

The Child and the Beggar: Romans 8, St. Martin and Understanding through Hope

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A cozy bustle filled the room of the church cafe-turned-crafting room on the evening of the St. Martin's festivities. "Here, see, you can take these pieces of colored tissue paper and glue them onto the glass of this old marmalade jar," said the lead volunteer, as she stopped to help one new child in particular who appeared not to know what to do really or what the hubbub was all about. "Yes, just like that. And here's another one. Good. Now, wait, this time use a different color, ok? The light of the candle will shine so prettily from the inside if you coat the jar with several different colors: now red, ok? Here are a few orange pieces. Ooh, let's now try some emerald and, um, ah here, some of these sky blue and midnight blue bits." The woman stood and placed her hands on her hips, looking with a smile at the quiet child who held the jar insecurely in their small hands. "Well! It's not perfect," she continued, "but isn't it beautiful? Keep going, just like that. And once you have glued on enough pieces to cover the whole jar, we will put a little tea candle in there, and, you'll see: it will shine just like the light in the church windows."

The child carried on, studiously following the instructions the kind woman had given while also stealing glances at the work of the two other children sitting at the same table in the cafe on that dark, cool November evening. The children were crafting something they called "*Laternen*." The new child was not yet sure what that might be, though they repeated the word again and again in a kind of song... "*Laterne, Laterne, Sonne, Mond und Sterne...*"

Sorted at tables around the room sat 10-15 children, along with as many parents and a handful of other grownups who, it seemed, were probably always there, just like the pews and the altar and the baptismal. Everyone was busy doing something. "Do you need more colored tissue paper, dear?" "Oh, that candle will never work; I tried to use one of those three years in a row before I figured that out! But, wait, I've brought some extras of this sort; they're really just perfect. Let me grab one for you from my bag." The child let all of this soak in and considered what it might mean. A combination of Ordnung and familiarity animated the room. Even those who were doing nothing appeared to be appropriately busy. The other children, for example, who had finished their *Laternen*, congregated in a huddle, with *Laternen* of paper mache and glass and colored tissue paper - all now hanging by wire and string from the end of sticks. They

were waving them joyfully and dangerously at one another, threatening to bring about prematurely the destructive end to which all children's craftworks seem destined.

The woman organizing the gathering came back around to the child's table, just as he was placing the last bit of colored paper on the outside of the glass jar. She produced a tea candle and lighter from the pocket of her sweater and, upon lighting candle between her fingers, dropped it into the jar. "There. Isn't it beautiful? See how the wiggling flame makes the colors seem to dance, too?" The child said nothing, but watched the colored light coming through the glass with quiet fascination and delight. It was just like the church windows. There too were the sun setting in the red and orange and yellow and the moon and the stars shining through the midnight blue. "Sonne, Mond und Sterne," the child hummed quietly. "Laterne, Laterne..."

It was soon announced that the time had come to join the train. It came as an even greater surprise to the child that they would now apparently be boarding a train. But in due course, the other children lined up along the wall in front of the cafe door with a fine collection of more or less finished Laternen. Ah, there was to be a parade, not a train; or rather, it seemed Zug must mean parade as well as train. They were a motley troupe: Some with jackets and scarves and gloves, despite it being nearly 20 degrees outside. Others in pullovers. Young and old. German, French, American, Syrian, Chinese. Some born in Germany, some of families living in Bonn on short-term assignments. But none of that really mattered to the children: They were ready to plunge into the darkness and lustily drive it away, armed with nothing but twinkling tea candles and a song: "Laterne, Laterne, Sonne, Mond und Sterne."

And so out they marched. They processed around the neighborhood auf und nieder for a good half an hour. They sang and sang. After they'd sung "Laterne, Laterne" several more times, each new song had to be learned on the go. It seemed to the new child that a lot of people were now only humming, which made the child happy, since then it was not so obvious when they did not know the words. One song in particular which told the story of someone named Martin was impossible to sing past the first line of each verse: "Sankt Martin, Sankt Martin, Sankt Martin hm hm hm hm hm." Still, although no one seemed to know the words, everyone seemed to know the song. But who was this Martin, that he should have his own festival and lanterns and songs?

The singing was interrupted by whimpers every so often, as various children's candles were blown out in the night air. But it would require only a moment, before another child would use the flathme of their own candle to revive the outed wick, and therewith the spirit of its bearer. And so they went.

As the parading train returned to its station, the group this time entered not the cafe but the church. The children were chaotically arranged by as many grown-ups, each issuing directives of his or her own, across the front of the church on the floor before the altar steps. The child wanted to sit next to its mother, who was warm; the other children were unfamiliar, and it was somehow colder in the church than it had been outside even. The other parents, too, were grappling with their own clingy children, however, until all were directed to pay attention to the altar, as a man climbed the altar steps wearing jeans and a t-shirt but also wrapped in a bright red polyester cape, crowned with the helmet of a Roman soldier and carrying a phony plastic sword. Sensing an opportunity, the parents began pointing toward the front and calling out "Sankt Martin! Sankt Martin!" that they might distract the children, and themselves simultaneously retreat into the pews. The ploy worked as the children's initial distraction was converted into curiosity and then into imagination and wonder. The new child only made it as far as distraction and curiosity, still enough to allow its mother to decamp with the other parents to a pew a few rows back. At first it was the sword that interested the child the most. But slowly curiosity did give way to imagination as this Martin strutted around the altar space, with an exaggeratedly serious posture and correspondingly austere gaze (something everyone else was calling leichter Mut?). And finally, someone began to narrate Martin's story:

*Accordingly, at a certain period, when he had nothing except his arms and his simple military dress, in the middle of winter, a winter which had shown itself more severe than ordinary, so that the extreme cold was proving fatal to many, he happened to meet at the gate of the city of Amiens a poor man destitute of clothing. He was entreating those that passed by to have compassion upon him, but all passed the wretched man without notice, when Martin, that man full of God, recognized that a being to whom others showed no pity, was, in that respect, left to him. Yet, what should he do? He had nothing except the cloak in which he was clad, for he had already parted with the rest of his garments for similar purposes. **Taking, therefore, his sword with which he was girt, he divided his cloak into two equal parts, and gave one part to the poor man, while he again clothed himself with the remainder.** Upon this, some of the by-standers laughed, because he was now an unsightly object, and stood out as but partly dressed. Many, however, who were of sounder understanding, **groaned deeply** because they themselves had done nothing similar. They especially felt this, because, being possessed of more than Martin, they could have clothed the poor man without reducing themselves to nakedness. In the following night, when Martin had resigned himself to sleep, he had a vision of Christ arrayed in that part of his cloak with which he had clothed the poor man. He contemplated the Lord with the greatest attention, and was told to own as his the robe which he had given. Ere long, he heard Jesus saying with a clear voice*

to the multitude of angels standing round—“Martin, who is still but a catechumen, clothed me with this robe.” The Lord, truly mindful of his own words (who had said when on earth—“Inasmuch as ye have done these things to one of the least of these, ye have done them unto me), declared that he himself had been clothed in that poor man; and to confirm the testimony he bore to so good a deed, he condescended to show him himself in that very dress which the poor man had received.¹

The narration concluded, as the man playing Martin, now lying on the ground, pretended to wake from a dream and ponder its meaning. An eruption of applause from the parents - now with the goal not of distracting the children but rather and signaling to them that it was time to go home - this applause momentarily foreclosed the possibility of pondering for anyone else. The Martin, who just couldn't be bothered any longer, bowed awkwardly, holding the toy sword now by the blade, and with the bunched-up robe hanging over his arm. Even as parents began to gather up coats and bags and volunteers collected already dilapidated and abandoned lanterns, a number of children dispersed and began chasing one another around the sanctuary. Shrugs of the shoulders and farewell conversations then began to fill in the already but not yet recognition that perhaps the evening had not quite reached its conclusion.

The child had remained seated. This whole affair had been a new experience to for them. They did not know how to bastel a Laterne, did not know why they'd trudged around outside in the cold and dark (even though they'd had to agree the candles were quite nice). And they'd never heard of this Martin that everyone was singing about. But as the child now began to ponder, they sensed they perhaps did understand Martin.

“The suffering beggar was Christ. And if the suffering beggar was saved by Martin's help, then Martin saved Christ. But, I thought Christ was supposed to be the one who saves people? How is that supposed to work?” The child pondered a moment longer. “It must have started with the beggar. Because he still hoped and cried out in hope, that someone might help.” And the child remembered hearing grown-ups use a big word like “rightness” at the church during other worship services. The “rightness of God,” or something like that. Or was it righteousness? No, it must be rightness; righteousness sounds silly. But anyway, maybe this is what the grown-ups meant: The rightness of Christ is the same thing as the rightness the beggar received and the same thing as the rightness that Martin showed. If you pay attention to the hope of the crying beggar, then you can see the rightness of Christ is the rightness of Martin. That makes sense,” thought the child. “I can believe that. But they really ought to be singing about the beggar then and celebrating his cry of hope.”

¹ <https://ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf211/npnf211.ii.ii.iv.html>

