

19<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost

Sermon 10.22.17

Scripture: Isaiah 45:1-7  
Matthew 22:15-22

Richard Wilbur died last week, on Saturday. Beloved American poet, twice winner of the Pulitzer Prize for poetry, Mr. Wilbur was ninety-six years old. Predeceased by his wife of sixty-five years a decade earlier, he gave up the ghost in his Belmont, Massachusetts nursing home.

Here is a poem of his, entitled “Love Calls Us to the Things of this World.” The driving image is laundry, clean and now drying on a line, its weightlessness a cause for jubilation, though only temporarily—for love calls us not to such simple bodilessness but to the *things* of this world.

The eyes open to a cry of pulleys,  
And spirited from sleep, the astounded soul  
Hangs for a moment bodiless and simple  
As false dawn.

Outside the open window  
The morning air is all awash with angels.

Some are in bed-sheets, some are in blouses,  
Some are in smocks: but truly there they are.  
Now they are rising together in calm swells  
Of halcyon feeling, filling whatever they wear  
With the deep joy of their impersonal breathing;

Now they are flying in place, conveying  
The terrible speed of their omnipresence, moving  
And staying like white water; and now of a sudden  
They swoon down into so rapt a quiet  
That nobody seems to be there.

The soul shrinks

From all that it is about to remember,  
From the punctual rape of every blessed day,  
And cries,  
“Oh, let there be nothing on earth but laundry,  
Nothing but rosy hands in the rising steam  
And clear dances done in the sight of heaven.”

Yet, as the sun acknowledges  
With a warm look the world's hunks and colors,  
The soul descends once more in bitter love  
To accept the waking body, saying now  
In a changed voice as the man yawns and rises,  
“Bring them down from their ruddy gallows;



all these edges and shapes is an infusion of the one who made the edges and shapes. “The caller,” of the final line of the last poem, the one who called and commissioned all into being and purpose, though fairly: this one-in-whom-all-is-made-one is infused in all, like sunlight streaming through a thick forest of trees.

Two weeks ago I preached on one aspect of the creation story in the first chapter of Genesis. One implication: that God spoke the creation into being means God didn’t battle the creation into being. Unlike in other creation myths the world over, unlike the many that imagine the beginning of the world as the result of war between a God of order and a beast of chaos, this creation story imagines God as sovereign, as having no equal against whom he had to go to war, but instead as ultimate in source and aim.

Yes, the notion that there was a great cosmic war out of which good order emerged, and that there is yet a great cosmic war ongoing, comes up in scripture here and there. And undoubtedly it comes up in certain theological traditions and tendencies. Just the other day, Hannah referred me to a blog post by someone who advocated for the sake of his marriage, and by extension all marriage, a “Christian” worldview that holds central the notion of being at war. The blogger wrote in advocating such an attitude, “Being in war together [as a married couple] may be what keeps us from being at war with each other.”

This is bad theology. In fact, this is diabolical, which is to say it’s of the spirit that encourages establishing alliances by holding common enemies, the very sort of social order that the gospel means for us to resist and that the church is inspired to resist. We don’t establish community by together having a common enemy. We establish community by the appeal of love.

And this I also preached those two weeks ago. Given this understanding of the creative power of this sovereign God, we might also be likewise creative, forming not by means of making war and conceiving of enemies but simply by means of creating something out of nothing. Now social groups and nation-states and everything in between can be conceived not by designating an “other” and then casting that other out, but simply by our common need for, and pleasure in, giving and receiving love.

But this week something more comes to mind. The sovereignty of God, the theological insight that God doesn’t have an equal against whom God positions Godself, but that God is the all in all: this sovereignty means that we as people of God don’t have to worry so much about the purity of the world and our own selves in it. We don’t have to worry about the cleanness or

uncleanness of things, the sullyng possibility of certain associations or proximities. When God is sovereign over all creation, we can set forth into the midst of this creation in the faith that God is at work in all things for good, and that all shall be well and all shall be well and all manner of things shall be well.

Purity: it's funny to me how concerned all sorts of people, in all sorts of groups, are when it comes to purity. On the right, it's about purity in ideology, and on the *Christian* right, it's all about spiritual purity and sexual purity. On the left, it's about being "free" of any of a whole host of impurities, from gluten to vaccines to plastic toys in your kids' schoolroom, from anything normative or typical or requiring discipline or restricting choice. To be pure is to be free from anything constrictive or binding, anything aggressive or competitive.

Purity: Tobias had a friend when he was a baby. Our families spent a lot of time together. Once, when each boy was around six months old, the other mother said to me something about how pure her baby was, how pure all babies are, and that her job as his mother was to maintain that purity for as long as possible. I remember this because I was struck by it. I'd just never thought in terms of pure and impure when it came to Tobias, or later on when it came to Jack, or really when it comes to anyone. I figure we're all quite complicated and self-contradictory, and that's one of the things I love about us. I remember it also because I suddenly suspected there would come a time when our two families would no longer be friends. Sooner or later, we Goodmans would reveal ourselves as too compromised to be acceptable...

...which came to pass. It was around the time foam swords and Nerf guns were introduced in our household.

When the Pharisees sent their disciples to Jesus, along with some Herodians, it was to test Jesus along these same lines.

It should surprise us that Pharisees and Herodians were working together in this regard. They had little in common, Pharisees and Herodians. There was little love lost between these two groups. The Pharisees were the pure ones, exact in their interpreting and living by the law, exemplary in their Judaism. They'd have rejected use of the coin that declared the emperor divine, as the denarius did, in an inscription on the tails-side. No one to them was lord but the Lord. The Herodians, by contrast, were those who aligned themselves with Herod and imperial governance. As to whether they really believed the emperor to be divine, I couldn't say. But they'd have had no problem going along with the claim. Whatever. You do what you have to do.

You go where the power is. That's where it's safest. Until that power turns on you too. But we'll cross that bridge when we come to it.

This coin, then, that they'd present, and this question that they'd ask: each of these two groups would have come down on a different side. The Pharisees would have claimed it unlawful to pay taxes, given that the law they understood as authoritative was the Jewish law, the Torah. Though they likely did (it was compulsory, after all), they'd have done so with heavy hearts and guilty consciences. So it would be interesting to see if Jesus has such a heavy heart and guilty conscience when it comes to this bind. The Herodians, on the other hand, would have claimed it lawful indeed to pay taxes by way of this coinage. It would actually be unlawful *not* to pay taxes to the emperor—and it was perhaps their denarius that they were able to put before Jesus.

These two conflicting groups then: they came to Jesus together as if to enjoy at least this one chance to share an agenda.

Entrapping Jesus: this could be fun. Establishing an alliance by means of a common enemy: it could be fun to have something in common with those pains in the neck.

I doubt very much, though, they were expecting to be amazed.

And, to be honest, I'm not sure what about this amazed them. All I see in it is Jesus being unfazed at the notion that you can be law-abiding citizens of the world while also being true to God.

But maybe this itself is amazing, especially to people who are religiously or ideologically fixated. The sovereignty of God: this is perhaps an amazing notion to those who are invested in the thought that God finds as untouchable the very things they'd find untouchable.

The Pharisees seemed to think God would be threatened and enraged if the people were to interact at all with an object that claimed the emperor as divine. Their acceptability before God depended on their not interacting with such an object, they seemed to think. Their worthiness in the eyes of God hinged on whether or not they did business with such a thing. And it was blasphemous, of course. This piece of currency: it was false, idolatrous. To claim that the emperor is as God: it's an outrage!

The Herodians, for their part, likely wondered whether Jesus was one more purity extremist, or if he would isolate himself further from the powers that be over the question of what to do about the fact that we're ensnared with the things of this world.

I guess what I find amazing in this exchange, if anything, is Jesus' withering disdain for the coin in question and the policy of taxation it represents. "Show me the coin used for the tax." It's as if he means to show it as so small a thing, so trivial. It's as if he means for the Pharisees and Herodians to see it for what it is: a trinket, a silly trifle featuring a desperate assertion that, were it true, wouldn't need to be so publicly insisted upon, wouldn't need to be said at all. "This is what the emperor wants? So, give it to him. The rest is God's." Actually, amidst a creation of which God is sovereign, an emperor insisting on his own greatness is mostly just funny.

It's not, of course, only funny. I said *mostly*, because it's troubling too. For what keeps this faith in God's sovereignty from slipping into cynicism, from slipping into a casual acceptance of anything and everything? What keeps this assurance of God's sovereignty from adopting as its confession of faith: "Whatever. It's all good"?

Because it's not. It's not all good. I mean, look around. Really, I wake up in the morning and hear not the cry of pulleys but the cry of peoples. I'm sure you do too.

This was likely the shocking aspect of what Isaiah had to say to the people Israel and Judah during the time of the exile. This is the situation out of which the reading this morning comes—the exile into Babylon of the people Israel and Judah once the imperial invasion had done its worst and come to completion. Jerusalem was ruined. The Temple was ruined. All that the people had built up and planted over the last five hundred was ruined. And they were driven out, deported to the foreign land and ways of Babylon—the good people anyway, while the old and sick and simple were left amidst the ruins, further ruin.

All was lost. All was calamity. None of this was in accordance with the will of God. It couldn't possibly be. None of this was in accordance with the goodness of God, and the good purposes of God.

Or was it, Isaiah would have the people second guess.

"Thus says the Lord to his anointed, to Cyrus..." to *Cyrus*, emperor of Persia, of Archemenid, of Babylon. "Thus says the Lord," according to the prophet Isaiah, "to his anointed, to Cyrus, whose right hand the Lord has grasped..."

That God would anoint Cyrus to subdue nations before him; that God would anoint this foreign emperor to strip kings of their robes, even the king of Israel whom he did indeed defeat; that God would use the calamities of history to bring about God's will: this would have been a tough assertion to hold as true, and to prophesy as true, and to hear as true.

And it is still, if you ask me. But that's what's implied in the theological assurance that God is sovereign. That's the net into which such disturbing truth-claims get caught up when we believe this, which Isaiah said in speaking for God: "I am the Lord, and there is no other; besides me there is no god." What of Auschwitz? What of Hiroshima? What of Aleppo and Puerto Rico and Nazis on the march in Gainesville, Florida? Sovereign God, what of all these? I don't know. I don't know.

This universality, this sovereignty: it's good news, it's beautiful news, until it isn't.

And then it really isn't.

And then, it is.

Love calls us to things of this world. We're called to find our place amidst the things of this world, to find where God's sovereignty insists we live it out. The way we do this will satisfy some, will distress others. It will be too much or not enough. We will be too strident, as John was said to be, or too lax, as Jesus was thought to be. We will take too much delight in things, or too much dread. Through it all, God reigns and these things abide: faith, hope, and love. And the greatest of these is love.

Thanks be to God.