



Remembering Rachel's Children: An Urban Agenda for People Who Notice

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THE CITY IS SO COMPLEX AND SO BUSY...AND SO SELFISH...AND SO ANGRY...AND so frightened. We Christians are a part of the city, and so we share in all its features: complexity, busyness, selfishness, anger, and fear. We are a part of it, but we are also to be in it and for it and not of it, not of its complexity, busyness, selfishness, anger, and fear. In it and for it, but not of it. We Christians live here, and as best we can, we have resolved to be different. This article is a reflection upon that difference, which is sometimes bold, more often rather feeble and fleeting.

Different, but how? Well, in what we notice, what we care about. We notice, when we are faithful, what the world discounts. We notice the little ones, the hurting ones, the weak ones. They are the ones so difficult to notice when we are busy and selfish and angry and fearful. We notice them, and our vocation in the city (in it and for it, but not of it) is to insist that they should not be forgotten. Our theme then is "the little ones" as members of the city. In what follows, we will consider five texts, three from the Bible and two derived from the Bible, texts which show how children rattle and disrupt our settled lives.

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I.

Our story begins in Genesis 37. Jacob and Rachel have waited long in barrenness. Only late, only by the remembering mercy of God, was Joseph born, late and treasured (Gen 30:22-24). He was also spoiled, as such a belated child tends to be, so much spoiled that his older brothers resented his preferential treatment. They plotted against him, sold him off to get rid of him, for he was truly an inconvenience. In order to get rid of this inconvenient sibling, the brothers had to fool their father, lie to him, and claim that his beloved son was dead. They thought they had accomplished “the final solution” to “the Joseph problem.” The response of the father to the news of the death of Joseph sounds like this:

Jacob tore his garments, and put sackcloth on his loins, and mourned for his son many days. All his sons and all his daughters sought to comfort him. But he refused to be comforted and said, “No, I shall go down to Sheol to my son, mourning.” Thus his father bewailed him. (Gen 37:34-35)

The son was gone, lost irrevocably, nullified in anger and envy. The son was mourned, grieved over, noticed, endlessly noticed and remembered, but lost. The father was deeply bound to the son, grieving, not cynical, not uncaring, resolved to grieve to his death. The child is precious, and the father noticed, and refused to be comforted. Father Jacob may be a model for how people of faith cherish their children, all the children that belong to them, all the little, vulnerable ones who are nearby, even if not visible. This beloved child was a gift from God, long awaited, finally given, snuffed out by the anger and fear and envy of the brothers. But the father refused to be comforted.

II.

This loved and lost son lingers over the community of faith. This community remembers and does not forget, cares and does not grow cynical, grieves and does not give in easily to the brutality that works so close to us. It is odd that the Joseph story hardly surfaces in the Bible. Unlike Abraham and Jacob, Joseph hardly figures, and does little for the imagination of his people. Nonetheless, this terrible moment of death and grief is held in abeyance in Israel, almost like a dream for the life of the unconscious, not quite framed or articulated, but lingering poignantly in its unresolve.

The memory and the grieved son linger unvoiced in Israel, four centuries, or perhaps six or more—until we arrive at Jeremiah. This poet of candor, terror, and belated hope came late in Israel, a long time after Genesis. He came soon enough, however, to witness the failure of the city of Jerusalem. The city had become, as cities tend to do, too cynical and busy and angry, too selfish and too fearful, too indifferent, too forgetful, too uncaring, too disobedient. And so, says the poet Jeremiah, God will come against it in savage ways. God will come by an army; and with the army always come famine and pestilence, all the four horsemen of God’s terrible judgment. They will surely come, even upon this city. The outcome for this city is certain: the city burned, the temple destroyed, the king violated. And when

death comes to the king and all the powerful ones by military action, we know all too well what happens to the women. And I dare not tell you what happens to the children, so vulnerable and defenseless. They are readily brutalized and scuttled, not even an important statistic.

This poet Jeremiah must find words to speak of the terror of the city. To get that said well enough, the poet goes deep into Israel's memory, and runs full face into this old grieving man in the book of Genesis. Jeremiah, 600 years later, uses the words from Genesis in order to speak in his own time about the loss:

Thus says the Lord:
A voice is heard in Ramah,
lamentation and bitter weeping,
Rachel is weeping for her children;
she refuses to be comforted for her children,
because they are no more. (Jer 31:15)

Jeremiah has pondered this ancient scene of Jacob and his lying sons. The prophet has moved that scene around, so that we can see it differently. The key phrase for Jeremiah is the same as in Genesis: "refuses to be comforted" for the children. That is how it was said already in Genesis. Israel in every season "refuses to be comforted," because it loves too deeply and remembers so passionately.

But there is a change in the lines. The weeping done in this poetic scenario of Jeremiah is not by father Jacob as in Genesis; it is mother Rachel, now a pitiful, disconsolate woman weeping her pet son, weeping the way desolate women in the Near East still weep their war-ruined children. This time it is a mother. Now the grief is for no single child. This is for all the children of Jerusalem. This is grief for the young gift of life, the promise of tomorrow, Jerusalem's only concrete hope in the world – all gone, over, ended, lost. And the mother weeps, endlessly.

The poet adds another phrase, in order to voice the terrible finality of loss: "They are no more." Or more accurately, "They are not." Or more tersely, *Not!* The city is now forever childless, hopeless, futureless, because it was too busy, too angry, too selfish, too fearful, as indifferent to the little ones as were the brothers in Genesis. The poet Jeremiah sets loose in Jerusalem a river of tears, a loud wailing of grief, marking the brutality with loss, sounding the violence in equally violent, relentless speech. The city has forfeited its treasure. And then there is stillness, no sound of children dancing and laughing; silence, except for the sob that refuses to be stilled. No voice of children, only what is left of mother Rachel.

III.

Yet another six hundred years, and the grief of father Jacob and mother Rachel surges yet again. Matthew struggles with how to begin his story of Jesus. The vulnerable, exposed messiah is to be birthed into the brutal world of King Herod. As presented (or perhaps caricatured) by Matthew, King Herod is a symbol of systemic evil. He is not simply a bad or mad person; he embodies the systemic power of the brutalizing state, the force of the devastating urban economy. He is the point man for the military-industrial-financial-informational complex. Herod

is evil because his evil serves a larger policy of state. So he destroys all the two-year-old males (Matt 2:16), as pharaoh had done before him (Exod 1:22).

This is the context of the birthing about to be told by Matthew. There is a deep mismatch between the power of the established order and this one set to live and die against that very order. Jesus appears in a scene as ominous as *The Godfather*, with violence lurking everywhere, ready to break out at any awesome moment. Around this one baby being kept safe, there were so many others not valued or protected, but forfeited to keep up the appearances of a working social system.

Matthew must find a way to speak this terrible truth about this deathly mismatch between king and baby. He watches all the deaths, and then he wails as his mothers and fathers have done for so long:

A voice was heard in Ramah,
wailing and loud lamentation,
Rachel weeping for her children;
she refused to be consoled,
because they are no more. (Matt 2:18)

The children of Rachel have become a large bloody sign for those left unprotected and unvalued, for those caught in the relentless brutality of the Jerusalem system of power.

IV.

Emil Fackenheim, that great post-holocaust theologian, has taken a long look at the deathliness that moves among this people from Genesis to Matthew.¹ He notices the sweep of grief over lost children. It is as though this people is always losing its children to some ominous, ruthless power. Fackenheim is peculiarly focused on the six million who died. He says of the Rachel passage:

God Himself, as it were, weeps for his children. He weeps not for symbolic children in a symbolic exile but rather for actual children in an actual exile. He weeps as would a flesh-and-blood father or mother. He weeps as Rachel does.²

Then Fackenheim reflects upon an interface between this text and the Nuremberg trials. The witness reports that,

orders were issued that children were to be thrown straight into the crematorium furnaces, or into the pit near the crematorium without being gassed first.³

Fackenheim comments on the witness:

This is a report about Rachel's children....It is not possible for Rachel today to refrain her voice from weeping, or her eyes from tears. It is not possible for God's

¹Emil L. Fackenheim, "New Hearts and the Old Covenant: On Some Possibilities of a Fraternal Jewish-Christian Reading of the Jewish Bible Today," in *The Divine Helmsman: Studies on God's Control of Human Events, Presented to Lou H. Silberman*, ed. James L. Crenshaw and Samuel Sandmel (New York: KTAV, 1980) 191-205.

²Ibid., 192-93.

³Ibid., 199.

prophet or God himself today to bid her do so or, if doing this bidding, to be obeyed. Jews today cannot obey such a bidding. Neither can Christians.⁴

Finally, Fackenheim comments on Job 42:10-17. Job, after his terrible affliction, receives back from God everything he had lost. He receives back seven sons and three daughters. But as Fackenheim so poignantly observes, these are not the children restored. They are not the same children as had been lost. They are new children. The real children of Rachel are irreplaceable, never to be restored or recovered, gone, lost, nullified – and the weeping God refuses to be comforted, forever.

V.

Finally, Jonathan Kozol, that great troubler of America who has thought long and written tough about our cities and our schools, has written a book with the sub-title, "Homeless Families in America."⁵ The book is a series of case studies, vignettes, and anecdotes concerning the crisis of homelessness, especially in New York City. It is a terrible, albeit unscientific, portrayal of failed cities where families have become impossible, people are devalued, and children are discounted, forced to live as common criminals and as desperate animals. And all this happens in cities brimming with affluence and cynical, uncaring self-indulgence.

Kozol writes of the children "interred" at the Martinique Hotel, which is like a penal institution:

These children haven't yet lived long enough to hurt us. They have not grown big enough to scare us. They have not yet learned enough to hate us. They are as yet unsoiled by their future indignation or our future fear. The truth is, they offend us only in one manner: by existing. Only by being born do they do injury to some of us. They take some of our taxes for their food and concentrated formula, their clothing, and their hurried clinic visits and their miserable shelter. When they sicken as a consequence of the unwholesome housing we provide, they cost a little more; and if they fail utterly to thrive, they take some money from the public treasury for burial.⁶

Further, Kozol quotes Kai Erikson, concerning these families:

They have lost "a certain natural immunity" to misfortune....One of the "bargains men make with one another...in order to maintain their sanity is to share an illusion that they are safe even when the physical evidence in the world around them does not seem to warrant that conclusion."⁷

And then he makes these poignant comments:

We do not know what we ought to do about an underclass...We do know children shouldn't live in subways. We also have a good idea of how to build a house—or many houses, each of which has many heated, safe, well-lighted rooms, doors with door knobs, electric switches that go on and off, a stove that

⁴Ibid., 199-200.

⁵Jonathan Kozol, *Rachel and Her Children: Homeless Families in America* (New York: Crown, 1988).

⁶Ibid., 91.

⁷Ibid., 102.

can be used to cook nutritious meals, a refrigerator in which food for children can be stored. Overwhelmed by knowledge of the things we can't do, we are also horrified that we do not do what we can. I suspect that one of the ways we deal with this is to get angry – not at ourselves, but at the mother, and by implication, at the child. It is easier to be impatient than to live with sadness.⁸

Kozol concludes this way:

So from pity we graduate to weariness; from weariness to impatience; from impatience to annoyance; from annoyance to dislike and sometimes to contempt....State terrorism as social welfare policy...has not yet achieved acceptance in our social order; but it may no longer be regarded as beyond imagination. When we speak the unspeakable, think the unthinkable, and permit the impermissible, we are not far from a final darkness.⁹

It is difficult to determine if Kozol is commenting on our current urban scene, or upon Auschwitz, or upon the work of Herod. I trouble you about Kozol's deeply troubling exposé, not because we focus upon New York City, or because our theme is homelessness. I cite the book in our context because Kozol's book has the stunning title, *Rachel and Her Children*. Rachel, it turns out in Kozol's artistry, is a welfare mother in New York who cannot keep her children safe; and so she weeps. Of course Kozol is not innocent in his writing craft. He is a Jew. He knows this woman in New York, now bereft with her dying children, is not the first mother Rachel. The first mother Rachel, he knows, is encountered in Genesis and heard in Jeremiah and sounds again in Matthew.

Kozol also knows, however, that the sounds of mother Rachel weeping are not just an ancient woman in Ramah, but in New York City. The woman is not just an ancient Jew, but now is an abandoned African-American, and a hopeless Hispanic, and a permanently poor white. Kozol has not departed one inch from the painful sound of the text, because now as then, "the children are not." It is still mother Rachel in the face of angry, vicious brothers who sell the pet child they so resent. It is still mother Rachel with lost Jerusalem and its children. It is still mother Rachel watching while Herod savages Bethlehem. It is still mother Rachel standing close to the ovens at Auschwitz. And now gentile children in urban America, but still mother Rachel with the uncompromising Jewish cadences which every other mother can recognize immediately, a voice of loss and despair, too deep for comfort. I give you this sequence of texts from Genesis through Fackenheim to Kozol. There is something so harsh and brutal and quick and sure about the city, without enough notice or enough patience, or even grace to value the little ones. As a consequence the children die, and God cries, and all the mothers cry with God in the night.

VI.

We, we Christians, like these noticing Jews, are part of that city. We invest in the same busyness and anger, the same fear and failure to notice. But along with

⁸Ibid., 130.

⁹Ibid., 183-84.

noticing Jews, we are also different. We meet and eat and think and pray regularly to ponder that difference. We do not deny we are in the city. We ponder what it means not to be “of the city.”

The difference our faith makes is not that we are better, or know more, or can do more. The difference is that we are the children of these texts, and are pledged not to forget. These texts make a different sound. Unlike the alternative texts of Locke and Hobbes, of Adam Smith and Karl Marx, these are texts of noticing and caring, of valuing and remembering and refusing. God has put this little flock in the city – rich and poor, conservative and liberal, catholic, evangelical, and reformed – put us here to be different and to make a difference. The little, vulnerable ones are not just children. As you know, they are all the weak, the powerless, the marginalized, the disenfranchised, the objects of contempt. The exclusionary practice of the frightened, angry city touches every aspect of life – political, economic, sexual, cultural, educational. The city, in its uncaring hurry, wants first of all to forget. And God has put us here to remember, to remember the names of the lost and scuttled and forgotten. Every time the church meets, it meets to listen to mother Rachel and to remember.

We remember not in order to wallow in the past or to be nostalgic. We meet rather to let the memories turn to energy, to let that memory create a different future, to let these little memories touch great political strategies and move great economic forces. You see, pharaoh and Herod and Himmler were not just weird guys. They sat at the center of great technical systems of death, and so do we. Ko-zol speaks of triage, whereby the lucky alone are saved – but not the others. These texts are about patterns of triage and its selective forgetting.

This company of Christians and all the baptized, together with our remembering and noticing Jewish and Muslim counterparts, refuse the hurry of the city, refuse to let go, refuse to pretend, refuse to be comforted. Because they are not! And we wonder with anguish, how many more?

Jesus looked at the city and its savage work. He said with unassuaged grief:

Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing! (Luke 13:34)

If you, even you, had only recognized on this day the things that make for peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes. Indeed, the days will come upon you, when your enemies will set up ramparts around you and surround you, and hem you in on every side. They will crush you to the ground, you and your children within you, and they will not leave within you one stone upon another; because you did not recognize the time of your visitation from God. (Luke 19: 42-44)

He wept over the city. He wept like mother Rachel. We weep – and remember – perhaps enough to make a difference, by calling the public forces of the city to their proper remembering. We remember, perhaps to make a difference. We are *in it*, but *not of it* – in order to make a difference. We are not of its anger, of its fear, of its forgetfulness. We remember, perhaps to make a difference.