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Commentary — From the Margins

The Poverty of Character

The death toll from a gasoline-tanker explosion in Kenya rose to 115, after nine people died after being hospitalized, the government said. ... The disaster happened about 100 miles (160 kilometers) northwest of the capital, Nairobi, on Jan. 31, when people were siphoning fuel from an overturned tanker that then burst into flames. The fire may have been started by a drunken man who was disgruntled about local police officials charging residents 100 shillings (\$1.26) each to siphon the fuel, the Standard reported today, citing Simon Korir, who was injured in the explosion.

Story by Paul Richardson; Bloomberg, 2 Feb 2009.

The Sterling Highway was closed. In the late afternoon hours of Rosh Hashanah, 1976, Mike Zorn and I sat, engine turned off, on the closed road, close enough to see the tanker lying on its side. The truck driver hadn't made the turn onto the bridge over the Kenai River, where the river leaves the lake. The truck had rolled. And 11,000 gallons of gasoline were quickly draining from the truck into the roadside ditch.

As Mike and I sat in a line that was growing and shrinking as traffic backed up behind us, then turned around to go somewhere — there was no other road around Kenai Lake so there was no way to get onto the Peninsula except to wait until the road was again open — the thought never occurred to either of us that we should siphon or scoop up the gas coming from the overturned tanker. Our concerns were about the problems that could come from the gas getting into the Kenai River, one of the world's preeminent salmon streams.

Neither Mike nor I were "rich" by American standards or even by second world standards. He and his family were living in a small cabin without running water or indoor plumbing. My family was living in an 8 by 35 foot trailer house that had neither a front door nor running water (a heavy quilt served as the front door throughout the fall and winter of 1976-77). Both of us heated with wood. He was an aircraft mechanic and was at the time unemployed. I was building (literally) a chainsaw-outboard dealership from nothing and without financing—I had the start of a 26 by 36 shop building up, but it was without wiring, insulation, or heat ... the building would eventually end up costing me \$2,600, seven chainsaws, and a 25 horsepower outboard. I would sell it in 1979 for \$30,000, when, because of the ending of Pipeline construction, Alaska's economy went south for a couple of years. I carried the contract and traded the first \$15,000 of the contract for a 30 foot boat, and I went commercial fishing, first out of Kodiak, then out of Dutch.

The numbers really have no meaning other than to establish credibility when I write that Mike and I were among the poor in a nation that was then about to enter a serious economic recession largely caused by the combination of a post-Vietnam shrinking of the economy and the inept political stewardship of Republican and Democrat administrations.

Why didn't Mike or I or any of the other drivers attempt to siphon some of the spilled gasoline? Neither of us had any money to go somewhere to eat and to wait out the road closure. We didn't have enough fuel in the vehicle to return to Anchorage. Yet we sat there until one of the other drivers said, "Our Point of View, the inn on the hill, is gonna stay open and serve coffee until the road opens."

Indeed, the young couple who owned and operated Our Point of View played movies, and served popcorn and coffee throughout the night ... the road wasn't open until 4:30 a.m. But within a year, the couple went broke; the inn closed and remained closed for as long as I remained on the Kenai.

When a person looks at what happened during the Great Depression of the 1930s, the person sees men walking to work in shoes with cardboard or newspaper covering the holes in the soles; the person sees families eating cornmeal mush for every meal for weeks on end; the person sees real poverty. But the person doesn't see a mass of looters descending upon an overturned gasoline truck to siphon or steal what gas they can ... oh, the person sees kids taunting men riding the rails, hoping that the men riding on coal cars would throw lumps of coal at the kids. The person sees deer nearly disappearing from the forests of the Pacific Northwest as every deer that could be killed was—as a kid, I remember older fellows telling me that they quit hunting deer with dogs because there were again enough deer that dogs weren't needed. I remember John Schirmer (the age of my father) telling me that the first money he earned was for selling to a Newport, Oregon, meat market a big bear he shot with his .22 rifle when he was 14.

I would like to say that the United States has not seen the type of mass poverty that would cause looters to siphon gas from an overturned tanker, or that would permit a policeman to charge just a little for allowing the siphoning, but that would not be true for America has seen looting in its inner cities—and it isn't a poverty of "things" that allows a looter to take what isn't his or hers during a calamity, but a poverty of character.

What thought underlies the premise that looting is somehow "okay" under some or any circumstances?

How many Kenyans would have perished if no one had attempted to take free gasoline when the tanker overturned ... "Poverty is pushing our people into doing desperate things just to get through one more day," Prime Minister Raila Odinga said at a hospital in Nakuru, near Molo. But is it a poverty of "things," of fuel for cook stoves, of money, or is it rather, a want of character that sees relatively affluent Americans carry away television sets following riots or hurricanes?

Someone will object, saying that I have never really been poor ... perhaps that is true. Although I have scrounged through grocery dumpsters when a teenager, I never thought of myself as poor: I had a rifle and a little ammo, and there were deer to shoot and salmon to catch. When I finally turned 18, I could get a job and I no longer needed someone to sign for me so I could get a drivers license—the problem with being a 16/17-year-old emancipated minor was the lack of anyone to sign permission forms; for since the beginning of the Great Society, children have been protected from having to work to survive. Only there was no one protecting emancipated minors, my status after Mom committed suicide when I was a 16-year-old college freshman (Dad died when I was 11).

Poverty isn't a want of things but a want of morals, a want of character, a sloppiness in distinguishing right from wrong ... which one of those Kenyans that died when the tanker exploded didn't really know that siphoning the gas was wrong? Which one truly believed that the gas belonged to the person? Or was the mindset such that the gas was free because a mishap occurred to someone else? The extension of this mindset will have everything being free to everyone when the second Passover occurs.

Morals cannot be hunted like deer. They cannot be transported in trucks or burned with fire or killed by hunger. They are what keep men and women chaste until marriage; what cause men and women to obey the law when no one is looking; what cause men and women to stay away from free gasoline leaking from a pipeline or an overturned tanker.

It's easy to take a free television set when the store has so many and has insurance and someone else has already broken the store window. Yes, it is easy to steal when the chance of getting caught is slim, when others are helping themselves to what doesn't belong to them, when justifying looting is framed in victimization. But how, as a looter, would you judge yourself if you were honest with yourself?

The Apostle Paul wrote,

For all who have sinned without the law will also perish without the law, and all who have sinned under the law will be judged by the law. For it is not the hearers of the law who are righteous before God, but the doers of the law who will be justified. For when Gentiles, who do not have the law, by nature do what the law requires, they are a law to themselves, even though they do not have the law. They show that the work of the law is written on their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness, and their conflicting thoughts accuse or even excuse them on that day when, according to my gospel, God judges the secrets of men by Christ Jesus. (Rom 2:12–16)

The looter lugging away a stolen television is without the law, but will also perish without the law; for those things that the law requires are not written on the looter's heart. No works of the law are evident in looting, in siphoning gasoline from an overturned tanker, in tapping into a pipeline to steal a few liters of gas even if the gas is necessary to cook a meal.

The prince of this world (i.e., the prince of the power of the air) is a rotten god that nearly all

of humanity obeys in one way or another: he doesn't give the person stressed by famine and impoverished by political corruption many options. Either the person steals to get through the day, or the person dies. And a person's self-preservation instincts push the person into stealing. So thievery is justified. Looting is justified even when the person knows it is wrong. The flesh demands and the person succumbs and salvation is promised by a lying god—but there is no salvation either now as one of the firstfruits or later in the great White Throne Judgment for the person on whose heart the works of the law are not inscribed.

According to Paul's gospel, the looter who remains alive is not saved; nor is the adulterer or the fornicator or the drunkard or the Christian who knows to keep the Sabbath but doesn't do so. In each case, the person is a hypocrite, knowing to do right but not doing so ... usually wrong-doing is excused as a weakness of the flesh: the person wants to do right but circumstances conspire against good intentions. The stomach growls, the baby is hungry, the heart is lonely—the reasons are many, but they all come down to the flesh ruling over the spirit even when the person hasn't been born of spirit as a son of God.

Yes, the girls are prettier at closing time, as the country music song goes: the hormonal demands of the flesh produce thoughts that are difficult to resist. If they were not difficult to resist there would be little wrong-doing in this world if any at all, for it is a rare person who doesn't at an instinctual level know right from wrong. It is an even rarer person who will, prior to being born anew, seek to do what is right when doing so is difficult. But the promise of Paul's gospel is that those who are without the law will perish without the law if the works of the law are not written on their hearts. The equal promise of Paul's gospel is that those who have the law—this is both Judaism and Christendom—will be judged by the law and justified by doing the things that the law requires ... are Christians not justified by faith? Yes, they are! But disciples are justified by faith through grace so that they can keep the law and not be burdened by the record of accrued debts with its legal demands that each disciple as a former son of disobedience acquired; for as Paul writes, "For we are his [God's] workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them" (Eph 2:10).

We are to walk in good works; we are to walk as Jesus walked (1 John 2:6); we are to imitate Paul as he imitated Jesus (1 Cor 11:1; Phil 3:17) — and Jesus was not a looter, was not a thief, was not a lawbreaker in any way. And He chose to die when He could have lived by simply answering Pilate. He chose to fulfill all righteousness over the self-preservation instincts of His flesh.

Choosing to die when a person could live for another day is a very difficult decision, but one most Christians will have to make once the seven endtime years of tribulation begin—and most will make the wrong decision. Most will choose to save the flesh, to siphon gas because it is there, to shoot a deer because they can. Yes, I understand as well as anyone how easy it is to justify wrongdoing, and I also understand how difficult it is to walk uprightly by faith in a world hell-bent on disobedience.

If being called great in the kingdom of heaven (Matt 5:19) were easy, neither greatness nor the kingdom of heaven would be worth much, and would certainly not be worth dying-for.

A siphoned liter of gas isn't worth dying-for either; yet 115 are dead and more may die.

Every person will die at some point, said with one primary exception (those disciples changed from physical to spiritual in the twinkling of an eye at Christ Jesus' return). Is prolonging this day worth salvation? Apparently it is for most of humanity, and apparently it was for those who were siphoning gas. Only there was no prolonging of the inevitable. There was only very painful suffering and death—suffering that makes the flames of paganism's hell seem real.

There are some who know me that claim I wolf down food, a habit probably acquired during that period when I didn't know from where my next meal would come. I disagree, but I also understand the reasoning so I don't condemn those who died siphoning gas. None of us are without sin; all of us have succumbed to the demands of the flesh. But if we are to escape the destruction of this world, we will not do so by conserving fuel or by changing light bulbs or by inflating tires. We will do so by having the works of the law written on our hearts, which means that we will not run with the lawless, that we will not join with those siphoning free gas, that we will not be in the bar at closing time, that we will not kill that deer just because we can, that we will keep the commandments of God to the best of our abilities. By faith, we will keep the precepts of the law or we will perish eternally. And for Christians, this means that we will keep the Sabbaths of God, all of them, not just the weekly Sabbath.

For a long time after baptism, life was more difficult than when I didn't know from where my next meal would come. For me, it was easy to kill a deer or to catch a salmon or steelhead. It was hard to stop at the limits imposed by the State of Oregon, for a deer didn't feed a growing family for long. Buying meat required cash money, a scarce commodity—and I didn't do well in limiting my harvest of game until after I migrated north to Alaska, where subsistence hunting and fishing are permitted. It was there where I realized I would rather play with my food (an expression borrowed from Todd Palin) than use a net; it was there where limits were not something to skirt but liberating enough to support life that I began to keep the law of man even when no one was looking. It was years after I was baptized before I realized how serious a problem compromising with what-is-right really is.

The Christian who knows that the seventh day is the Sabbath—and every Christian knows that it is—compromises with what is right when the person worships on Sunday. Thankfully, every Christian is under grace so that the law and the works of the law can be written on the person's heart. But grace ends with the second Passover liberation of Israel, now a nation circumcised of heart, and when grace ends, there will be no more covering for transgressions of the law. The only covering will be obedience.

Following the second Passover liberation of Israel, the looter or the poacher who has no respect for the law will not suddenly cease doing those things the person did before. Likewise, the Christian will not suddenly cease from doing what he or she did before—and if this Christian had been attempting to appear before God on Sunday, this Christian will most likely resume his or her attempt to enter into God's rest on the following day (cf. Num chap 14; Ps 95:10–11; Heb 3:16–4:11).

Remember, according to Paul's gospel the person without the law will perish without the law

unless the works of the law are written upon the person's heart ... the looters siphoning gas were probably without the law. Were the works of the law written on their hearts? I don't know. If they were not, then the looters will perish in the great White Throne Judgment. But the born of spirit Christian who has the commandments of God but who will not even attempt to keep them, with the Sabbath commandment being the least of these commandments, will perish in the lake of fire when judgments are revealed at Christ Jesus' return ... it will be better for the looter who died physically in agony but who might receive mercy in the great White Throne Judgment than for the Christian who has already received mercy (see Rom 11:32) but spurned it by continuing in disobedience. There are reasons for the looters' transgressions of the law (whether these reasons withstand the examination of Christ Jesus is a matter for Him to decide), but there are no legitimate reasons for the Christian to continue in lawlessness of any kind.

When I finally quit trying to feed myself and began to trust God to provide, I found that the Father and the Son were indeed faithful to supply my needs ... in those years when I was an emancipated minor living on my own, I worked a number of jobs where no one asked how old I was. I purchased several vehicles and drove without a license, a practice that makes a person a careful driver. No one asked how old I was. Even when I finally got a driver's license, I wasn't asked for identification. American society was then more trusting. But beginning with my generation, a spirit of rebellion against authority erupted: if I hadn't been killing deer to survive, perhaps I would have participated in the counter-cultural rebellion that came to define the 1960s. As it was, my rebellion was confined, contained by the necessity of feeding myself, not as part of a larger society but as a lone individual in a culture that cared but didn't know what was happening.

Those Kenyans who survived the explosion need help, but a world of impoverished morals cannot really offer them the help they need; for even if their bodies heal, their spirits will not. Oh, they will have learned not to siphon gas, but they will not have learned that salvation is worth more than physical life itself. Even after being born of spirit as a son of God, that lesson took me more years than I care to admit to learn.

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