Excerpts

Excerpt from Chapter 1

The world, as it is, is the enemy of God. The world, as it is, is the enemy of the people of God. The world, as it is, is the enemy of those who, while claiming no belief in God, are devoted to creating a just society and act with such courageous conscience that they put the institutional church to shame. A great tension exists between the world as it is and those believers and nonbelievers who are "in the world but not of the world." This is so because the world, as it is, is driven by abusive power, consuming greed, relentless violence, and narcissistic pride. The world as it employs nationalism, propaganda, racism, civil religion and class enmity to bolster entrenched systems, corporations, and institutions. All of this is offensive to God and to those who seek to do what is just.

Throughout the centuries those who have faithfully witnessed to Jesus have learned all too well why the Greek word used for "witness" in the New Testament transliterates as "martyr." But certainly it is not only obedient Christians who have found that the world is their enemy. People of conscience in every society have suffered the affliction of being enemies of the State, held suspect, imprisoned, brutalized, exiled, executed. The Buddhist monk and peace activist, Thich Nhat Hanh, speaks a word that all people of conscience understand: "We are the loving adversaries of every regime."

Most Christians in the United States are lulled into imagining that here, it is different. In this nation, do we not see the defender of religious freedom, of freedom of speech, of democracy? In this nation, do we not see the hope of the world, the defender of truth, the strongest society in history? In this nation, do we not see a friend of God? Surely here Christians may make peace with the world.

. . . Those Christians who feel at home in the United States can do so only because they have buffered themselves from the brutal conditions of poverty, blinded themselves to the realities of racism, and deluded themselves into imagining that the vast military force of this country is the agent of justice. Many such Christians worship the idol of prosperity and have quieted their conscience in return for lives of relative ease and material comfort.
In the middle of a First Communion Class, a ten-year-old boy from the neighborhood said to me: "Hell is living in the ghetto with all its violence. Heaven is living in a safe neighborhood." While such a statement disregards both the heavenly qualities of many who live in the ghetto and the hellish aspects of life for many who live in safe neighborhoods, it nonetheless offers a clear truth. There is a dividing line in this country between those who are trapped in urban ghettos and those who have the economic luxury to live in relative ease. And the perception of life in the United States has very much to do with on which side of the dividing line one is.

How does one describe life on the ghettoized end of the dividing line? I think of the nine-year-old boy I visited whose family was living on the third floor of an abandoned apartment building in a room without plumbing, heat, or electricity. His arm was broken and in a cast but he would still go into the basement each morning, fill a bucket with water from a leaking pipe, and carry it up three flights of stairs to his family.

I think of Billy who is single and usually unemployed or working menial, temporary jobs. His income is too little and unpredictable to rent his own apartment so he stays with some acquaintances who smoke crack cocaine whenever they can. One day when I dropped him off at his place, he got out of the car carrying a bag of emergency food, motioned towards his apartment and said, "Welcome to my little corner of hell."

For Christians who do not live in poverty, the challenge is to view the world as it is from the underside, from the bottom, from the vantage point of the poor. Otherwise, at home in their society, they face the accusation of Jesus: "The world cannot hate you, but it hates me. . ." How indeed can the world hate the Christian who is at peace with the world? In fact, the world values such a Christian. He or she is useful to the status quo. Such a Christian, attentive to the propaganda of the State, has closed his or her ears to the voice from heaven regarding Babylon: "Come out of her, my people, so that you do not take part in her sins" (Rev. 18:4).

How does one come out of Babylon? In the first instance, this suggests a perpetual state of internal exile. The status of the faithful Christian is always one of being an alien in a strange land, always feeling unease with the disease of the culture. To come out of Babylon is to live in a constant state of resistance to classism, racism, and militarism. To come out of Babylon is to connect with a community of faith and faithfulness. To come out of Babylon is to act in accordance with one's conscience.
Excerpt from Chapter 2

The world as it should be is in direct opposition to the world as it is. The world as it should be is rooted in truth, love, and community. In the world as it should be, the voice of conscience is heard. In the world as it should be, people act according to the values of their faith. In the world as it should be, fairness and mutuality reign. The world as it should be is God's dream engaging the nightmare that the world has become.

Our English word "person" comes from the Greek word persona. The persona was the mask held before the face of the actor in Greek theater. In the world as it should be, the persona is removed. People are able to trust each other sufficiently to be transparent and exposed. People are not forced into the psychic splitting that occurs in the world as it is. People can live truthfully, honestly, with integrity, as authentic persons.

. . . In a world where 40,000 children die of hunger-related causes every day, the world as it should be has an abiding concern for children and for their right to have a playful present and a human future. Native Americans say that we must act in a way that gives thought to the impact of our action on the next seven generations. Such solidarity with children and with children yet unborn is the only way to guarantee that there will be a future worth entering.

The world as it should be is childlike in its innocence. This is not to be confused with pseudo-innocence, a particular affliction of many Christians. Pseudo-innocence lacks the courage to see the world as it is. Pseudo-innocence imagines that the world is essentially good, that war is waged for moral purpose, that the poor cause their poverty, that race relations will be transformed through friendliness. Pseudo-innocence is undaunted in its cheery approach to relationships and bewildered and useless when it comes to systemic injustice.

Martin Luther King, Jr., with reference to Paul Tillich, observed that while power without love is tyranny, love without power is sentimentality. Sentimentality is the face of pseudo-innocence. This is different from the childlike innocence of the world as it should be. Jesus said that we must be "as wise as serpents and as innocent as doves." Those who have a faithful vision of the world as it should be see the world as it is for what it is. They have the wisdom of serpents. But they retain a childlike innocence in their
actions. They are willing to engage power in the service of love. And power joined to love can create justice. ...