

2008-9-28 Humility/Hospitality
Rev. Mark Belletini

Opening Words

We are here
after a week of temperate weather
and fearful and confusing news
to worship. Now we are free
to leave certainty for perspective,
abandon gloom for love's radiance,
and replace panic with attentive patience.

And so, though our ways of thinking and feeling about the meaning of our days may differ, we agree to journey together, side by side, face to face. Within this circle of strong spirit, mutual care, and ethical vision, may we ourselves remain open to being transformed by a welcoming heart and emerging justice.

Sequence

O Love, not the easiest week.
No. Not easy at all,
despite the lovely mild air.
Plenty of bewilderment.
Extra helpings of anxiety.
Our great and ordinarily useful words
like "peace" and "love" and "truth"
seem to sound rather softly now
amidst the blaring commotion of blame.
But I maintain that the contrast
is temporary. Deceptive.
Like the feeling you get on a roller coaster
when you think you feel weightless.
It's deceptive. Gravity is still in effect.
It hasn't ebbed at all.
And so, Love, is this not true here as well?
Isn't there Peace in this room of attentive people?
Love enough in this room of breathing people?
Truth itself in hands dancing on a keyboard?
Peace in the harmonies of word and wonder?
Love in the hospitality of this community?
And truth in the struggle for understanding?

silence

O Love, not the easiest week.
But our week, in the end, is not defined
by the extraordinary but by the ordinary.
The ordinary relationships of love, memory,
struggle and gratitude that pulse

like the heart-beat of the universe
within us.
Setting aside a moment now to note
to feel that heartbeat,
we name those whose lives live inside us,
far away, nearby, or remembered.

naming

Both: O Love, not the easiest week.
9 AM But there is enough music and spirit
and love in this room to make all the difference.
11 AM But peace still begins with us, nevertheless, and is not a gift of either church or state. Let
there be peace on earth....

The First Reading is Edward Hirsch's excruciatingly appropriate poem *Mergers and Acquisitions*.

Beyond junk bonds and oil spills,
beyond the collapse of Savings and Loans,
beyond liquidations and options on futures,
beyond basket trading and expanding foreign markets, the Dow Jones industrial average, the
Standard & Poor's stock index, mutual funds, commodities,
beyond the rising tide of debits and credits,
opinion polls, falling currencies, the signs
for L. A. Gear and Coca Cola Classic,
the signs for U.S. Steel and General Motors,
hi-grade copper, municipal bonds, domestic sugar,
beyond fax it and collateral buildups,
beyond mergers and acquisitions, leveraged buyouts, hostile takeovers, beyond the official policy
on inflation and the consensus on happiness,
beyond the national trends in buying and selling,
getting and spending, the market stalled
and the cost passed on to consumers,
beyond the statistical charts on prices,
there is something else that drives us, some
rage or hunger, some absence smoldering
like a childhood fever vaguely remembered
or half-perceived, some unprotected desire,
greed that is both wound and knife,
a failed grief, a lost radiance.

The Second Reading is a poem from Linda Hirshfield's book *After. The Title: A Day Comes*

A day comes
when the mouth grows tired
of saying "I."

Yet, it is occupied still
by a self which must speak,

which still desires, is curious.
Which believes it has also a right.

What to do?

The tongue consults with the teeth
(which) it knows will survive

both mouth *and* self;

They grin – it is their natural pose –
and say nothing.

Sermon

My friend Babar was naturalized this week. Became a citizen of the US of A. I had never seen such a ceremony, although I had long ago heard my grandparents moving stories about their citizenship ceremony.

The ritual took place at Veterans' Memorial, in the smaller of the two auditoriums. Over three hundred people claimed their new citizenship, people from all over the world...from Lagos Nigeria, Lahore, Pakistan, Manila in the Philippines, and Mexico City, Mexico. Different clothes, headdresses, accents, languages, ways of expression. It was a magnificent site.

One of the judges talked about his Lebanese and Irish past. He talked about the wisdom of our founders in offering hospitality to those from other nations. He mentioned that this hospitality was there from the beginning, with Italians like Filippo Mazzei and Poles like Thaddeus Kosciuszko helping with our revolution. He pointed out that the oath administered to Babar and the others that day was composed all the way back in 1789, and the Abraham Lincoln had added the only word of that oath that ever changed that composition during the Civil War. He pointed out that this hospitality was based on an authentically humble faith that a great nation could gain strength from a variety of civilizations, enriching the mosaic of its diversity with the beauty and culture of all the nations.

I have to say that I wept a bit as Babar raised his right hand and recited the very same words which, I learned that day, my own grandparents had recited so many decades ago. And believe me, that judge was speaking the sober truth about the gifts immigrants can bring. Babar, who 12 years ago came alone to this country with only 300 hundred dollars to his name, has truly made a national impact so far via his education, his art, his social skills, his understanding of mainframe computers and his stunning generosity, which among his friends has become legendary.

Afterward, we went to a brief lunch, since all of us had to get back to work. I knew most of Babar's other friends, but I met Tom for the first time. A lawyer who had helped Babar with his flashcards, Tom and I exchanged stories. Come to find out that his mother's side of the family had all immigrated from Emilia in Northern Italy, just as my grandparents had. "What town did they hail from?" I asked, hoping I might recognize it from among the thousands of villages dotting the Appennine Mountains. "Fanano," he said. I almost fell over. It's the exact same small town where my father's parents hailed from. We were both amazed that both of our families even shared names...the Bonuccis and the Guiderinis. We weren't exactly cousins, mind you...but, I have to say, we both came away from our meeting with a realization of how small the world is, how interrelated we all are, and how the phrases "We are all family" or "We are all sisters and brothers" are not just metaphors, but sober biological facts.

The ancient Near Eastern peoples started proclaiming such notions 5000 years ago with their stories of the creation of humankind. The late sample of such stories which we find in the Hebrew Scriptures is actually very moving, if a person can tear himself or herself away from the foolishly concrete readings of these stories that so sting modern religious conversation.

The actual Hebrew text in the story is, typically, crammed with puns and wordplays worthy of an Grammy-winning Rap song. The best we can do in English to imitate those word plays is this:

“The Eternal took some earth and molded it into an earthling.” Or, even better “The Eternal shaped some humus into a human being.” (And not a man, mind you, sorry. It doesn’t say that at all. The human being is, later in the story, clumsily split in two, and only then does gender begin.)

And indeed, this word play humus/human is the source of our English word “humility.” In other words, humility is the awareness that we are all made of the same stuff. In ancient days, they said we were crafted from dirt in the garden. Today we might say the exact same thing with reference to the Periodic Table of the Elements, or by going along with the assertions used by cosmologists, namely, that we are all made of stardust flung from distant supernovae.

The point is, if we are all made of the same stuff, then all of the ancient affirmations about human equality and dignity are simply true. I have never heard of anyone who was ever able to make a case for saying that one handful of humus is worth 700 billion times more than the handful of humus right next to it.

And yet that is the story of the human history, as I read it. Ages and ages of one clump of earth saying to the other “I’m rich, rich soil. And I know for a fact that you are merely a chunk of dirt. Go away.”

Unfortunately for us, many chapters in this sad story of human history unfolded this week. Chapter One: the economy of our nation teeters on the brink, and everyone seems *to know*, oh yes, *to know*, exactly who is to blame. NOT themselves. Someone else. Radio pundit Rush Limbaugh is sure it is all Barney Frank’s fault. Others say it’s the greed associated with Wall Street, or the CEO’s of huge, avaricious corporations who feel they are entitled to something for nothing and simply took it. Of course (fasten your seat belts), others are sure that it’s the fault of the working class and the urban poor who, for some reason, had the temerity to want low-cost housing. It’s the Democrats’ fault. It’s the Republicans’ fault. It’s China’s fault.

I’ve been paying as close attention as I can stand, and so far, I have yet to hear a single voice asking “I wonder. Do I have a part in all this?” Or in the words of Hirsch’s perfect poem: *is something else that drives us, some rage or hunger, some absence smoldering like a childhood fever vaguely remembered or half-perceived, some unprotected desire, greed that is both wound and knife, a failed grief?*

If I heard such a voice, I would begin to suspect

I was actually in the presence of a humble person. Someone who rests in the awareness that they are made of the same stuff as everyone else.

Someone who doesn't "know" who is at fault, but who recognizes that it's a lot more complicated than simple blame.

But so far, no takers.

Oh, I know the objections to the word "humble."

People confuse it with "humiliation," either from some implanted inner voice which harps on saying "What a worthless fool you are! You can't do anything right," or from some swaggering voice outside of us who says the same thing. Sorry, humiliation, being beaten *into the ground*, is not humility. Humility is just the attentive and patient awareness that we are all made of the same elements, the same earth.

Others point out that as soon as you try and "be" humble, like some saint kissing the sores of a leper for God, you automatically become conscious of being more saintly than the person next to you, and that your humility is only a sham. That might be true. Perhaps. I can also think of a few reasons why it might be presumptuous on someone's part for thinking so. But I am not talking about specific humble acts here. I am talking about an awareness, a consciousness, an attentiveness which might pour into every act, and not specific selected acts.

But now I want to get back to the story of human history, as I read it. Remember what I said? Ages and ages of one clump of earth saying to the other, "I'm rich, rich soil. And I know for a fact that you are merely a chunk of dirt. Go away."

The blame frenzy surrounding the stock market debacle is Chapter One in this week's story. Chapter Two is the ridiculously wide distribution of a dvd called *Obsession* in all the election swing states. The mere fact that these dvds were distributed for free ONLY in the swing states suggest very clearly to me that there is a political angle in there somewhere. They were tucked into newspapers, including our own Columbus Dispatch. (The Columbus Dispatch, which didn't have the sense of the St. Louis newspaper, which, in a remarkable expression of ethical courage, refused to allow such an outrage.

What was in the dvd? A devious depiction of Muslims as cruel savages who would as soon kill as pray. The producers of the dvd vainly protest that they start the dvd off with a statement that "Most Muslims are not like this." But the dvd undermines that little sop to their conscience within a minute or two. The clear purpose of the video is to let non-Muslims "know" that they simply don't know enough about the evils of Islam.

The producers of this video "know" the truth. You and I do not. My friend Babar, and all of his Muslim friends, they will tell you, may not be terrorists; but their *religion* IS the source of all terror and evil, nonetheless, implying that my friend Babar must be a pretty bad Muslim. And to be open to welcoming Muslims into our own nation is tantamount to destroying it.

They "know" this is true. And they want you to bow to their authority, to say "I now know what you know. I will tar every Muslim with the brush you put in my hand. I will be swayed by your violent images. I will be afraid and will base all of my decisions on that fear."

I cannot tell you how disgusted I was when I watched this propaganda. Already there is reason to believe that the chemical irritant sprayed into a Dayton Mosque on Friday may have been an act stirred up by such hateful nonsense. Time will tell.

Look, many religious groups and many political movements attract and even help shape hateful and destructive people. This has been true since ancient times, and frankly, I don't expect anything to change about that in my life time.

But really, Pol Pot is not the typical Cambodian, Stalin not the prime sample of the Georgian or Russian Communist, Goering not the exemplary German, Cardinal Law not the portrait of all Catholic priests, and neither James Dobson nor R. J. Rushdoony are the preeminent and symbolic Protestant Christians.

Nor are the yelling proponents calling for narrow interpretations of Muslim Sharia law to become the law of our nation the spokespersons for all Muslims nor even typical Muslims.

All of these people I've named were, or are, immoderate people, people at the edge, not the center.

But the makers of the dvd *know* the truth, they say, and we don't.

I think that the authoritarian claim of such invincible knowledge closes the door to human redemption, and the creation of any kind of cooperating world community. It abolishes rational hope, and every possibility for communication except violence. I don't see any goodness buried within its assertions.

In the first poem, Hirsch suggests at the end that this whole present difficulty with the economy stems, perhaps, not from the acts of this or that person, this or that party, this or that corporation, but from "a lost radiance."

Yes, a lost radiance. The same lost radiance which was not afraid, once upon a time, to say, "I don't know." I don't know anything about Muslim history and culture. Can you tell me how you understand it?

A lost radiance. A lost radiance which was not afraid, once upon a time, of welcoming a stranger, or offering hospitality to a foreigner with a different religion or different accent. Not just technical citizenship, but real welcome, appreciation, you know, hospitality.

A lost radiance that was open-hearted and cooperative, about me and you working together for the common good, not about me working for my good and to hell with you...you can be satisfied with what trickles down, if anything.

A radiance that welcomed new ideas, fresh insight and still had faith in cooperation.

In Jane Hirshfield's poem, she notes that we might recognize and remember that radiance when we find ourselves tired of saying "I" all the time, when we realize that we are in necessary relationship with every other creature of earth, made of same stuff. The elements. Humus. The root of humility. The root of our common humanity.

She then says that this “I” we are tired of, does have something to say.

Suddenly we’re in a pickle. If we are self-centered all the time, we end up making a shambles of it, as this week has revealed with great clarity. But if we try and give up our singular focus on the self and live in constant community with others, without the insights of uniqueness and passion which are the provenance of the individual, we might lose just as much radiance.

But when consulted, the teeth in our mouth, she playfully concludes, just sit there and grin.

They grin because the answer has never been “either/or”, but always “both/and.” The heartbeat needs the *lub* and *dub*, the breath, the *in* and *out*, the soul, the *you* and the *me*.

So in conclusion, I say this: my friend Babar brings his unique skills and wisdom to this nation. And he brings those individual skills and that deep wisdom in service of this nation’s aliveness and solvency, AND, as well as to keep himself alive and solvent.

He does not come here to build a castle, as in our children’s story this morning, to keep the next arriving stranger out, but to welcome him or her with open arms, into a community based on the humility signed by an open door. Into a nation with a wealth built, not on mergers and acquisitions and hostile takeovers, but consisting of people in communities of radiance which work for the common good, to make our days, all of them, and each of them, for each of us, glad. Oh may we live to see this vision made real!

Offering

The offering is a sign that our congregation
is not in service of the government, state or national, nor in service of a strict hierarchical body.
The offering is a sign of our liberty.

We are not our own, mind you...we are all children of the earth, made of its elements,
and subject to its forces and whims.

But we as a congregation in the midst of that
reality, we are free.

The offering will now be given and received.

Prayer

Let this be a house of welcome.

To those who have been here for forty years,
as much as to those who have just walked in the door.

To those who think with their hearts
and those who feel with their brains.

To those who have a past to overcome,
and to those who have a future to negotiate.

To those who have been wounded,
and to those who are bent on healing.

To those who know how much they don’t know,
and to those who don’t know how much they do know.

To those who find our community wanting,
and to those who find it just right.

Let this be a house of welcome,

O Love, that all our days might be glad.