Jesus. In the parable of the Good Samaritan, a hated foreigner of another religious tradition than Jesus’ is shown as the good neighbor, while two Israelite holy men are contrasted by their lack of compassion and concern. In the description of Martha and Mary welcoming Jesus into their home, again a marginalized person in ancient Israel, a woman, is described as the model disciple, sitting at Jesus’ feet to be taught like a male, instead of helping her sister in the women’s work of the household. She’s encouraged by Jesus to violate social boundaries and norms in order to learn his moral and spiritual lessons.ⁱⁱⁱ

How do we respond to social injustice and to marginalization that we see happening around us? How do we respond with solidarity to the fears of the African American community in the aftermath of Trayvon Martin’s death and the acquittal of George Zimmerman? As a second example, how often are we, like those portrayed by

Amos, standing by, while the government we elect tramples on the needy and brings to ruin the poor of the land? An illustration might be the action taken this month in the House of Representatives to strip the food stamp program out of the agriculture bill for the first time in 40 years,^{iv} thereby directing government subsidies to farmers but providing no guarantee of continuing food assistance to the 47 million Americans who need it. Even though, as a *New York Times* editorial explained, “the Center on Budget and Policy priorities has repeatedly shown [that] the food stamp program...has long been one of the most effective and efficient anti-poverty programs ever devised...cut[ing] extreme poverty nearly in half,” the House of Representatives chose instead to provide some \$200 billion over ten years to the likes of agribusiness and nothing, at least for now, to those needing food.^v Then, as a third example, there’s the immigration bill, which also looks as if it will die in the House of Representatives. Even conservative columnist David Brooks in a *New York Times* op-ed called this a potential tragedy for the country, disrespecting Hispanics, Asians and other immigrant peoples. Among many other advantages of the immigration bill for the country, as he described it, is the potential of low-skilled, low-income immigrants finding entry-level work without directly competing with native-born Americans.^{vi}

This is a matter of moral courage not only for the Congress, but also for “We the People...”^{vii} in the month we’ve celebrated our great national holiday, the Fourth of July. How involved are each of us in staying informed, debating, advocating, and lobbying for public policy that protects the needy, the poor, and the marginalized?

There's a novel by South African author Nadine Gordimer, called "The Late Bourgeois World," which raises the issue of ordinary citizens' moral courage in another national context and might help us make greater sense of this question and of today's scripture readings.

It's set in the mid-1960's during the era of apartheid, and describes the reaction of several members of a white family to apartheid as a profound form of bigotry and human oppression. The book begins with thirty year-old Liz learning of the death of her divorced husband, Max – an apparent suicide, drowned in his car in the Cape Town harbor. She drives to the school where Liz's and Max's twelve year-old son, Bobo, is boarding, to tell him. As she explains to her son, Max "went after the right things, even if perhaps it was in the wrong way... He wasn't content to leave bad things the way they are."^{viii}

Max had come from a wealthy family of mixed Afrikaans and British background, against which he rebelled as a teenager as he got involved in the anti-apartheid movement. He was eventually tried and imprisoned for sabotage for making a bomb. Later he turned State witness against some black freedom fighters, so he ultimately died in disgrace among both whites and blacks. As Liz put it to their son, Bobo, "If he failed, well, that's better than making no attempt...some men live successfully in the world as it is, but they don't have the courage even to fail at trying to change it."^{ix}

The man Liz is with now is named Graham. He's quite a bit older than she is, at forty-six, and he works as a civil rights attorney. As described in the text, "Graham defends many people on political charges and is one of a handful of advocates who ignore the possible consequences of getting a reputation for being willing to take such cases."^x Liz does lab work at the Institute for Medical Research, and she is proud that neither she nor Graham "makes money out of cheap labor or performs a service confined to people of a particular color."^{xi} But as the novel progresses, we realize that Liz is struggling with whether she can and should do specific illegal anti-apartheid work herself, risking going to prison and leaving Bobo without any parent to care for him. As she says to herself, quoting Franz Kafka, "There are possibilities for me, but under what stone do they lie?"^{xii}

She's also ambivalent about the level of Graham's commitment: She notes that, "He lives white, but what's the point of the gesture of living any other way?"^{xiii} She likes the fact, though, that "When I talk with him about history or politics I am aware of the magnetic pull of his mind to the truth."^{xiv} Early on when she was married to Max, the two of them were deeply involved in anti-apartheid discussion and study groups with people like themselves, as well as going to the black townships for open-air meetings and demonstrations. They had good friends who were black, Indian and colored. They were involved in a radical white organization called the Congress of Democrats, which did work for the revolutionary ANC – the African National

Congress. Then Max teamed up with a black ex-schoolmaster named Spears, to formulate a handbook for the African revolution.

Liz wasn't sure about the nature of the love that she and Max had for each other: "What I wanted was for him *to do the right things so that I could love him.*"^{xv} But then she asks herself, "Was that love?" Later, he began having affairs with other women in the anti-apartheid movement, and Liz eventually divorced him, although they maintained a level of friendship. After a bomb he was making was discovered, and he was sentenced to five years in prison, it appears that he was beaten and tortured until he gave up names of some black Africans he was working with. He was released from prison early, but as a broken man. Liz's final analysis is this: "In his attempts to love he lost even his self-respect, in betrayal. He risked everything for them and lost everything. He gave his life in every way there is; and going down to the bed of the sea is the last."^{xvi}

So, in Max, and Graham and Liz, we have several models of how to respond to social injustice and marginalization, demonstrating varying levels of moral courage. Max takes the revolutionary road and loses everything, although Liz continues to admire him for giving his all to the effort: He went after the right things, even if perhaps it was in the wrong way and even if he failed in the end. Graham, by contrast, stays within the parameters of white society and his profession as a lawyer. He works within the system for change. He defends people in court who are being repressed by the state for fighting apartheid. He's one of few white attorneys willing to do so,

though, and he ignores the consequences he may face for it. Under the circumstances, would any of us be willing to act either as Max or Graham did? Or would we be one of those decent people, as Liz puts it, who deplore situations of inhumanity but generally commend action for social change to others, rather than to themselves?^{xvii}

Liz's own engagement over the years was much more mixed and ambivalent than either Max's or Graham's. With Max, she was involved as an activist, but in a supportive, background role as she was primarily involved with making money for their family and raising their son while Max was politically engaged around the clock. Since their divorce, though, she hasn't really done anything except to lament the state of her country under apartheid and to keep her hands clean, as she puts it -- by not making money off cheap black labor and by not performing services confined to whites. However, after Max's death, she's asked to serve as a conduit for some money from abroad for a black African acquaintance who's engaged in the liberation movement. She could do so, because she has power of attorney over her senile grandmother's bank account, and it seems an unlikely place for anyone to look to see if moneys are passing through into the hands of black Africans involved in anti-apartheid work. But she's afraid, because if what she's doing is discovered, she could be arrested and jailed herself. On the other hand, she's been long committed to helping end apartheid. "Why on earth should I do such a thing?" she asks herself about the money. And then she answers her own question: Because "there is the bank account. That's good enough."^{xviii}

The book ends with her lying awake a long time late one night: “There is no clock in the room...but the slow, even beats of my heart repeat to me, like a clock: afraid, alive, afraid, alive, afraid, alive...”^{xix}

Shall not the land tremble on account of the social injustice that exists within it, asks Amos. Mary sits at the feet of Jesus to be taught, as a disciple, breaking the social conventions of her day, learning his lessons of how to love. What shall we do in our era, faced by the kinds of social injustice that we can surely see if we only open our eyes? We can be afraid or alive. We can cower or we can act. Afraid, alive, afraid, alive, afraid, alive....

BENEDICTION

The courage of the early morning's dawning,

And the strength of the eternal hills,

And the peace of the evening's ending,

And the love of God,

Be in our hearts, now and always. AMEN.

(Anonymous)

NOTES

ⁱ Amos 8: 1-12.

ⁱⁱ Luke 10: 38-42.

ⁱⁱⁱ *The New Interpreter's Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), Vol. IX, p. 231.

^{iv} Jonathan Weisman and Ron Nixon, "House Republicans Push Through Farm Bill, Without Food Stamps," *New York Times*, July 11, 2013.

^v "Missing: The Food Stamp Program," Editorial, *New York Times*, July 12, 2013.

^{vi} David Brooks, "Pass the Bill!", *New York Times*, July 12, 2013.

^{vii} The first three words of the Constitution of the United States of America.

^{viii} Nadine Gordimer, *The Late Bourgeois World* (London: Penguin, 1982), p. 18.

^{ix} Ibid.

^x Ibid., pp. 36-37.

^{xi} Ibid., p. 37.

^{xii} Ibid., p. 45.

^{xiii} Ibid., p. 37.

^{xiv} Ibid.

^{xv} Ibid., p. 49.

^{xvi} Ibid., p. 55.

^{xvii} Ibid., p. 28.

^{xviii} Ibid., p. 94.

^{xix} Ibid., p. 95.