

Justice and Compassion

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Opening Words

We are here,
in winter, at the turn of the year,
to worship, to cultivate a deeper life,
and claim once again our part
in the ongoing work of making the world just,
and, at the same time, loving the world more.

So, mindful that we share a common world, but approach that world in different ways, we begin our celebration together by kindling our promise of mutual honesty, attentiveness, and deep courtesy. May we become more proficient at gratitude and awareness, that we might more deeply embody the kind of justice and peace which embraces everyone on earth.

Sequence

It's amazing. A whole year of yesterdays is past. So many experiences, so many memories both tough and sweet, so many wonders I haven't fully digested yet. But with all that experience, I'm still not any better at predicting what will happen next Tuesday, or the following Friday.

The air around us is transparent as glass, but it's not a crystal ball...breathing it in and breathing it out only serves to keeps us alive... in the present moment only. It does not help me to foresee the future. But the air *is* definitely here. It surrounds you and me, enfolds us, reliably bearing the light of color and shape to eyes which can see.

And I am convinced that even if the very stars suddenly arranged themselves in letters so as to spell out tomorrow's name plain as day, the frequent grey skies of January would still block our view of them, and we would be none the wiser about tomorrow. So let tomorrow come tomorrow... as it will. And let yesterday wash away like writing in beach sand, and let us welcome the present moment with the praise we know as silence...

silence

The silence breaks with these words, and as the presence of those who help shape our lives crowds around us, the living and the remembered. Now we can welcome them as we welcome the next moment; may we feel free here to name them quietly or see their faces flashing in our heart to affirm that both past and present may not predict tomorrow, but they certainly illuminate it.

naming

Who can tell what the next note in the score of life will be? The spirit, and the spirit alone!
For behold, it's *all* improvised, ... it's all pure jazz and it always was jazz, even before we had that word.

The First Reading consists of a pericope, that is, a singular gospel story, from the New Testament, in this case, it's free-floating and totally anonymous, a pericope which is not found in any of the ancient manuscripts. In our era it's found in the gospel of John, inserted there by some unknown scribe in about the 4th century. It may have been written down as late as the year 200 or as early as 100, but more than that, we cannot guess. The textual evidence is too scanty to say any more than the authors responsible for John's gospel are not responsible for this. This translation of the Greek text makes the legal language explicit.

In the early morning, he came again to the temple precincts. There, he sat down, as teachers usually do, and began to teach. Some local scribal authorities and rigorous religious leaders then approached him. They were dragging a woman with them whom they charged with the crime of adultery. Thrusting her into the midst of the gathered students, their spokesman said: "Teacher, the evidence is quite clear: this woman has committed adultery. Our Laws clearly lay down the punishment for such a crime: death by stoning. What's your opinion in this matter?"

They asked him this question to see if they could put him in a bind, or even expose some legal charge against him. But Jesus only bent over, and started to record something, using his finger to write in the earth at his feet. When he ignored them, they pressed him all the more to answer their question. So he stood up, and said to them, "Why not ask the innocent among you to throw the first stones?" And then immediately he sat back down, bent over and continued writing in the earth, as if recording something. But after hearing what he had to say, one by one they simply went away, the elders leaving first. Even his students left, leaving Jesus alone with the woman standing there before him. So he looked up at her and said, "Madam, where is everybody? Is no one passing sentence against you?" "No one, sir," she answered. "Well, I'm not passing sentence either. Go your way now, and be careful not to make that mistake again."

The Second Reading is a remarkable poem by Colorado activist Laura Hershey, with a truly amazing track record in social justice issues having to do with GLBT and disability issues.

You get proud by practicing.
If you are not proud for who you are, for what you say, for how you look;
if every time you stop to think of yourself
you do not see yourself glowing with golden light;
do not, therefore, give up on yourself.
You can get proud.

You do not need a better body, a purer spirit,
or a PhD to get proud. You do not need a lot of
money, a handsome boyfriend, or a nice car.
You do not need to be able to walk, or see, or hear,
or use big complicated words or do any of the

things you just can't do to be proud.
A caseworker cannot make you proud,
or a doctor. You need only more practice.
You get proud by practicing.

There are many ways to get proud.
You can try riding a horse, or skiing on one leg,
or playing a guitar, and do well or not so well
be glad you tried either way.
You can show something you've made to someone you respect and be happy with it
no matter what they say. You can say what you think, though you know other people may not
think the same way, and you can keep saying it
even if they tell you *you* are crazy.
You can add your voice all night to the 150 others
at a jailhouse where your brothers and sisters
are being held for blocking busses with no lift,
or you can be one of the ones inside the jailhouse,
knowing of the circle outside.
You can speak your love to a friend without fear.
You can find someone who will listen to you
without judging you or doubting you or being afraid of you, and let you hear yourself, perhaps,
for the first time.
These are all ways of getting proud.
None of them are easy, but all of them are possible.
You can do all of these things,
or just one of them again and again.
You get proud by practicing.

Power makes you proud, and power comes in many fine forms, supple and rich as butterfly wings.
It is music when you practice opening your mouth
and liking what you hear because it is the sound of your one true voice.
It is sunlight when you practice seeing strength and beauty in everyone including yourself.
It is dance when you practice knowing that what you do and the way you do it is the right way for
you and can't be called wrong.
All of these hold more power than weapons or money or lies. All these practices bring power,
and power makes you proud.
You get proud by practicing.
Remember, you weren't the one who made you ashamed, but you are the one who can make you
proud. Just practice, practice until you get proud,
and once you are proud, keep practicing
so you won't forget. You get proud by practicing.

Sermon

I don't know about you, but I've begun to wonder how anyone ever understood modern culture here in the States before the invention of the ice-cube tray. You know, those little oblong things in our freezer before our freezers got so techno-snazzy with their automatic icemakers and all that. I'm talking about those old-fashioned ice cube trays, once made of metal, but now, more likely, plastic, the ones with 16 ice cubes paired in two neat side-by-side rows.

I say this because, for me, the ice-cube tray is a perfect picture of the cultural system of metaphors that we use here in the States. We speak of black or white people as if the 600 real colors of everyone else in the world didn't exist, or as if black and white were actually descriptive, which they indeed are not. We speak of male and female, as if they were two rigid categories, although any anthropologist of human cultures or physician or biologist can tell you that "gender" is a hundred times more complicated than that. We speak politically of being either on the left, or being on the right. We speak of gay or straight, old or young, introvert or extrovert, theist or atheist, believer or unbeliever, love or hate, compassion or justice, guilt or innocence. There you have it. The ice-cube tray theory of North American metaphor and culture. Two by two by two by two by two by two by two by two. Frozen solid.

However, thirty-one years in the ministry and sixty years of living have inspired in me a desire to thaw the ice cube tray. To melt the metaphors. To let things flow a little, questioning the easy definitions, and getting clearer about others.

Take Justice, for example, January's theme word. So many things get in the way of any easy definition of that frequently used word.

First, I don't want to confuse justice and fairness, which is indeed often done. It may not seem fair to us that some people die at age 22 and others live to a ripe 102. But this state of affairs is not what I mean by justice, unless you have the rather cold theological opinion that the actual date of one's death is somehow the judgment of an arbitrary God. Unequal length of life doesn't strike most of us as fair, but it's not unjust. Although (and here's where things get complicated...), there are *elements* of justice involved in some length-of-life issues. For example, if a destitute 60-year-old woman won't be able to thrive another ten years because she can't afford the best medical care to treat a specific illness, an illness that *is* curable, and someone else *can* because they're privileged with sufficient means, then justice does at least *interface* with fairness. But really, they are not the same thing.

Second, the Chinese story about the pear seed you heard earlier, points out another complexity involved in getting clear about the meaning of justice. Although the ice-cube theory of guilt and innocence implies that a person is either one or the other, the story suggests that guilt and innocence are mixed in every person...both the poor woman who stole in order to survive, and the judges that sought to punish her for her crime. Justice and innocence, says the story, are not a couple of frozen ice cubes totally separate from each other. They kind of melt together. Why?

Because there is always some larger context over-arching any particular justice story like a fine, hot sun.

The story of the first reading, the free-floating and, for many, very well-known story of the teacher, the woman and what has been described by one theologian as a “lynch-mob,” suggests to me where I might look for such a context, such a sun to start the melting process.

Now, as you know, there are many ways to interpret any story. You can bring many points of view to the understanding of such a tale. When I first read this story, it was easy to see it as simply a tale of a bunch of arrogant and sexist men making cruel decisions about a woman as if she wasn’t even there to speak for herself. This might be called a *feminist* reading by European-rooted thinkers, or, in African-American terms, a *womanist* interpretation. Or, you could give the story a post-modern reading, namely: this story reveals that these punitive laws about our private sexual lives proves that religion is wicked and should be destroyed off the face of the earth. Then there’s the anti-Jewish variant reading, namely, that this story of the potential stoning proves that the Old Testament God of strict law and order is so much more nasty than the New Testament God of sweetness and light; but I have most often found that’s the opinion, usually, of people who cherry pick their way into the standard bigotries of the Western world, which they were steeped in to begin with, and which they are often not even aware of themselves. There is also what might be called the literate reading of the story: it’s a tale with a witty and surprising comeback line, a story of verbal comeuppance, if you will. What folklorists like to call “a wisdom tale.”

Here however, is the historical context of the story. Here is the first ray of hot sunlight to start melting things together.

Though we don’t know who wrote the story, the historical sensitivity in its writing suggests total familiarity with the precise political situation in which Jesus lived.

In the year 30, the Roman occupation government officially stripped the Jewish court system of its authority, and put Judea under Roman law. No religious judge had the right to impose sentence on anyone without taking it to the Roman magistrate. Now, the Jewish law system prescribed capital punishment in a variety of cases which were deemed disruptive to the larger society. Murder, certainly, but adultery was taken very seriously, too. Both parties, male and female, were first tried, and then taken out to a quarry. The witnesses of the crime themselves threw stones first, then people who had experienced the result of adultery in their own family lives were invited to throw stones next. By making this a community execution, there could be no clarity as to which stone struck the fatal blow, and thus, there could be no vendettas or tit-for-tat revenge. You can see that such a practice, although undeniably horrific, was sociologically different from the State-sponsored murder, or capital punishment favored by Rome, or by the State of Ohio, for that matter.

The story as we have it is filled with legal language such as “to pass sentence,” “evidence,” “crime,” and “innocence.” Even the odd image of Jesus bending over and writing with his finger on the ground uses the Greek verb “katagraphein,” which means to “record,” something even in our own day done by someone we call a “court recorder.” Now here’s the issue: if the teacher had

offered an opinion *in favor* of the Jewish court practice, the lynching would have taken place, and Jesus would have been arrested for bucking Roman legal sovereignty. If he had said, “Just follow Roman law! They’re in charge, you know!” his students would immediately lose faith in his authority as a Jewish teacher. Why? Because he would clearly be favoring Caesar over Moses, and this would effectively sabotage his teaching career. Either way, the religious elders figured, he was out of the picture. And please, don’t go thinking of these religious leaders as cads and monsters either. The storyteller in no way paints them as villains. The loss of their capacity to practice their interpretation of their own Law, however I might disagree with its provision of stoning, must have been deeply painful and disorienting to them. Losing one’s identity is deeply painful, and I can understand the desperate impulse to preserve it. Being occupied by a foreign military presence with imposed laws, customs and assumptions was no picnic either...there are probably people all over the world living at this very moment that could tell you what that feels like, if you could find a way to ask them. No, Jesus’ looser interpretation of the Law at other times made him seem scary to many people. So the context of the story is very complex, and easy judgments on a first reading are probably not very accurate.

The core of the story, however, is neither the context, nor the defense of cultural identity. The core of the story is the Teacher’s clever way of getting himself...and the woman...out of a jam. He doesn’t criticize the Law, or their interpretation of it. He simply invites the “innocent” among them to cast the first stone. He actually treats them as honest, self-reflective peers, not his bitter enemies. He trusts them to realize that guilt and innocence are not neat ice-cube categories. He does not force a clean separation between guilt and innocence, or, for that matter, between his compassion for the woman’s plight, and the demands of justice under law. He asks each of them to take an honest assessment of their lives, and asks them how different they are from the poor woman they are using as a political symbol. And one by one they drop their rocks...and their charges, and go home, leaving the woman alone with the Teacher. “Is no one pressing charges?” he asks. “No one, sir,” she answers. “Well, I’m not pressing charges either; and then he warns her “not to make that mistake again.” Not “sin,” sorry for the traditional types who love to turn everything into hard-core theology. A *mistake* is what it means.

I have a friend who made a couple of mistakes once. He was 17, got in with what my parents used to call “a bad crowd,” and was charged with committing two crimes within a three month period. Felonies. He served time too. Almost a year, I think.

But since then, he has made his own way. He got his GED all on his own, has taken classes at Columbus State. He pays child support for his daughter and throws her nifty birthday parties. He pays his rent...mostly on time, if he’s got work. And he has become a pro bodybuilder, requiring the kind of almost scary discipline that’s foreign to me. He’s been a good friend for the last ten years, and he wouldn’t think of turning down Thanksgiving dinner at my house. He’s family.

Whenever he gets a job interview...he just had one at a large local company; they loved his work, his personality, his initiative... they eventually turn him down because their computer check lifts up the felonies on his record from 15 years ago. One of which, he claims, and I believe him, was a set up in the first place. He freely admits breaking the law the other time. But since there are, officially, two felonies on his record, both dating from the very time in our lives when many of us

make “mistakes” as part of the growing up process, he cannot have them expunged from his record, despite his exemplary life since then. The Law, Ohio Law, makes that clear. Give a thousand bucks and one felony can be removed from your record. If you have two, too bad, you are tattooed for life with your past mistakes. He has a life sentence in other words. Oh, he tried. I lent him the money to pursue it, and he tried. The judge admitted that the law was a bad one, but there was nothing he could do.

My friend came back from Springfield and said to me: “I give up.” But you know, he really hasn’t. Right now he is working with a few friends... “a good crowd,” to open up a new gym down at the Seneca Building on Broad. A training gym. They have more money to invest, but my friend has been working hard to paint and build walls and do the things he *can* do very well. He has pride in what he does. He has pride in what he has done these last 15 years. And sorry, although the Medieval theologians thought of “pride” as one of the Seven Deadly Sins, I don’t see it that way, except when it’s a delusional pride. In fact, I see the kind of pride that Jimmy has about his athletic ability, his work skills, his GED, his initiative, despite everything that has pulled him back, as his safe pathway between the frozen definitions of Justice and Compassion that wall him in and have permanently damaged his life. Ohio law permits no compassion for someone with his record. Unlike the record Jesus was making with his finger in the dirt at his feet, my friend’s record will never blow away in the breeze or melt in the rain. And though I know his situation, and have compassion for his plight, that love cannot magically rewrite Ohio law and change the world of his reality. So what saves my friend is his sacred pride. And, as far as I can tell, he practices that pride every day. Because, “You get proud by practicing,” says poet Laura Hershey. If you are not proud for who you are, for what you say, for how you look; if every time you stop to think of yourself you do not see yourself glowing with golden light; do not, therefore, give up on yourself. You can get proud.” Poet Hershey lists many ways and then finally says: “Power makes you proud... It is music when you practice opening your mouth and liking what you hear because it is the sound of your one true voice. It is sunlight when you practice seeing strength and beauty in everyone including yourself. It is dance when you practice knowing that what you do and the way you do it is the right way for you and can’t be called wrong. All of these hold more power than weapons or money or lies. All these practices bring power, and power makes you proud. You get proud by practicing. Remember, you weren’t the one who made you ashamed, but you are the one who can make you proud. Just practice, practice until you get proud, and once you are proud, keep practicing so you won’t forget. You get proud by practicing.”

I wish I had written that. I intend to read it to myself every day for a while. I intend to give it to my friend so he can read it every day too. For me, her poem does to my heart what Jesus’ famous words in the story did to my heart the first time I heard them. They melted the icy barrier separating justice and compassion into conflicting worlds. For me, compassion and justice are not at odds. It is never a matter of either compassion OR justice, any more, as Dom Crossan says, than there can be a matter of a coin with only one side. So for me, the definition of justice has to do with equal access to power, and the definition of compassion has to do with equal access to pride. Together, they sow the seeds for a new life on earth, for my friend, for that poor ancient woman, a life of justice deeper than written law, and a life of compassion deeper than mere sympathy, a partnership that can resist the frozen obstacles of an ice-cube tray civilization and get

on with establishing a growing human covenant of trust, honesty, peace, justice and love here on this earth. Let the sun that melts the ice continue to shine throughout all of our new year days....

Offering

The days to come remain unknown to us.

We cannot control them by will,
nor predict their every turn and surprise.

But today we bless them by giving of our substance....some give in other more electronic ways,
others prefer this ancient way.

In all cases, what we give, we give freely
as a tangible sign that our ancient free tradition
resists coercion in all matters of the spirit.
The morning offering is now given and received.

Closing Prayer Heretical Imperatives

(Decisions by Slovenian poet, Boris Novak)

Between two words,
choose the quieter one.

Between word and silence,
choose listening.

Between two books,
choose the dustier one.

Between the earth and sky,
choose a bird.

Between two animals,
choose the one who needs you more.

Between two children,
choose both.

Between the lesser and bigger evil,
choose neither.

Between hope and despair,
choose hope. It will be harder to bear.