

Mark Belletini

Opening Words

We are here
to worship, to unleash our praise,
and remind ourselves once again
of what we already know.

Here under this golden gable,
set amid trees laid bare by November,
we begin in this way:

**Mindful of the responsibility our freedom presses into us,
blest by the beauty of the world, and drawn by a vision of a
community known for its honesty, generosity, depth, love, and justice-
work, we focus our time together by the kindling of light.**

Sequence

I usually write the words before silence when I lead worship, but this morning, I want to read a perfect poem someone sent me two weeks ago. It's called Praise Song by Barbara Crooker, and let these flawless words lead us into the silence:

Praise the light of late November,
the thin sunlight that goes deep in the bones.
Praise the crows chattering in the oak trees;
though they are clothed in night, they do not
despair. Praise what little there's left:
the small boats of milkweed pods, husks, hulls,
shells, the architecture of trees.

Praise the meadow of dried weeds: yarrow,
goldenrod, chicory, the remains of summer.

Praise the blue sky that hasn't cracked yet.

Praise the sun slipping down behind the beechnuts, praise the quilt of leaves that covers
the grass: Scarlet Oak, Sweet Gum, Sugar Maple. Though darkness gathers, praise our
crazy fallen world; it's all we have, and it's never enough.

(silence)

Praise the tendons of spirit that connect us one
to the other, despite distance, despite loss, despite even ancient estrangements. Setting
aside a moment in the middle of worship to acknowledge the larger community which

enfolds us, we praise the gift and reality of universal communion by naming those whose names our heart prompts at this moment, either quietly within, or whispered aloud.

naming

Praise now the power of music: difficult, sublime, beautiful, arresting, astonishing and rich.

Readings

The First Reading *is an excerpt of a much longer poem called Poem for Audre, written by Gloria Hull as a commentary on, and grateful response to, the poem we read earlier as an affirmation:*

What you say keeps bothering me,
keeps needling, grinding,
like a toothache or a bad conscience:
“Your silence will not protect you”
You quietly stand there,
annealed by death,
mortality shining:
“Whether we speak or not
the machinery will crush us to bits---
and we will also be afraid.
Your silence will not protect you.”
Some of us sit rigid,
our eyelids burning
mute from birth, from fear
from habit, for love and money,
for children, for fear, for fear,
while you probe our agonized silence.
Please keep on teaching us
how to speak,
how to know that now
“our labor is more important
than our silence.”

The Second Reading *comes from the Enchiridion or “Handbook” of the Roman Stoic philosopher Epictetus, who was born during the reign of Nero, and lived a good long life. Like Sokrates and Jesus, he never wrote anything down himself, so his student Arrianus copied his teaching down as he offered it day by day. This was written about the same time as the gospels of Luke and Matthew were being edited, around 95 CE.*

"Happiness and freedom begin with a clear understanding of one principle: some things are within our control and some things are not. It is only after you have faced up to this fundamental rule and learned to distinguish between what you can and cannot control that inner tranquility and outer effectiveness become possible... ...Remember too, that if you think you have free rein over things that are naturally beyond your control, or if you attempt to adopt the affairs of others as your own, your pursuits will be thwarted and you will become a frustrated, anxious and fault-finding person."

Sermon

When I used to live in Oakland, California, there was a house right across the street from my loft building. Whereas everything else on my street was either utterly dilapidated, or some sort of crack den, this house was one of those cute white picket fence deals with a porch and even a small lawn, something pretty rare in urban California.

Two men lived there, brothers. Both in their 60's. And both very friendly, always waving. And both of them *really* heavy drinkers.

One day, my seminary intern, Gretchen, was over at my loft. We were planning an intergenerational service together over a bit of lunch. It was a warm day, so the windows were open. After lunch we went to work on the computer. We kept on looking out the windows to the beautiful sky to the north, and the warm yellow sunshine. One of the two brothers who lived in the charming house across the street was out on his porch. He had been drinking.

Suddenly, as he was walking all wobbly drunk toward the door, he fell. He hadn't tripped, or had any kind of heart attack...that was clear. He was just falling down drunk. We could see that he was trying to get up, but he was simply just too drunk to stand.

I said to Gretchen "I better get over there and help him up."

"Just let him lie there," she said with great authority.

"What are you saying? He clearly needs help."

"And going over there to lift him up and set him upright is not the help he needs. Someone, his brother probably, has been picking him up all of his life. He is still drinking at his age, even though he is bombed out of his skull half of the day, because he has been supported in his drinking by those around him. They have been silent, or if not silent, very tentative in their needful challenge of his behavior. If you go over there and pick him up, you are confirming what everyone else has been saying to him all his life...by

not saying anything and ‘helping’ him.”

I remembered then that Gretchen had dealt with substance abuse problems in her own circle, and was now married to man known throughout the world for his wisdom in this area. So what she said had undeniable impact. But, boy, was it hard to simply let him lay there on the porch. My whole being wanted to go over there and help him, to save him from the shame of having fallen down drunk on his porch. About an hour later, his brother came home and silently helped him get up off the porch and wobble inside.

And the next day, he was back at it.

I have used this memory as a touchstone, a prayer bead that I finger with my reason, my emotions, and my self-questioning. I find that I spend a good deal of time pondering the gift of restraint which Gretchen asked of me. Consider this sermon just a public meditation on a topic I meditate on every single week a dozen times.

My whole life I have heard that it’s good to be helpful. I have been told that it’s good to lend a hand, from the proverbial Boy Scout leading a fragile elder across the street, to hauling furniture when my friends move from one place to another. Help my grandparents weed their garden? Of course. Help my neighbor Mrs. Byers wash her awnings? Without a doubt.

Moreover, my career as an ordained minister... isn’t it all about reaching out, isn’t it all about helping, isn’t it all about lending a hand to people as they face difficult situations in their lives? My whole education aimed itself in that direction, didn’t it?

Actually, it didn’t. Not as much as you might think. Throughout my training for the ministry, there was a strong thread of “Let it be” too. A strong encouragement to be there, but to not offer help, simply a steady presence.

Helping others, you see, is tricky. Confusing. Sometimes helping others is not helping them at all, but actually keeping them down as a way of keeping their dramas and trouble out of our life. And sometimes, as the children’s story made so clear this morning, when you help other people you are only really helping yourself...helping yourself to feel better, to feel more useful and loved.

Now there can be no doubt that at other times, help is both appropriate and welcomed. Helping a trembling elder down the steps, helping out a trusted friend by fixing his car because you have the skill, helping out a sick friend by driving her to fill a prescription...this seems pretty reasonable to me.

But how does one decide how to help appropriately?

Good question. But I know I cannot offer any easy answers, if that's what you are looking for. In the end, each of us will have to find answers for ourselves. I am not able to help with some universal solvent. I simply don't think it exists.

Still, even if the question admits no easy or universal answers, it's still a critical question for our days. For example, many of us are aware, more especially at this season than usual, that some of their relatives or friends suffer problems with alcohol or other addictions.

If people, for whatever reason, including inherent physical vulnerability, drink themselves into oblivion or drug themselves into a stupor, and the folks who are in their lives are quiet, do not speak up, and make excuses for them, then I ask, "By what miracle does anyone expect them to stop drinking?" Are there people who really do believe in heavenly miracles, bolts out of the blue or that sort of thing? I certainly don't.

But as soon as I ask that question, which seems reasonable, I all of a sudden remember what many people have said to me over the years when I urge them to *not* keep quiet about the elephant in the room, in other words, about what they actually see and hear and sense. A friend put it this way: "I worry about what will happen if they make a fuss. Anyway, no matter what I say, they won't do anything about it. We've just learned to ignore Uncle Harry's obnoxious shenanigans every Thanksgiving." Or, "They'll just tell me to shut up and mind my own business." Or, "They'll get angry and when they get angry, I am actually scared of them."

Well, yes, all these things might be true. But this is where I find great strength in the ancient philosopher Epictetus. He reminds me that "Happiness and freedom begin with a clear understanding of one principle: some things are within our control and some things are not. It is only after you have faced up to this fundamental rule and learned to distinguish between what you can and cannot control that inner tranquility and outer effectiveness become possible..." In other words, yes, if I bring up the alcohol or drug issue, or verbal domination, anger management problems or any other thorny issue for that matter...I may indeed be at the receiving end of a considerable temper. I may be told to just shut up. I may indeed fail in my attempt to name things, as everyone ignores what is right in front of their eyes.

And anyone of those things might cause me real pain, and real suffering of the spirit.

But, in the words of Audre Lord, "We were never meant to survive." In other words, as Buddha made perfectly clear 2500 years ago, pain is part and parcel with life. So spending your entire life trying to avoid pain is just plain foolish. You can't. You *will* experience pain. There is no choice in the matter unless your denial mechanism is set so high that you wouldn't feel a cement floor if you fell on it.

What I am saying is that there is a good possibility of pain if you speak up, yes, but there is an even greater likelihood of pain...a different kind of pain, to be sure, but pain nonetheless... if you remain silent and pretend that either nothing is happening, or that there is nothing that can be done.

And so the tendency is to either pick someone up when they have fallen, or make excuses for them (“Oh, they’ve had a really hard life.” Or, “Oh, they don’t really do this all the time.” Or “Oh, they don’t really mean it.”)

Real interdependent relationships involve both give and take on the part of both parties. What I am talking about is more take and take, the famous relationship style popularly called “co-dependency.” The co-dependent relationship is tricky. It seems at first like a one-way relationship, a unilateral approach. One person keeps on giving to the other person until there is nothing left to give, and then they still keep on giving even more. The other person keeps on taking, and often is quite a bottomless pit of need. But actually, the co-dependent relationship is based on mutual need...one person needing to help, to take charge, to control, while the other person, in fact, is actually in charge, and controls everything around him or her so as to never be challenged. Both of them are taking, not giving.

One takes apparent charge of things, the other takes real approval. When two folks depend on each other to cooperate at any cost, that is a take-take or a co-dependent relationship. There is nothing either healthy or helpful about it.

Now be clear about this...there are times when someone might have to give of themselves unilaterally. If I am crossing the street, and don’t see a car coming, and you do, and, thinking quickly, you push me out of the way, you are giving and I am gratefully receiving. But if our relationship is healthy, you know very well that I would do the same thing for you in a similar situation. But in an unhealthy relationship, one person takes all the power praise from the other, while the other takes self-esteem and approval back. The first says: “You don’t call me to account, you don’t ask for any accountability or responsibility, and I will like you. As soon as you withdraw your consistent support, I will not like you anymore; I may even hate you, or be angry with you. I might frown at you, or sigh heavily, sounding hurt in your presence, but ultimately I will crush you. So shut up, don’t ask, and don’t tell. I will drink when I wish to, I will engage in angry or erotic acts as and how I need to, I will dominate you, the rest of the family, and any institution I wish with my temper, my talkativeness, my passive-aggressive behavior, or my boorishness, and you can’t say a damn thing about it. I need you to be quiet for me. You need me to like you, and make you feel good about yourself. We are dependent on each other. Let’s not destroy a good thing.” And the other person agrees, and gains their whole sense of worth from the agreement. And neither of them is really helping each other at all.

My observation is that this whole co-dependent approach to things has percolated up from the family unit into larger institutions and society at large. The practice of mutual dependence has bent the whole nation out of shape. I used the phrase “Don’t ask and don’t tell” earlier to begin to make that point. Asking people to deny who they are in order to protect the sensibilities of people who don’t want to deal with reality is exactly what happens in a co-dependent family relationship. But you can find it in even larger social institutions too. Madison Ave. can make you buy anything it wants you to buy by telling you how it will make you feel good. They can promise love, pleasure, orgasm, and anything else that has absolutely nothing to do with the product, because, in a co-dependent culture, the promise of love and pleasure in exchange for your silence about what you actually see and hear is far more important than truth. Most historical wars, most national budgets, and even ecclesiastical creeds are based on the notion of someone else’s needs, our tacit silence in order to proceed. We are asked constantly, by a thousand devious means, to “help” others...help them win, help them amass, and help them control the environment. And the best way to help, we are again told by a thousand subtle means, is by keeping silent, or by saying things like, “It’s just the way things have always been!” Or, “No one would *really* tamper with a voting booth just to win, would they?”

So how *do* you really help others? I find myself going back to the man lying on his porch. Refusing to pick him up wasn’t going to magically change his drinking behavior... but it can kick out just one more prop keeping him in that drinking system. Real help takes time, but more his time than mine. Real commitment to stop drinking. Real work to make that happen. But refraining from physically helping someone is pretty rare I think. Mostly, in my experience, you have to speak up. You have to say something. In short, it’s not “Don’t ask and don’t tell, but “Do Ask and Do Tell.”

Speaking up where your cooperative silence is expected... you making mention of the unmentionable...is going to be perceived as unhelpful. You’ll be told you are making things worse, and are no real help at all. Well, right, you’re not going to be helpful...as they want you to be helpful, by helping them to get away with whatever they want. Your real help may be speaking up and being willing to earn their disapproval and even to live with it. It won’t be a miraculous event, to be sure. Recovery from alcohol, drugs, anger problems, and sexual boundary-breaking takes both time and commitment. And, when you speak up, you will be afraid. But as Audre Lord reminded us, “when we are silent, we are still going to be afraid. So, it is better to speak. ”

How do you best help? By taking the time to get clear, in your own particular life, about who is expecting your silence and who welcomes your input. By taking the time to disentangle yourself from desiring a particular outcome. You can’t control that. All you really can do to be of help is to speak the truth as best you can, and live in peace with the results.

Not easy. But then nothing truly and deeply grounded and honest and glorious ever is.

Offering

As the community gathers, we provide the opportunity to support our common house and home by the pledges we make and the gifts we offer. This is that time. The congregation supports the congregation. The circle closes with us.

Prayer: Let it Be

Let the lamentation be. Fly above it.
Let the tumult and the strife be. Sing instead.
Let the tempest roar. Tell the truth.
Let the storm shake. Cling to truth.
Let the silence be. Speak.
Let the silencing be. Speak again.
Oh Love, come not into my life
to take my troubles away,
but be with me in them,
and let me sharpen my mindfulness
on the whetstone of your beauty.
How, I wonder, can I possibly keep from singing?