

Homecoming

Saint Paul's Cathedral, San Diego
September 13, 2009; Proper 19B (RCL)
Scott Richardson +

Gracious God,
Let these words be more than words and give us the spirit of Jesus.
Amen.

Let's begin with a lightly edited recitation of an e-mail I received from Bob Boyd. Here it is: "I want to share with you a truly amazing moment. It happened in Brannack, Montana. Brannack is now a deserted town and state park. It is truly out in the middle of nowhere, among rolling hills that stretch to forever. (I kept thinking, God, don't let our car break down here.)

The Kodak moment happened at the wooden church (Methodist). We went into the church to look around. Our five-year old grandson, Sean, realized it was a church. He promptly went to the front, stood behind the lectern, and asked us to sit down. When we didn't sit he stepped from behind the lectern and repeated his request with a movement of his hands out and down. Sean went back behind the lectern and said, 'Welcome to our church.' He spoke a few words then said, 'now for some music.' He softly sang a few bars of something and then said, 'Thank you for coming to our church.' At his signal we applauded; he said, 'You can go now.'

Neither Russ nor I have any idea what motivated Sean to do what he did. I can say that from the time Sean was ten-days old he has gone with us to Saint Paul's Cathedral where he has heard the service and knows the proper forms. So who knows what happened in that tiny, rural, abandoned church? It was a very memorable event for us, one that Russ and I shall never forget. I just wanted to share it with you."

We today celebrate Homecoming at the cathedral, that day when we kick off much of our fall programming and welcome back all who have been away. We also remind ourselves of what it means to be "at home" in this place, in the larger community, and in Christ. Five-year old Sean might serve as our role model in that regard. He knows he belongs. He has a message to share and a song to sing. He even knows that he's been given authority to share those gifts. In like manner, you belong – whether you've been here for fifty years or fifteen minutes. You have a message to share and a song to sing. You've been given authority by God to discover and express your message and your song. The cathedral exists to help you do that – that's the primary purpose of our being.

So what might your message and your song sound like? In the end, it should be good news and a joyful noise: life overcoming death, light overwhelming

darkness, health emerging from malady, and grace trumping tragedy. That, to get fancy for a moment, is your teleological destiny, your promised end. But you might also fold in material from scripture that, in the meantime, challenges your rosy finale. In this morning's gospel, for instance, Jesus tells his friends that he's headed home and that, to get there, he's going to have to make a stopover at a place called Golgotha, the place of the skull, the site of state executions. He goes even further – he tells his friends that they too will have to pass through Golgotha on their way to heaven, their final home.

So your message and your song take on darker themes and dissonant notes. We must allow for death, malady, tragedy; we take up our cross and love one another as these manifest in community but we never give in to them. We never concede. These do not define us. That is neither our deepest message nor our best song. In the midst of these we hold to the promise that, in the end, all shall be well.

On that note, I want to tell you about the past week. Mary and I were invited by John Philip Newell, the Celtic scholar and sage, to spend five days in New Mexico with seven other guests to take the pulse of spirituality today. What are its features, new directions, challenges? The guest list included David Crumm, the founder of "Read the Spirit", a new media effort supporting spiritual writers and readers; Barbara Brown Taylor, the brilliant author and professor, and her husband Ed, a gentleman farmer, searcher, and teacher; Fran McKendrie, an extraordinary musician, and his wife Diana, an insightful therapist; Marianne Borg, the director of a wonderful spiritual formation center in Portland and the wife of the renowned NT scholar Marcus Borg; Elizabeth Randall, an Episcopal priest and spiritual director from Denver – twenty years at their cathedral and now beginning a new ministry as rector of a church in the same neighborhood; a very good soul.

As a group we were asked us to think about those things that are quickly passing away in our culture and about those things that are just as quickly emerging. We reflected on the spiritual state of contemporary college students and wondered what the church might be like if we held rigid certitude lightly and dedicated ourselves to creating meaning in community over and over again, like a mandala being continuously created and swept away. We heard the haunting OT story of a concubine brutally raped by a crowd and then, the next day, murdered by her master. An almost impossible question was posed; as a person of good faith and deep hope, what would you say not about her but to her? We then learned more about the overall health of the church as we undergo a period of radical theological re-education. Mary had the chance to introduce the Guadalupe Art Program. She was delighted to discover that others in the group shared her passion for exploring the feminine face of the divine as well as issues related to violence against women and children – the two primary foci of the program. She also, of course, belted out a few tunes when urged to do so at the end of our session one evening.

It was all very rich fare. I was asked to help bring things to a close on Thursday night. I ended my brief talk by telling this story: Paul Tillich, the great 20th century systematic theologian, spent several months toward the end of his life teaching at my alma mater, UC Santa Barbara. He was a generally punctual man so it distressed his wife Hannah, when, during one strong winter storm, he failed to come home at his usual time. Several hours elapsed before they finally found him – he stood on the beach at the edge of this continent completely drenched and absolutely entranced by the storm. When asked what he was doing he, in a thick German accent, simply replied, “Beholding the power of nature.”

I think that’s what we did in New Mexico. I also think that’s what we’re all doing these days. We stand in a stormy place, on the edge of cataclysmic change in the culture and in the church and, at times, even in our homes and in our own bodies. This can seem chaotic, frightening, dangerous, and oddly marvelous all at once. So, transfixed, we behold the power of nature and human nature. We also surrender entirely to the One who brought nature into being and the One who redeems the whole creation and the One who blows through the cosmos and our souls even now. We receive life on life’s terms – all created things are subject to decay and dissolution - and we cling to the resurrection vision of life restored and perfected. Even at the grave we make our song: alleluia, alleluia, alleluia.

And any place where we do this is our true home. Our spiritual home is not located at 2728 Sixth Avenue or at an abandoned Methodist Church in Brannack, Montana or at a retreat center in the high desert of New Mexico. We are home when we proclaim the good news and sing our song. We are home when we seek and see God in creation and in our neighbor’s pain and in our neighbor’s joy, and in our pain and joy, as well. That’s what we celebrate on Homecoming. That’s what we celebrate every time we gather to offer prayer and praise not in spite of but amidst the changes and chances of life. Amen.