

While the Jury Is Still Out

Some people make New Year's resolutions. I reflect on the way I spend my time and energies, and wonder if it fits with my professed convictions. There's clearly room for improvement.

A few years back I learned from my sons that one of the worst epithets one can have hurled one's way is "loser." It says something about how we view the world if we tend to divide people into "losers" and their presumed opposites, "winners." I guess it's the next generation's version of my generation's "failure" and "success."

Anyway, I grew up wanting to be a success, and now I sometimes feel that I have become a patron of lost causes. In my own mind, I don't think so. But it is true that I don't hang out much with folks who are at the top of their game, so to speak, and that I devote some of my energy to causes that seem out of favor.

Enter my convictions. There's a strong critique of dominant worldly perceptions in the Christian scriptures and tradition, and especially in the teaching of Jesus. He taught that the last shall be first, and the first last. His disciples understood that service rendered to "the least of these" is divine service. Recent church teaching speaks of God's "preferential option for the poor," a declaration that God is especially concerned about the interests and welfare of those who have little worldly estate. The message is not that Christians should become patrons of lost causes, but that what appear to be failures, lost causes, marginal movements, or hopeless undertakings may well be the most significant places of divine ferment and possibility.

We tend to regard success as breeding success, and want to get on the bandwagon. But God apparently likes to hang out with those who are hoping against hope, because they have little else to go on.

I like to be on the winning side, but I want my efforts make a real difference. If some cause or group can get along just fine without me, maybe I need to put my time and energies elsewhere. Moreover, my faith and life experience tell me to expect some major reversals of fortune. So I live in hope that the apparently marginal efforts to which I sometimes feel drawn are not lost causes, but merely the initial stirrings of what is yet and ultimately to be.

Copyright 2009 by Byron C. Bangert