

2007-01-07 **Along the Way, Joy**
Mark Belletini

Opening Words:

We are here
in a strangely warm winter,
gathered in a house of praise, set like a jewel
between a busy street and a muddy river,
to worship, to return to our deeper affirmations
and fortify ourselves for the justice work
and soul work that center our good community.
And so once again we begin by declaring:

As we move through this year of transition and joy, we remember with gratitude the power of our living heritage, which moves through time like a clear running creek; refreshing us with the sweet draughts of courage, hope, justice making, peaceful living, ever deeper honesty, and more truthful loving. And so we kindle this light with thanksgiving...

Communing *The Sequence for the Day*

The silence is often not quite silent, is it?
There are always those noisy worries
whispering loudly in the corner of the mind:
My aging parents; what can I do?
Those I love who crumple from addictions;
how can I be there for them?
How do I know when to say yes,
when to say no?
The silence is often not quite silent, is it?
There are always those noisy questions
whispering loudly in the corner of my heart:
How do people no different from me become homeless and sleep on steps
at the bus station?
How do nursing home workers pay their rent?

How is it possible to fear being honest?

The silence is never quite silent, is it?

For some Russian Orthodox immigrants in Pretoria, South Africa, today is both Christmas and a lovely summer's day...I bet the bells are ringing loudly.

For other Russian Jewish immigrants in Columbus Ohio, today is not Christmas, just a warm winter's day for a bike ride along the Olentangy River bike path...I bet the fast brown waters are churning noisily against the muddy banks.

The silence is never quite silent, is it?

It never seems to be.

And yet it is not without joy that I approach the silence, for in the sanctuary of the safe and silent heart, even the questions, the wonderings and the sound of bells and waters can bring healing-

silence

Indeed, in every heart there is a room, a sanctuary safe and strong, where love may offer its hand to care and concern, where the memory of a loved one, a suffering friend, or tender face may be named, welcomed and embraced for a time, like a placeholder amid our busy lives. Whispering their names aloud or cradling them in silence, we remember them.

silence

And so it goes, and so we go along our way,
serenaded from sound to silence, from worry
to wonder, from bells to blessing, by music.

Readings

The First Reading comes from Brita Stendahl,

who with her husband Krister, was a major presence at the Harvard Divinity School during the seventies and eighties. She is talking about a Sabbatical they took during their career, back to their native Uppsala, Sweden, where she began work on the book, Sabbatical Reflections, and where her husband also planned on writing a book, a biblical commentary.

What became of our sabbatical? Was it just another time in which we traveled and rested, ate and drank, read and wrote and filled the wastebasket? Was it a success or a failure?

We were back in Uppsala on May 1st, Krister eager to get back to work on his commentary. We rented two student rooms in order to make the last stretch so he could return with a manuscript.

On May 15, he called me into his study, and I knew right away, from the manner in which he asked me, that he had something significant to say. Then he told me he had come to the conclusion that he should scrap his work on his commentary. I didn't know what to say. He had worked for many years on this project. The sabbatical had begun in hope of fulfilling that obligation.

At first I felt thunderstruck. Was this not a defeat? All that labor in vain. But he was no longer sorry. Rather, the decision to scrap the project relieved him.

***The Second Reading** comes from the pen of German playwright, poet and philosopher, Friedrich von Schiller in his *Philosophical Letters*, 1786*

Love is the most beautiful phenomenon in all the soulful world, the unfailing gravity of the spiritual world, the source of devotion and the most sublime virtue—Love is the attraction of the excellent.

When I cease to love, that is, when I hate, I take something away from myself; when I love, I become so much the richer. Forgiveness is the recovery of an alienated property. Hatred, on the other hand, is sort of prolonged dying, and by one's own hand at that; while self-absorption

remains the greatest poverty a human being can know.

Sermon

Just thinking of a first sentence in a sermon that follows five months of sabbatical time left me perplexed for hours. The images that I bring with me into this pulpit literally crowd behind my eyelids. The time was so rich, so full.

I could spend an hour or two just trying to capture my five day visit to New York's electric Manhattan, where I walked alone, late on its humming September streets, taking in the lights on a balmy midnight.

Or I could talk about going to the Whitney Museum the next day, to see that very scene seemingly depicted in advance by one of my favorite North American artists, Edward Hopper, whose paintings filled the entire top floor of the museum. Oh, I could have spent a month in the Whitney easily, drinking in Hopper's amazing style, yes, but also gulping down more contemporary art, like Christian Marclay's mind-blowing *Video Quartet*, a thirteen-minute musical composition in four movements made up entirely of clips from the movies. As an artist myself, I was as joyous in those days as it is, I think, possible to be.

And as a cook, I could also spend an hour describing the incredible meals I had while on sabbatical too, such as at Mario Batali's Roman restaurant in New York, Lupa, where I had the best single Italian meal of my life...sorry, grandma. Or dining on perfect potato ravioli with my godson Ben in Sacramento, while conversing with the owner, Biba Gaggiano, whose family also, like mine, came from the Emilia area of Italy. So much pleasure for a man who loves to cook, like me.

So before I get lost in a thousand details, let me focus my comments a little more sharply. I want to begin exploring my sabbatical time with you by circling a single day among the 150 odd days I was away.

It was the day after Thanksgiving...a warm Friday, some of you may

remember, a shirt-sleeve day. I was down at Schiller Park, here in Columbus, in German Village. I was taking a joyful walk with two of my friends, visiting from Pittsburgh for the holiday, my colleague David McFarland, his partner Tim Nuttle, and their foster-baby, Jaden.

It's wonderful to have these two as close as Pittsburgh. Some of you may remember I had visited them in Germany three years ago, back when they were living in the very charming city of Jena, where they were taking classes at Schiller University. So naturally, I thought they might especially enjoy Schiller Park. And especially the translations of Schiller quotations cast in bronze along the pavement of a looping path in the west gardens of the park.

Both David and Tim were fluent in German, so as I held young Jaden, they retranslated Schiller's pithy quotes in a decidedly dated form of German, and debated their meaning, giving the sayings in the walkway sometimes very different meaning. And as they did, and we strolled and stopped along the way, I mused on my own sabbatical learnings.

Jedes neue auch das Glück erschreckt. Everything new, even a blessing, strikes fear.

It was interesting to me how it started off, my sabbatical. At first, it felt so good just to catch up on sleep, to dine at regular suppertimes at real tables, to be able to call friends and say, "I'll be right over." The unstructured time, the days suddenly free of deadlines. I can work on my book when I want to, I thought. Even at two in the morning if I want to, since I can sleep in till noon. I can read for idiosyncratic pleasure, instead of having to prepare for the next week's commitments. What a blessing, I thought. What a blessing.

And yet Schiller was right. In the midst of all this freed up time, I had to wrestle with discomfort, a kind of fear. I found I actually *missed* the deadlines, the structures, the juggling. These had been shaping my life for almost thirty years. To be without them for five months...what would happen to me? Would I find inner motivation, fresh disciplines? After all,

my work-life deadlines were regular, reliable. Sunday services and Wednesday Board meetings arrive as if on a conveyor belt that never shuts off. My schedule never changed. But everything was new on sabbatical. Scarily unstructured. I began to wonder. Did I miss these deadlines because their very reliability disguises change, so that I actually live with less fear when I have deadlines than when I do not?

But after worrying about this for a while, I realized I had to agree with Schiller again: *Die zeit bringt rat*...it's only time that brings wisdom. And so I decided to wait for time to pass to see if my fear abated and I could proceed with my plans.

But the thing with life is that it neither knows nor cares about sabbaticals, and does not schedule anything based on whether you are fearful or not.

So during my sabbatical, things I could not have imagined at all before my sabbatical, came my way during my sabbatical. The best made plans, it would appear, are mostly provisional.

First, there's what I wrote about in my newsletter, about creating a family relationship...father and son, with a young man name Tony Hess. He lives with his partner in Albuquerque now, but we speak or visit daily via computer, often face to face because of cameras. I'll unpack that in a sermon down the line, but believe me, on the first day of my sabbatical, I never imagined that someone would be calling me Babbo, or Dad, at the end of my sabbatical, nor is it something I had longed for or wanted for a long time.

Second. After being invited by a kind man to visit the local temple, or gurdwara, of the Sikh religion, I became so fascinated that I decided to make a major study of that religion. It's the fifth largest on earth, and one with a very beautiful scripture. I will talk about that part of my sabbatical in a sermon to come. But believe me, I hadn't planned to do any such thing.

Third. I befriended two homeless people and I maintain those friendships

today despite the differences in our lives, our culture, our vocabularies. Both of them are moving toward better days, I am glad to say.

Fourth. I visited...every week... another friend who went to jail for reasons entirely due to substance abuse, with which our so-called justice system is little prepared to cope because it is so poorly funded, although I must commend local judge John O'Conner for throwing the whole cog of his being into the wheel of the system as often as he can. I watched him sentence people one day while on my sabbatical, and I have never scene better justice served in all the ten times I served jury duty. But the very idea that we actually *jail* addicts, or imprison the mentally ill reminds me of the understandably derided idea of debtors' prison from merry old England. "We'll let you out of jail when you have paid in full." Right. And in our day, a day no more enlightened than they were back then, we tell people who are caught in a whole system of substance abuse that a few years in prison will *teach them a lesson*. I have to wonder... what kind of lesson can be learned by five months in jail followed by nothing except simple release...which usually happens, I kid you not, at two or three in the morning at a place without a busline or taxis?

A young friend of mine was surprised that I went to the jail every week. Or had homeless friends. He wondered why a man in a profession like mine might engage with people so different from him. I said to him, "Not all that different. They both breathe. Just like me." After all, I preach the virtues of Love, Compassion and Kindness ever week in this pulpit. And as Schiller puts it so compactly along the way, in the park named after him, *Jewede tugend ist fleckfrei bis au den augenblick der probe*...all virtues are credible until they are tested. And besides, friends are friends, are they not? And again Schiller reminded us along the way, *Und die treve sie ist doch kein leerer wahn*...loyalty is NOT an empty vision.

Or, in language even more direct, Schiller wrote a passage not to be found along the park path, but one which you heard in the second reading, from his philosophical writings,

When I cease to love, that is, when I hate, I take something away from

myself; when I love, I become so much the richer. Hatred, on the other hand, is sort of prolonged dying, and by one's own hand at that; while self-absorption remains the greatest poverty a human being can know.

These are powerful words.

And this love he lionizes must, in order to be real, move toward people who are different from me, who are not “like-minded” or “equally lucky.” One of my homeless friends also has a kind of mental illness that helps to keep him on the streets and away from the normal workplace. I do not suffer from that mental illness, by genetic luck, I guess. Yet I like the soul of this man, and enjoy our conversations about his real feelings and interesting analyses of his situation. He seems like a very good man. A decent fellow. After all, as Schiller confirms along the way in his rather antique German, *Redicheit gedeiht in jeden stande...* You can find a certain decency in everyone.

Now, of course, visiting someone in jail does not strike many people as being as joyous as going out to dinner or knowing ecstasy in great museums. Or doing whatever brings you joy easily, say, watching the game tomorrow night, or going dancing or working a puzzle. Or, say, flying up to Chicago...which I also did, to take my eldest godson Adam out to the opera for his 30th birthday. The opera was *Salome*, the perfect singer was Deborah Voight, the sets were just about as astonishingly beautiful as could be expected. I've known and loved Adam since I first held him in my arms as a newborn. And the joy I feel, simply being with him and his uplifting friends, leaves me almost exhausted with joy. How lucky can a man get?

Yet on my sabbatical, I learned that watching my friend Dewey dig into his own soul, an act I can see visibly through the thick and scratched glass of our awful Columbus jail (voted, I hear, second worst in the whole country), and when I hear him weep for his life, or laugh at the absurdity of his situation, that's joy too. And how lucky can a man get to care for someone who is finding himself so clearly, gladly and completely, *despite* the awfulness of our justice system and its plentiful obstacles to real

healing.

How much more joy can I know, than to show up for a friend? Thirty years, or one year, makes a difference in intensity, perhaps. But this joy is just as truly joy as the first. Different, perhaps, but just as true. And just as redemptive to my soul. Because on sabbatical, I learned that I am not going to wait around for redemption, as our Swedish poet wrote in the affirmation. I am not going to desire it. To find the joy hidden in the difficult, as well as that proclaimed by the sublime, is to be redeemed already. After all, as Schiller expresses along the way, *Ewig is die freude*. Joy is ageless.

Now, yes, you may remind me that I did have plans to write a book, a book filled with the kinds of prayers and meditations I write every Sunday to lead us into silence, or to preface a song. And I didn't finish that book. Oh, I worked on it some, did some initial rearranging and editing. Pushed verses here and there. But I am nowhere near completion.

But I am somehow relieved, as the professor in our first reading was. Relieved not to have finished the book. Unlike him, I have not given up working on the book...I still am working on it. But at my pace. Within the contexts of deadlines and work pressures, within the actual context of my writing, which is preparation for worship when I am not on sabbatical. I am not, after all, a Thoreau type who would enjoy writing out in a cabin in the woods. I'm afraid that is the romantic image of the writer that dogged my tracks while on sabbatical. But that is simply not how I write. I write best in the middle of things, after a good meal, after being entranced by a sunlit piece by Edward Hopper in a big museum in a crowded city, or after a computer chat with my son, or a visit to Dewey behind glass at the jail, that I have to fit in between a hospital call and BREAD meeting. Or after a walk with friends, late on a Saturday night, when I realize that the purpose of the sabbatical in the end is not to go through it and leave it behind me, but to take its riches with me into the work I love, in the congregation I both love and serve. Here's where I will write. Here is the diving board that quivers beneath my feet as I dare to risk the plunge into a deeper loving, a more redemptive joy.

So thanks for all that you did so excellently to make this church thrive while I was gone. It was humming beautifully as I re-entered the door, as I had very real faith that it would. And I suspect you, too, have a few sabbatical stories to tell. For your lives and my own were indeed lived separately for a while. And so I can only believe that each of you, too, may have discovered, through experience or study, some things about your lives that may prove to be your redemption, your salvation, your life's true joy.

But now our lives are flowing back together again. And we have things to do. So let's get going.

Blessing Prayer

Joy, not contentment. Not satisfaction, O Love.

Something a tad more dangerous, more risky.

A deeper happiness, one that does not even count some unhappiness as an enemy but an ally. A creative power. A healing power, O Love. Something a lot like you, in fact. Amen.

Come now, and let us make symphony together.

Schiller/Beethoven's Ode to Joy