

Killing the Bodhisattvas (Lk. 4.24-30)
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I was a bit tired of everything on my iPod. I hadn't updated the music in a while, and, as I scrolled through the familiar playlists, I thought that perhaps I'd just finish my workout in silence. Yet as I climbed onto the treadmill and began at a warm-up pace, I was aware that it's not always easy to find silence at the gym. The overhead speakers blared bad 80s music, the monitors in front of me yielded a strange cacophony of FOX News, ESPN, and infomercials, and the person beside me was puffing loudly as he ran. So back to the iPod I went, thumbing through the options looking for a last resort. And there it was. A year-old podcast that I hadn't ever got around to playing. It was a dharma talk from a monastery in California given by the Vietnamese Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh, who you all know is one of my favorites.¹ Delighted by the find, I pressed play and began to listen. In a matter of moments, I was transported from the gym.

The podcast opened with the sounds of a gong being struck. Even through my tiny earbuds, the sound was deep and resonant, each note left to linger until it dissolved into silence. Then there was another moment of silence before I heard the voice of the aged teacher. Having been on one of his retreats before, it was not difficult to picture him as he began to speak softly to his original audience in California and to me, the minister listening in from a treadmill in Texas. Thich Nhat Hanh usually sits on a simple zabuton cushion on the floor. He crosses his legs in the familiar Buddhist style, holds his back

¹ The Deer Park Dharmacast, "The Beloved Community," June 11, 2009, available online at <http://deerpark.libsyn.com/>.

straight, and moves his hands gently while he speaks. His head is clean-shaven and his cheeks deeply wrinkled from years of aging and smiling. He almost always begins with a smile. His method of teaching is that of the soft-spoken dharma talk, connecting one thought to another as he moves through his common themes of mindfulness, compassion, and peaceable living. The talk I had found on my iPod was entitled, “The Beloved Community.”

Thich Nhat Hanh began with a brief consideration of the sangha, the community of practice that was represented by his gathered audience as well as religious communities around the world. He quickly noted the universality of the sangha, saying that it was not for Buddhists only, and moving into the place where his title suggested he’d be going. The sangha, he said, was the same as the beloved community. Then he began to talk about Martin Luther King, Jr. The first time that Thich Nhat Hanh, who is called Thầy by his students, met Martin Luther King, Jr., who was called Martin by his friends, was in Chicago in 1966. Thầy and Martin met together, drank tea, and then emerged for a press conference. At that press conference, Martin came out against the war in Vietnam, aligning himself with the cause of Thầy’s life. Afterwards, Thầy spoke of the need to support Martin’s work for civil and human rights. The two very young men recognized that they were both engaged in a larger movement as they struggled to change the world through nonviolent means. They began to consider themselves brothers of a kind. I listened intently to the podcast, gaining speed on the treadmill. Then Thầy continued with a story that brought tears to my eyes.

Thầy met Martin a second time at a peace conference in Geneva in 1968. As he began the story, he noted that only a few months later Martin would be killed. During this

second meeting, Thầy said that they enjoyed breakfast together, but he did not offer a detailed description of what they talked about. Perhaps they talked about their joint efforts to bring the war to an end and further the causes of human rights. Perhaps they compared notes on the sangha and the beloved community. Perhaps they spoke of the price they had each paid for their efforts, for, by this time, Thầy had been exiled from Vietnam and Martin was the subject of rising criticism from the usual detractors as well as former civil rights allies who thought he'd gone too far with regard to the war. All that Thầy mentioned was one thing that he said to Martin. As they sat eating their breakfast together, the monk looked at the preacher and said to him, "Martin, you know, in Vietnam we speak of you as a bodhisattva." According to Thầy, Martin was so moved by the comment that he could not speak and fell silent for a time. He knew what a bodhisattva was. A quick definition of a bodhisattva, according to comparative theologian Paul Knitter, is one who has "caught a glimpse of the oasis of Awakening...[and] runs back into the desert to lead others."² So Thầy had told Martin that he was one who did not seek to hold the truth only for himself, but was trying to show its way to others. He was an enlightened one who had chosen to stay to help others along the path. Brother Martin, bodhisattva. As Thầy told the story, he stopped for a moment, his raspy voice caught in contemplation. "I am glad I told him that," he concluded, "because that was the last time I met him."

The story haunted me for days as I considered the two men, each of them a bodhisattva in my book, and the terrible prices they paid for trying to build beloved

² Paul Knitter, *Without Buddha I Could Not Be a Christian* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2009) 109.

community. Martin, of course, paid with his life, gunned down in Memphis as he worked to improve the lot of the city's sanitation workers. And Thầy, now an old man, has lived more than 40 years in exile in France, teaching others about mindfulness while always harboring a longing for home. And I wondered: Why do we kill our bodhisattvas? Why do we send them away? Where are they now, the ones who are still trying to teach us? And can we ever truly hear them or do we always drive them out? The questions were fresh in my mind as I opened the Bible to a rather prescient lectionary text.

Our short reading from Luke Chapter 4 begins with the words of Rabbi Jesus. "Truly I tell you," he says, "no prophet is recognized in his own country." This is a curious thing to say, an ominous thing to say, and perhaps we could take just a moment to examine the context in which he said it. According to Luke's narrative, Jesus had returned to his home region of Galilee to preach a deeply inclusive message, borrowing imagery from the prophet Isaiah that would have been familiar to the people of Israel and expanding it to include a good word for all. According to biblical scholar Alan Culpepper, "Jesus came announcing deliverance, but it was not [the supposed] national deliverance but [rather] God's promise of liberation for all the poor and oppressed regardless of nationality, gender, or race."³ So the rabbi was preaching a radically inclusive message, and he was preaching it at home. Yet no sooner do the crowds come to cheer him than he chides them a bit with his dark-laced admonition, "Truly I tell you, no prophet is received in his own country." The statement proves to be true over the course of the next few verses as the crowd turns sharply on the rabbi. Continuing to

³ R. Alan Culpepper, "Luke 4.16-30 Reflections," *The New Interpreter's Bible Vol. IX* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 108.

teach, Jesus offers a number of instances when God favored characters who weren't Israelites, expanding the divine concern and widening the circle of beloved community. The audience doesn't want to hear this, though. As the Revised English Version tells it, "[His] words roused the whole congregation to fury; they leapt up, drove him out of the town, and took him to the brow of a hill on which it was built, meaning to hurl him over the edge." It's a rather dramatic finish, an image as full of foreboding as that of Martin standing on a balcony in Memphis or Thầy boarding a plane leaving Vietnam.

Sometimes the prophets aren't welcome at home. Sometimes the bodhisattvas aren't safe. Sometimes we love them for who they are and hate them for asking us to be the same. Because that's what the bodhisattvas do. They show us the path. Not the path of perfection, but the path of real human possibility. It is humanly possible, they say, to stop the war. It is possible to live as equal brothers and sisters. It is possible to widen the circle of our concern, to create a movement, a sangha, a more beloved community. Yet this can only come about if each one of us will take the risk of moving beyond a careful consideration of the bodhisattvas' words to taking those first stumbling steps down the pathway of their practices.

My friend Barbara Pescan, the best preacher I know, offered the following observation on the story. "The surest way to kill the message," she said, "is to deify the messenger." The easiest way to avoid the bodhisattva's path is to turn the guide into a God and then determine that we could never be like that. We kill the bodhisattvas, in part, to excuse ourselves from the calls they issue to us. Yet it seems to me that this is directly at odds with the message of our best teachers, including Thầy, Martin, and Jesus. They knew of our inclination to resist their words, yet in love they continued to speak. Thầy, Martin,

and Jesus called us not to become gods, but rather to become more fully human. More deeply, wonderfully, and lovingly human. More a part of the sisterhood and brotherhood of all—Baptists, Buddhists, Jews, anybody. Each of these teachers, I think, is a part of a larger movement made of so many saints and sages who have dared to say that we can create the world we want through nonviolent spiritual transformation. And our path to enlightenment will not ultimately be that of venerating the teachers or convincing ourselves that they are the only bodhisattvas. Our path will be the way of following along with them, daring to believe that the way we live our lives might make all the difference. For the beloved community can only come into being if we will make it so, if we will practice it, if we will see its possibility here and now and join with others in creating it. To be sure, we have a lot still to learn about what the beloved community really means. But Thầy, Martin, and Jesus would remind us that what we most need to learn we can always learn by doing.

Then with good and glad hearts, let us be about our work. May it be so.