

2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday of Easter

Sermon 4.8.18

Scripture: Acts 4:32-35  
1 John 1:1-2:2

Here is a poem. Jack Gilbert wrote it, an American poet, though one who lived abroad most of his adult life—France, Italy, Denmark, Greece, Japan. Before all that he was a high school dropout, a door-to-door salesman, a Guggenheim fellow. The poem is entitled, “A Brief for the Defense.”

Sorrow everywhere. Slaughter everywhere. If babies  
are not starving someplace, they are starving  
somewhere else. With flies in their nostrils.  
But we enjoy our lives because that's what God wants.  
Otherwise the mornings before summer dawn would not  
be made so fine. The Bengal tiger would not  
be fashioned so miraculously well. The poor women  
at the fountain are laughing together between  
the suffering they have known and the awfulness  
in their future, smiling and laughing while somebody  
in the village is very sick. There is laughter  
every day in the terrible streets of Calcutta,  
and the women laugh in the cages of Bombay.  
If we deny our happiness, resist our satisfaction,  
we lessen the importance of their deprivation.  
We must risk delight. We can do without pleasure,  
but not delight. Not enjoyment. We must have  
the stubbornness to accept our gladness in the ruthless  
furnace of this world. To make injustice the only  
measure of our attention is to praise the Devil.  
If the locomotive of the Lord runs us down,  
we should give thanks that the end had magnitude.  
We must admit there will be music despite everything.  
We stand at the prow again of a small ship  
anchored late at night in the tiny port  
looking over to the sleeping island: the waterfront  
is three shuttered cafes and one naked light burning.  
To hear the faint sound of oars in the silence as a rowboat  
comes slowing out and then goes back is truly worth  
all the years of sorrow that are to come.

The Johannine community was struggling with this fact, which we *still* struggle with apparently—the fact of this world as a ruthless furnace *and* a beautiful delight fashioned so miraculously well.

So they wanted out, some of them; they *imagined* themselves out. This gathering of churches for whom the Gospel of John was written and was held central, this gathering of believers for whom the letters of John were composed as interpretive sermons to be read aloud in the congregations: this Johannine community now had some members who fancied themselves out of the imperfection of this fallen world, fancied themselves *in* on the perfection that was promised to be coming as if it were now already here.

Gnosticism, it seems, is an evergreen heresy. To be not fully in the world, to be not corporeal and corruptible, to be mere spirits awaiting liberation from the morbid snares of bodies and matter: Gnosticism is a school of thought we seem unable ever fully to shake—and because it's so tempting.

Wouldn't it be wonderful if we could just be done with all this—*some* of us anyway? (What hope do those others have that they'll ever *get* it?)

Wouldn't it be wonderful if we could just be spirit-selves?

Never to suffer illness or injury, never to *cause* injury or hurt? To be clean and free-flowing and wise! To be impartial instead partial, to be already finished, already complete, and even privy to the secrets of wisdom and truth, privy to the way of peace! Wouldn't it be great to have risen above it all?

This is the Christ that Gnostics of the Johannine community confessed: that Jesus wasn't really a person, and that he wasn't really crucified, and that he certainly didn't suffer, for such things would be beneath a god-man like Christ. Worse, it would reveal promises not all that promising—that the world is still a mess, but it's also apparently the place where God is.

Now *that's* disappointing.

So, it was all a show. It must have been! A demonstration of sorts, the crucifixion was an illusion, which was then to inspire a disavowal of this ugly, gross world, and an arrival into a spirit-state that all of Jesus' followers should aim to become, would indeed become, would insist they *had* become—above it all. Enlightened. Analyzed. Born- again. Woke.

And to be honest, John's gospel made that easy to believe—this gospel that remembers Jesus to have moved toward the cross with remarkable calm. On the night of his arrest, he was remarkably articulate and gracious. At the sight of the coming detachment that would bring him into custody, he was forthright and confident. Nowhere in this narrative account does Jesus pray of the Father, "Take this cup from me." Nowhere does he buckle in anguish or curdling dread. No, indeed; for this gospel seems intent to make clear, in the words of the footnotes of my study Bible, that "Jesus' fate is self-chosen; he, not Judas or the soldiers, determines his death."

True as that final point might be, though, it's a misreading of this gospel to conclude that our writer took Jesus to be dispassionate, merely floating through life, phantasmagoric.

That said, to hear in this account instead passion, urgency, a committed and convicted earthiness, you have to work pretty hard.

This Johannine abstraction of what's actually an embodied (though spiritual) faith, this Johannine removal from the physical realm the imperatives of the gospel: these were likely made even more possible by the fact of the remove of the Johannine community itself. Recent scholarship suggests that the people for whom John wrote his gospel, in likely the year 110, and for whom the letters of John were offered as sermons, in likely the middle part of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century, were in southern Syria or maybe Lebanon. This is to say that this community of believers was a century away from the time of the resurrection, and 130 miles away from that garden in Jerusalem where John attested it all took place. And this is to say the Johannine community was gathered far afield of the point of origin—which might have allowed their going far afield theologically too.

It would threaten to divide the community even irreparably—and this was a community embattled enough. They'd been driven out of their synagogues; they'd been driven out of their villages and families. They needed each other. But now they'd begun to turn on each other—the ones who figured the world was a place in need of good news and a living out of the gospel of God's love, and the ones who figured the world wasn't really worth their worry, not when they could pursue spiritual enlightenment, not when they could *achieve* their own sinlessness.

Because that's part of Gnosticism too—sinlessness. That burden of knowing all is not right with you: away with *that!* That burden of knowing you can be petty, you can be cruel; you're envious and selfish and a little egotistical: shrug all that *off*. And this: that you're party to some

pretty bad things—structural injustice, economic exploitation, interreligious strife, environmental degradation, history’s many problems heaped on you as an inheritance. No, for you’ve *arrived*.

It’s hard to know what aspects of human sin the Gnostics of the Johannine community were trying to get free of, but it seems there was something. After all, our writer was intent to note to all the congregations, though likely to a few particulars among the congregations, “If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us.”

Rest assured, this wasn’t simply accusation because our writer was also intent to note that there is forgiveness of sin. It’s not to be found, though, in the denial of sin, but in the confession of it, the recognition of it. “Try. Just *try* taking responsibility for your part in all this, your part and partiality in all this. And when that falls short, Jesus Christ will grace us with his impartiality, or his omni-partiality, as one professor in divinity school understood God’s wisdom.”

This is the way of community cohesion and health, of course. If everyone has a true understanding of themselves, if no one is operating under some illusion of how he is or she is; if you’re honest in your self-understanding so that no one else in the community is burdened with carrying those parts of yourself that you refuse to carry, refuse even to recognize: this is the way to community cohesion and health. I mean, we need to be realistic. *We all* have blind spots. *We all* have strains in our personalities that we’re going to remain unconscious to and that we’re going to rely on others to help us manage both those strains and our unconsciousness. “But *try*. Try to make your blind spots as small as possible. And if nothing else, realize at least that you have them.”

For what it’s worth, this is the dynamic that I imagine made possible the socialist ideal that was the earliest manifestation of church. When the whole group of those who believed had one heart and one soul and shared everything in common, part of the success of this, I imagine, was that the members had an honest view of themselves. Their relative small numbers helped. The bigger this project of church would get, the more difficult this socialist ideal would be to achieve. But at first, it seems everyone was equal parts giving and getting—which depends on honest self-reckoning, self-understanding.

Also for what it’s worth, the realization that this project was to be a long one complicated matters, I would guess. That their wait for the return of Christ would be not a matter of weeks or even months but of millennia, and moreover that this anticipated return would not be a matter of him reappearing to lead them again but *is* to be a matter of our working amidst history so to

participate in this promised manifestation: these also, I'd think, complicated the socialist ideal. Suddenly, their life together wasn't a matter of subsistence but of investment. Suddenly, they'd be compelled to think not only about bread enough for today, but "bread" for the future. An endowment! You know that old hymn, "The church's one foundation is Jesus Christ her Lord." I know weary clergy, and anxious treasurers, whose sleepless nights have them confessing that the church's one foundation is something else altogether, and (worse) is shrinking.

But we're not there yet. With this letter of John, we're yet insisting that this faith into which we've been called is one declared from the beginning and is in discipleship to a way that is very much a matter of matter, very much to be lived in fullness amidst the world—the world as the beautiful delight and ruthless furnace that is. Thus, the insistence on the part of the writer, who writes on behalf of the leadership and authority of the community, that they have heard this with their own ears, seen it with their own eyes, looked at it and *touched* with their own hands—a physical manifestation of the word of life. This faith, in other words, isn't an escape hatch; it's a doubling-down to the here and now. And it is so "that our joy may be complete."

This is a typical Johannine aim—that joy may be complete. The phrase shows up in the Gospel of John, and it shows up in each of the two letters of John. But it's not a notion exclusive to that group. The prophets who had in mind a God who aimed beyond the Judeans and Israelites had in mind also a joy that abounded amidst this "chosen people" but also abroad. Indeed, Isaiah spoke of people who once walked in darkness and who've now seen a great light, and these would be people beyond the Jordan, beyond Galilee, and they would result in a multiplying of the nation, an expanding of those who'd be blessed by God. This God, then, was no mere tribal God, and this People of God was not to be merely concerned with themselves but with a much broader blessing, abounding (much) further afield. And the reason for this is that joy might increase, might one day even be **complete**.

That will be quite a day.

That will be endless day.

Meanwhile, though...

Here is a poem. William Stanley Merwin wrote it under his penname, W.S. Merwin, a midcentury American poet, a preacher's kid. It is entitled "Thanks."

Listen

with the night falling we are saying thank you  
we are stopping on the bridges to bow from the railings  
we are running out of the glass rooms  
with our mouths full of food to look at the sky  
and say thank you  
we are standing by the water thanking it  
smiling by the windows looking out  
in our directions

back from a series of hospitals back from a mugging  
after funerals we are saying thank you  
after the news of the dead  
whether or not we knew them we are saying thank you

over telephones we are saying thank you  
in doorways and in the backs of cars and in elevators  
remembering wars and the police at the door  
and the beatings on stairs we are saying thank you  
in the banks we are saying thank you  
in the faces of the officials and the rich  
and of all who will never change  
we go on saying thank you thank you

with the animals dying around us  
our lost feelings we are saying thank you  
with the forests falling faster than the minutes  
of our lives we are saying thank you  
with the words going out like cells of a brain  
with the cities growing over us  
we are saying thank you faster and faster  
with nobody listening we are saying thank you  
we are saying thank you and waving  
dark though it is

At the prison, we read this poem—my class of three inmates and me. They scoffed that they didn't get it. Then one of them noticed something—a middle-aged man for whom this prison-stay is his first and wasn't (I gather) part of the plan. He said, "No one around here ever says thank you."

What does that mean, we wondered? That it's a place of compulsory behavior rather than anything freely chosen; that it's a joyless place. Gnosticism isn't the worst option available to us—this misbegotten notion that we've already arrived, some of us anyway. Ingratitude is worse, the

deathly conviction that there's no where to which we might aim to arrive, no one to whom we might offer thanks, no one who's gracing us with good will or, at the very least good treatment.

I wore the phrase around all week: "...that our joy may be complete." It wasn't a new one to me, just one I'd newly decided to figure out if I could connect with. Could this phrase be mine to use? Was this aim one I could relate to, and this process one I might engage in?

Our writer of this letter of John recognizes that this is what the people want, and likely because this is what God wants: a world abounding in joy, a world no longer a series of parts where joy either touches down or does *not*, but a world that is whole and healed and reconciled and full of joy. Our writer also seems to recognize that some people have decided they're going to claim that as theirs now. Tired of waiting, certainly tired of bearing in mind that "if babies aren't starving someplace, they're starving somewhere else," certainly tired of "remembering wars and the police at the door and the beatings on the stairs," they've decided, "To hell with all that. Inner peace will do for me. Gracious living for these chosen few' associates of mine is all good."

Our writer of this letter of John, though, seems also to recognize that this is but one more version of joy that is *not* complete. If those who've got it don't insist that they're to *do* something with it—something that benefits others and not just themselves—then they're (we're?) contributing to a yet incompleteness of joy.

We must risk delight, yes.

We must have the stubbornness to accept our gladness in the ruthless furnace of this world, yes.

To make injustice the only measure of our attention is to praise the Devil, yes.

And, yes, if we deny our happiness and resist our satisfaction, then we deny also the real-world experience of those who live in real pain and terrible fear. And to deny them a recognition that this pain and fear are of a different order is to do further violence against.

I once participated in a conversation on whiteness. Three white men and me, we were to delineate what it means to be white.

One kind and conscientious man went on at some length—that to be white is to be undeserving of what privilege you're given, to have to watch what you say because your entitlement has spoiled your self-perception, a litany of weighty drags that struck me as denying who's really suffering racism—though that was clearly *not* his intent.

I said, “Wow! I think being white is great. I’m given the benefit of the doubt. I’m assumed to be an individual and not someone who represents my whole race. My children are safe. The police are on my side.” I was even wearing a hoody that day, which I hadn’t put on to make a point, a thing that was sort of the point. “I can ever wear a hoody without worrying I’ll seem ‘thuggish.’ I don’t have to think about it all. Really, I can present myself however I choose. Being white in America is awesome. I wish this existence were available to everyone.”

I have to tell you, the reason I think this is because of a conversation I had in high school with a black girl. I intimated that I sort of wished I were black, to which she said sharply, “Then you’re a fool.”

She was right.

The sad fact is that the only way to a completeness of joy is through the cross—a clear-eyed recognition that. Though all might be good enough for us, all is not right with the world. The sad fact is the only way to a completeness of joy includes the recognition that joy is to abound even amidst this ruthless furnace of a world—and therefore we cannot stop until that ruthless furnace has let to cool. I’m very sorry to have to tell you that the healing and wholeness we aim for is entwined with our reckoning of devastation and loss, of caged women and imprisoned men who scoff at their not “getting it,” of cruel history and its continued hold on it, of a future heavy with uncertain hope and certain threats.

But there is good news in the fact that partial joy doesn’t feel like enough for us, because it indicates that partial joy isn’t enough for the truth that is within us either—and that truth is God. God, who will not stop until joy abounds; God, who will not rest until the work of grace is complete; God, who will not settle for anything less than universal salvation, a new creation in which all sin is worked out, all suffering is redeemed, and all deemed lost is gathered in for good: this is the God whom Christ calls us to serve and on whose behalf Christ empowers us to work.

The mid-century poet who was a preacher’s kid supposed, “..with nobody listening we are saying thank you, we are saying thank you and waving, dark though it is,” which I imagine he wrote following the death of God, in late mid-century when Western thought had become wise. But that moment has also passed, Holy Saturday behind us. The stone’s been rolled away, the tomb is empty, and Christ yet lives. Therefore, as in darkness, so in light, to a universe deaf to our

existence and amidst a listening creation in which we are beloved, we say clear as ever, “Thanks be to God.”