

## THE WORDS OF WISDOM

There are no prerequisites for hearing a sermon, unless it be life itself. But were there, for *this* sermon, it would be Bill's Moyers' recent interview with the Pulitzer Prize winning poet W.S. Merwin. It was a wonderful discussion about words and meaning, with Merwin claiming that language is a living creation, constantly evolving, changing, and developing. Words are continuously being born out of the void, out of our existential encounter with life---out of situations which cry out for new description because none of the "old words," the "classic definitions," the "worn-out clichés" are adequate to the occasion. Often, in such a birth, there is an experiential breach which produces not a natal clarity, not even a still-born silence, but a frustrated, infuriated, or, maybe ecstatic cry of self-expression. To illustrate Merwin's point, the TV screen showed us the picture of a kneeling burka-clad woman in Afghanistan, hovered over by three similarly clad women, whose scream of agony over her war-dead child would surely have been heard by Allah.....What words could adequately describe such an obscenity as a friendly-fire casualty? Certainly not these words which I've just used with you. I feel the sting of Sweeney's complaint in T.S.Eliot's poem "*Sweeney Agonistes*": "The trouble is, I gotta use words when I talk to you."

Merwin's point is not confined to acts of terror or tragedy. Ecstasy exposes the same linguistic poverty. On the weekend of July 4<sup>th</sup>, the papers spread over their front pages pictures of Wimbledon champions Serena Williams and Roger Federer, arms outstretched, mouths wide open in triumphant screams; the words for such historic moments have not yet been born! When asked by the reporters and commentators, "How does it feel..." the inadequate clichés of response bring eye-rolling silence from us.

Merwin wants us to understand that interpretation necessarily accompanies all the conversations we have. And, wasn't this just the claim that Judge Sotomayor made at her Supreme Court hearing. Words in isolation are never self-sufficient, self explanatory; they need a context to be understood. I usually greet Elaine DeMers with a "Hello Luv!" Unless you knew our Scottish connection, you might well think---'What would Joyce think if she heard that?' Well, Joyce hears it all the time and thinks nothing of it. But "love" is notoriously such a word. To say, "I love you" can mean a zillion things depending on context, tone of voice, inflections. One beautiful August evening, sixty years ago, on the shores of Lake Erie I said to Joyce, "Will you marry me?" She looked steadily at me for several long, long seconds, then said, "Do you really mean it?" How's that for rapture and the exclusive power of words to control our destiny? Truth demands more than words.

But there is a flip side to this difficulty in explaining our selves with words. Roland Merullo, in his charming book “Breakfast with Buddha” warns us that we also use words and clichés of all types as a kind of defensive armor, a way of hiding in plain sight: “People make the armor from their smartness, or their anger, or their quiet, or their fear, or their being busy, or their being nice. Some make it by being *very* important. [But] many do not make [an armor], ...and those people begin to see the world as it is.” Isn’t this what the teacher in Proverbs is also saying? Wisdom is inviting us---the simple, the senseless, and the fearful---into her house so that we might understand the nature of life as it is: “Come,” Wisdom says, “eat of my bread and drink of the wine I have mixed. Leave simpleness, and *live*, and walk in the way of insight...The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and the *knowledge of the Holy One is insight.*” And, haven’t we just heard Paul admonish the Ephesians: “Look carefully then how you walk, not as unwise children but as wise...therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is...and do not get drunk with wine, but be filled with the Spirit...”

The Gospel of John picks up Wisdom’s cautionary tale. John obviously knows that to convey this spiritual truth (*knowledge of the Holy One is insight*) in words he has to risk conveying an absurdity---just as great love is realized only with the concomitant risk of great hate. For John, to be filled with the Spirit is to be one with Christ. John invokes mysticism at the risk of magic; he risks graphic description, ever in danger of being lost in translation.

Listen to what John has to say about the heart of Christian worship, the Eucharist, the Sacrament of the Lord’s Supper: *Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of man and drink his blood, you have no life in you;...for my flesh is food indeed, and my blood is drink indeed. He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me, and I in him.* If we take these words literally, then John is suggesting something which many have found to be grotesque, gruesome, even cannibalistic. Most of us who are committed Christians have resolved the dilemma *either* by studiously ignoring John’s words *or* by simply saying, ‘it’s obvious that Jesus (as quoted by John) is not speaking literally but metaphorically.’ Then we smile, knowingly. But we’re hiding, just like Merullo observed. We don’t really know if Jesus ever said these words---they don’t appear in any of the other Gospels, nor in Paul, though all of these writers refer to the Last Supper Jesus shared with his disciples. John knew all this; he was writing over 100 years after the birth of Jesus and is credited with being the most theologically sophisticated of the lot. So what was he up to? For years the Church has said that John was reaching out to a culture steeped in Greek thought which claimed that our *everyday words* are not the conveyors of truth but symbols which point to eternal truths beyond words. Just so, the poet Emily Dickinson, coping with the death of her father, wrote: “The broadest words are so narrow we can

easily cross them,---but there is water deeper than those [words] which has no bridge.” Just so deeply, so profoundly, John’s readers would assume that Jesus, called the Christ, was referring not to his own flesh and blood, but to the very spiritual heart of the Divine.

To convey this vividly, John has Jesus use the universal and intimate symbols of eating and drinking. But, words are always at risk of being misunderstood, of becoming the absurd; if we take the words literally, mysticism does turn into magic [‘do this, get that’]---the physical act of consumption is substituted for the spiritual act of communion. Yet John knows, without those symbols, the full, personal, even visceral richness of grace cannot be indicated.

This presents *us* with a problem: how do we understand these sacramental words of institution---we, who don’t think like John and the Greeks; we who culturally take our evolving historical words more seriously, often literally. The Church in its ecclesiastical wisdom ingeniously resolves this linguistic dilemma by resorting to ambiguity: it offers us two related but dissimilar metaphors for each of the sacramental elements: “the body of Christ,” “the bread of heaven”; “the blood of Christ,” “the cup of salvation.” The effect is to eliminate the risk of literalism while at the same time minimizing the risk of irresponsible interpretation. But interpret we must if we are to understand, if we are to accept Wisdom’s invitation to eat her bread and drink her wine at the table of the Lord.

So how do *we* read John’s gospel? We believe we know what he was trying to tell the seekers of truth in the second century; what can he say to us in the twenty-first century? Literal and metaphorical readings, as we have noted, are ultimately inadequate, but it is at this point that the poet Merwin and the teacher in Proverbs come to our rescue. The wisdom of Merwin is to remind us that the mystery of what’s at the heart of the sacrament can’t be unlocked or even fully captured in words. To do so would turn living mystery into biographical magic as we have noted earlier. Wisdom tells us that the truth must lie beyond the words of institution; *truth must be lived, lived within the risks of spiritual encounter.*

At a Lenten service some years ago, as I knelt at the altar of Grace Church, Amherst, awaiting the distribution of the elements by Bishop Barbara Harris, I noticed her pausing in front of the man next to me. She had said, “The Body of Christ” as she held the wafer in her hand, just over his outstretched hand, but she had not given him the wafer. She waited silently until the man had finally looked up at her. Only then did she add “The bread of heaven” and gave him the wafer. Later, when I had the chance to ask her about this, she said, ‘I never serve the elements until they have looked me in the eye; I want them to know that we *together* are living a holy, spiritual affirmation of our life in Christ, one that the Church has celebrated for two thousand years.’ What Bishop Harris knew, what

Martha Hubbard and all our Eucharistic ministers know, is this: our living-encounter at the altar invites us to venture beyond the treacherous isolation of self, carries us beyond the sacred poverty of even the hallowed words of the sacrament, and into the mystical presence of God. There are no words for that, but within that proffered gift there always burns the question... 'Do you really mean it?' In our acceptance there can only be the grateful witness and response: "So be it" Amen!

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