

One New Book for the Preacher

D. Cameron Murchison, Jr.

Columbia Theological Seminary, Decatur, Georgia

AMAZING GRACE: THE LIVES OF CHILDREN AND THE CONSCIENCE OF A NATION by Jonathan Kozol. Crown Publishers, Inc., New York, 1995. 286 pages.

I remember learning when I was a child that my home state of Louisiana had the only remaining leper colony in the United States. I was led to believe that this improvement was owed to wonderful medical advances which had dramatically reduced the incidence of a disease which seemed so prevalent in earlier epochs, most notably in the times recounted in the biblical narratives. It was reassuring to me then to believe that the ostracism, quarantine, and associated degradation experienced by lepers—and for which only the boldness of Jesus in touching these unclean ones was an answer—was a thing of the past.

But Jonathan Kozol portrays a present that is even worse and which, in turn, portends a future that could be disastrous. Depicting the concrete meaning of ghetto, segregation, and quarantine refracted in the experience of children and adults who live in the South Bronx, Kozol puts readers in uncompromising touch with significant realities of life in America today. His description of the social plague that afflicts a particular American neighborhood is appalling: a neighborhood where people routinely die in fires; suffer from rates of asthma almost three times greater than in the state of New York as a whole; wait in the hallways of a hospital as much as four days before being put in a room; experience drug dealing as the most beneficent economy available to them; are born and die within prison and sometimes find the best health care available there; live in apartments with power outages occasioned by rats chewing through the wiring; go to school in demonstrably toxic buildings with virtually no sanitary facilities, not to mention qualified instructors; bury relatives who may be their children or their not so old parents, all of whom have died of AIDS; and regularly have welfare benefits disrupted sheerly by bureaucratic lassitude.

Kozol regards this social plague as a function of our society's strategy "to keep on placing those it sees as unclean in the unclean places" (p. 137). His narrative continues: "In reality, it is a form of quarantine," says Ana Oliveira, who directs an agency that serves ex-prison inmates who have AIDS, "not just of people who have AIDS, but of people who have *everything* we fear, sickness, color, destitution—but it has been carried out in ways that seem compatible with humane principles" (p. 137).

It's not the title that makes this one new book for the preacher. It's the subtitle that does it. Or better, yet, it is the story that is told. If Kozol is responsible for the main title, it can only be construed as a sucker punch. If the publisher is responsible, it can only be construed as a shrewd marketing ploy. By its own testimony, this story of the lives of children and adults in the South Bronx of New York is not fundamentally a celebration of how grace has triumphed "against all odds" in the lives of significant numbers of people. Instead, it is a sober pondering of the possibility that the South Bronx is a symbol of how systemic injustice is triumphing in large—albeit generally unnoticed—segments of American life. Kozol does know of and tell us about some significant moments when "little miracles" seem to happen. But he warns against

premature congratulations. "The trouble with miracles, however, is that they don't happen for most children; and a good society cannot be built on miracles or on the likelihood that they will keep occurring" (p. 160).

Thus a preacher will look in vain here for stories of moral uplift that can spice sermons with a dash of urban *savoir faire*. What a preacher will find instead is a moral question posed in the stories of particular people. It is the question of segregation, quarantine, and shunning: "So long as the most vulnerable people in our population are consigned to places that the rest of us will always shun and flee and view with fear, I am afraid that educational denial, medical and economic devastation, and aesthetic degradation will be virtually inevitable" (p. 162). Circumlocutions to the contrary notwithstanding, we have many leper colonies in our land these days. Addressing the question might well fund the preacher's reflection on biblical injunctions for hospitality and inclusion which will grate against the experiences of the South Bronx that are extant in every community in the land.

Kozol offers no blueprint for change. That, by his analysis, would surely be laughably premature. First it is necessary to discover "just how far the nation has regressed during the quarter-century that has transpired since the death of Dr. King and of the dream that seems to have died with him" (p. 163). No one can know what can be done differently until we are willing to do things differently. At a time when conservative talk show hosts and tired liberals alike make a case for radical abandonment of the poor—lately embraced on all sides in congress under the questionable guise of "welfare reform," this requires us to acknowledge what we are in fact doing that promulgates South Bronx and its kin.

It is perhaps a time of special urgency for preaching in this regard. Few voices in the current welfare debate do more than endorse the widespread conviction that "something has got to change." But the change most often articulated is one which provides less in goods and services for the poor and exhorts them to greater personal discipline and moral rectitude. Kozol's account makes clear that such appeals in the framework of the strategy of quarantine are predestined to failure. A prior need for "making changes in welfare" is for a change in the strategy of quarantine. Children in the South Bronx understand the strategy well. "It's not like being in a jail," [says fourteen-year-old Isabel]. "It's more like being 'hidden.' It's as if you have been put in a garage where, if they don't have room for something but aren't sure if they should throw it out, they put it there where they don't need to think of it again" (pp. 38-39).

At its most fundamental level, welfare reform has more to do with reforming the attitude of the dominant population which requires that poverty be aggregated and concentrated in particular communities "where they don't need to think of it again." Whenever that happens a ghetto is created with the Dickensian degradation that Kozol so tellingly describes. Until we find ways of assimilating those whom the ghetto tortures into the mainstream neighborhoods of our society, taking care not to concentrate all the deprivation in discrete spaces, we will simply be putting things in the garage. But the readiness depends entirely on the "ordinary choices" which another of Kozol's interlocutors mentions. "A dream . . . does not die on its own. A dream is vanquished by the choices ordinary people make about real things in their own lives" (p. 149). In relationship to our pattern of quarantine in America, these "ordinary choices" have to do with where we are willing to live and with whom.

Amazing Grace challenges us to address in preaching, teaching, and building

Christian community the haunting question with which Kozol leaves us:

Will the people Reverend Groover called “the principalities and powers” look into their hearts one day in church or synagogue and feel the grace of God and, as he put it, “be transformed”? Will they become ashamed of what they’ve done, or what they have accepted? Will they decide they do not need to quarantine the outcasts of their ingenuity and will they use all their wisdom and their skills to build a new society and new economy in which no human being will be superfluous? I wish I could believe that, but I don’t think it is likely. I think it is more likely that they’ll write more stories about “Hope Within the Ashes” and then pile on more ashes and then change the subject to the opening of the ballet or a review of a new restaurant. And the children of disappointment will keep dying (p. 230).

Amazing Grace will be more than an ironic title and more than a marketing ploy to the extent that it invites preachers to remind Christians that Jesus touched and healed lepers and to the extent that it urges preachers to encourage these Christians to contribute to a social reality which does not quarantine (and thus intensify the degradation of) the destitute.