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Texts: Matthew 27: 50-51; John 12: 20-26  
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### Meet Me at the Wrecking Ball: A Plea for a Secular Christianity

Few voices get to me the way Emmylou Harris's does when she sings "Wrecking Ball." It's a song found on her 1995 album of the same name, covering what was, originally, Neil Young's song. No longer. It belongs to Emmylou forevermore. She performs it in whispers and sighs, a weary woman trying to connect with an old lover for a last drink - or maybe the first in a renewed relationship. She's tired, but there's something seductive and haunted about her vocals. She proposes to meet at a cafe, or a bar, called The Wrecking Ball. It's a suggestive image. It implies something that's gone wrong, the scene of a disaster, the scene of a broken heart, an open wound that refuses to close. As I listen to the song, I imagine that the singer has seen better days. Maybe her looks aren't what they used to be, and the job isn't as fulfilling. She sounds lonely, longing for the company of other people, for the comfort of human touch. "Meet me at the Wrecking Ball," she sings. "I'll wear something pretty, and white," as if to suggest a new beginning. "And we'll go dancing tonight," she continues, there at the scene of a train wreck, there at the scene of the disaster, the Wrecking Ball. I'm inventing a backstory, but Emmylou's vocals invite such inventions. You sense in her voice a person too tired to judge, too weary to cast blame any longer. I sense someone at the bottom, with a willingness to embrace the raw humanity of her life, and to risk forgiveness. And I sense a certain kind of play as well, as she opens herself to a slow dance, upon the very scene of the wreckage.

I sense all of that and more, for I've come to think that it's the sound of something akin to the Gospel floating through that song. It's the sound of one who knows herself to be among the fragile ones, which seems to free her in a strange way to risk reaching out again. It's the sound of one for whom past resentment and enmity have been melted away into a present where it's no longer worth it to keep track of who's done what to whom. It's as though she no longer cares about who owes what, who's received what, who deserves what. There's nothing much left for her, except that pleading voice and an open heart - that, and a standing invitation to meet at The Wrecking Ball. Hold onto that image. I'll be coming back to it.

I appreciate that sense of invitation in all sorts of ways. But one of them is that it stands in marked contrast to the religion I grew up with as a kid, at least for a handful of formative years. In late elementary school and then into middle school, I learned that Jesus had come to save people from their sins. Once I accepted that, I was to find ways to separate myself from the rest of the world around me. Christians were to have their own friend groups, based in the church. I soon learned that there was a special kind of music - Christian rock - that I should listen to. It sounded like everything else, but with anything objectionable swapped out for Christian themes. Books and movies too were suspect. We were to avoid anything that did not explicitly uphold a so-called "Christian" understanding of the world. In short, we were to ensconce ourselves in a maze of sacred truths that were loosely based on the Bible, truths that worked to filter out any ambiguous elements from the wider world. For a time, I appointed a kind of border patrol agent to guard my inner life, preventing anything without proper documentation from crossing into my consciousness. It was my Berlin Wall, my El Paso. It

seemed impervious for a while, but little by little, underground crossings began to occur. Then cracks began to form. After that, it just crumbled.

That's a far cry from how most of you were raised, I know, but it's pretty representative of American evangelicals. Whether you know it from first hand experience or not, you'll certainly have felt the effects of that kind of thinking. It's baked pretty deep in the US psyche. In fact, it might even be our national Unconscious. It shows up any time the world is divided between the sacred and the secular, between those who are in, and those who are out, between those who have the Truth, and those who are trapped in error, between those who organize their lives morally, and those who are trapped in a kind of vice. That's exactly how, for example, all the transphobic laws currently being enacted in state legislatures are gaining adherents - by an implicit appeal to a widely held understanding of what is sacred, and what is not.

But I think we see it in other ways as well. We see that dualistic, binary, either/or version of the world in our immigration debates, which are rooted in attempts to police the boundaries of our national purity. We certainly saw it after 9/11, when attempts were made to suggest that Islam was somehow supplanting the Christian identity of the United States. We're seeing more and more versions of that argument - if such it is - play out, with different national or religious identities swapped out for Islam. We see it in the attempts to remove certain materials from school libraries, and to police what can and cannot be taught in a public school setting. And public shootings often, though not always, are twisted attempts to separate the wheat from the chaff using violence - where whatever group is thought to be polluting the purity of the wider social body - Jews, Asians, Blacks, LGBTQ, Secularists, you name it, are terrorized or killed. That is, perhaps, the most extreme form of this tendency, but I believe it's all predicated upon the wish to divide up the world between some version of the holy and the profane, the sacred and the secular, the pure and the impure.

Of course, attempts to correct against that tendency risk reproducing it. It's a risk I'm running even now. By diagnosing, and attempting to differentiate from that deeply American tendency, we risk reenacting the very thing we wish to avoid. How, in standing for justice, or in saying that actually, we believe trans-lives, or Black lives, do matter - how do we avoid the pitfall of creating still one more fault line, one more dualistic either/or account of the world, all while trying to undo such things? After all, if you care about justice, it will require you to say yes to certain things, while also saying no to other things. How then to stand firm against the rising tide of intolerance and indecency that has now gone mainstream, while also not yielding to those very same traits, though now in inverted form? It's a knife-edge that's very difficult to walk, suggesting just how deep the tendency actually runs to carve up the world into different versions of the sacred/secular divide. Indeed, it is our American Unconscious.

In the time that remains, I'd like to do what I can to sketch - and I can only sketch - an alternative account. Understood in a certain way, the Christian faith is already a kind of secularization. That's because the good news of Christianity has to do with impurity, crossed boundaries and cultural mixing. "Secular," in its root form simply means "outside religious orders," which originally implied being outside the monastery walls. That is to say, at its root, the very meaning of secular is to be outside the ghetto, outside the fences erected in the name of religion, nation, and creed. If to be secular originally meant existing outside the walls of the monastery, then we have all been secular for a long time now - even if we continue to be invested in a life of faith. To be secular, in the broadest sense of that term, simply means to reside in the world itself in all of its marvelous and confusing messiness, rather than sequestering ourselves in intellectual, spiritual, or political cul de sacs, where nothing on the outside can taint

or tempt us. To be secular is to open ourselves to all that the world has to offer, and to experience that world as a piece of God's good creation.

So much of the New Testament has to do with precisely that idea. "Go out into all the world" is what Jesus tells his disciples after the resurrection, at the tail end of his earthly ministry. "The world," in that passage, has not only to do with far flung lands. It has to do with the business of life itself. "Go out into all the world" - because that is where God is. Indeed, when the curtain of the Temple is ripped in two at the moment of Jesus's death, that is the meaning of that event. The Holy of Holies is no longer a sequestered place, quarantined off from the rest of the world. It is no longer a privileged place where God is accessed only by the chosen few. Such divisions, between the sacred and secular, between the holy and the profane, are torn asunder in the event of Jesus, who, we should recall, spent his entire ministry out in the world, outside of religious orders, among the people. He lived, in other words, a secular life, where opposites were reconciled, where things that didn't belong together were joined, where that which had been shunned was invited back in. He was, as certain formulations have it, a man of sorrow, who knew how to connect with others from within that sense of mutual sorrow. "I recognize you in your blindness because I have been blind. I see you in your leprous, shunned condition, because I have been shunned. I know that you are hurting, because I hurt too." That's how Jesus seems to operate.

By way of parenthesis, let me say here that you could also reverse my formulation, so that instead of initiating a process of secularization, Jesus opens the way to a sacralization of all that is. That works up to a point, except that the sacred always depends upon something outside of it, something that is not sacred, in order to function. I don't think the process of secularization operates that way. The secular need not depend upon its opposite in order to breathe. End of parenthesis.

Back to the Wrecking Ball. To hear Emmylou Harris sing it, the Wrecking Ball is a dark star. It is the scene of incomprehension and sorrow. The Wrecking Ball is midnight in the Emergency Room, or noon at a graveside service. It is every scene in our own lives where we strive to comprehend our existential situation - our loneliness, our trying to connect, our frailty, our losses. The Wrecking Ball is the scene of vulnerability and need, but it's also the scene of a certain openness, a certain communion. It is the touch of a hand, a head slumped onto the shoulder of another, eyes that meet and do not look away. It's not a place we wish to visit. And yet it's a place in which we do find ourselves from time to time. No matter how dark or confusing, I believe the Wrecking Ball is a place where we can expect to encounter the generous embrace of a God who has preceded us there, even there, outside of the holy places, after the Temple curtain is torn asunder. The Wrecking Ball is a vision of the secular itself.

It is also, I believe, the scene of the cross and resurrection, which Jesus forecasts in our Gospel lesson this morning. "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified," Jesus says. "Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit," he continues. When Jesus offers that parable, I believe he's referring to something very much akin to the reconciling, secularizing process that I'm describing. Everything turns on the metaphor of the ground. Might it be that Jesus is urging his disciples to cast their eyes not on the starry heavens above - where God, and the holy, are so often located - but on the ground beneath their feet? Could it be that his entire ministry was a way of orienting his followers to the ground, to the Earth, drawing them deeper and deeper into the flesh of the world? Did Jesus not spend his life among those who had been brought low, closer to the earth than the sky? Did he not spend his days and nights with those who haunt the Wrecking Ball?

What if Jesus was urging his followers to fall to the earth, to let the ground swallow them up, with the understanding that it was there, exactly there, in the hummus and dirt of this sweet and messy world that a fragile and vulnerable God would dwell? In other words, what if Jesus was inviting his followers to become not more Godly, but more human, more vulnerable, more open? What if, finally, Jesus's parable of the grain of wheat falling into the earth were a way of asking us all to perform our own shuffling slow dance there at the Wrecking Ball, in the sites within our lives and within the world that most need to feel the touch of our reconciling embrace, trusting that God will meet us there?

In the tense religious and political climate in which we live today, we need alternative visions to counter those strains of Christianity that would bifurcate the world into the saved and damned, the sacred and the secular, the righteous and the unrighteous, however those categories may finally manifest. We need visions to counter the narrow, sectarian, divisive, and exclusionary voices that too often get passed off as orthodoxy. We need ways of finding and allowing irreconcilables to mingle and coexist.

To begin to understand what that might mean, I would like to tell you about a moment recently in which I found myself at the Wrecking Ball, a place where, somehow, all the irreconcilable elements within a collective body were somehow suspended. It happened last month when I flew to California to be present at the funeral of my great Aunt. She and my grandmother, my mother's mother, had a special bond, which meant that she and her family were always close to our family. Some 50 people flew in from different parts of the country, and we all converged for a weekend of visiting and storytelling. There was great sadness surrounding the event, but it was so good to be gathered with all of those family members, many of whom I hadn't seen in twenty years.

They - we - are a very religious family. More to the point, it's a very evangelical side of my family. When we're together, everyone sings, especially old Gospel hymns, the kind that we don't sing much around here. "Blood hymns," they're sometimes called. They contain a theology that I no longer find helpful - being washed in the blood, being made clean, being set apart for righteousness. You can sense the whole apparatus of a Christian quarantine, of the sacred, being set in motion in just a few lyrics. Not surprisingly, those theological tendencies have given rise to political tendencies, at least among many within my family, that I have wished to avoid. Sitting, or standing, within those circles of song throughout the weekend, I sensed all the ways that my own life choices have taken me far - at least in some ways - from that particular world. I sensed all the ways that the language of faith has come to mean something very different to me, which might have made me feel lonely. It didn't. Nearly every time we sang together I dissolved into tears. It was a moment of shared memory, of shared sorrow and loss, and in that space I felt, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that no matter our differences, these were the people to whom I most deeply belong. We were at the Wrecking Ball, which gave us the means to find one another, to embrace one another, to belong to one another, in ways that are far more profound than what we believe, or how we vote. We sang "It is Well With My Soul." And it really was well.

If we are to get through this moment together - as individuals, in our families, as a church, as a country - I think we need to find our way to the Wrecking Balls in our lives. We need to find ways to embrace the elements of our own sorrow, of our own frailty, of our own vulnerability, not unlike the way we do at funerals. That's where the defenses come down. It's often where we manage to soften. It's often where a tenderness emerges that allows us to quit insisting we are right. I'm not saying we need to sit with the lights out forevermore, or conduct

our lives as if we were attending a perpetual funeral. God forbid. We need laughter and joy too. And justice will still require us to say yes to certain things, and an emphatic no to others. Even so, I think we need a little of the spirit that is found in those moments of shared sorrow if we are to find one another in this complex and messy world. I think we need to find our way to the Wrecking Ball. When we do, I believe we encounter the love of a trustworthy God, who has promised to dwell with us wherever we happen to find ourselves, in the ordinary and good secularity of everything that is.

Meet me at the Wrecking Ball.