

Easter VII Year C 2019

Back in the day before I lost my mind and went to seminary, Katharine and I would regularly travel from Dothan to the Alabama Shakespeare festival in Montgomery. We had season tickets, and such pilgrimages I think, in hindsight, kept me sane in my former life; the poetry of it... that, and singing in the Nativity choir. So I saw an ad just the other day that the Shakespeare Festival will be performing Hamlet this coming September. I impulsively bought tickets for this, Shakespeare's most famous play; and I went home and started reading again Harold Bloom's exquisite book on Shakespeare. The book's title is: *Shakespeare, the Invention of the Human*. As the title suggests, Bloom is proposing that the high art of language, particularly poetry, best represents who we are; language being the most profound measure of the complexities of culture: words being symbols of our collective interior life; words that are chariots of the human imagination... I am reminded of Gregory Orr's audacious phrase, "Let's remake the world with words." Indeed words have the power to shape reality... Other scholars besides Bloom argue that Shakespeare is the inventor of modern English; that his cosmology, his philosophy, his view of the world, is still far ahead of its time; still informs us. Our Prayer book, and many of our hymns owe much to Shakespeare's genius.... In the beginning was the Word.

So please allow me to go all English Major on you....Poetry, good poetry, can't come into being without embracing the whole of life's experience... the dark and the light, joy and pain, despair and hope... Poetry more than anything else is honest. It finds its resonance in speaking the truth about life's mystery... love and loss, sorrow and joy, death and rebirth. To work, it must hold in artful tension the paradoxical complexity of life. It must be comfortable in ambiguity; in speculation; in things being unresolved... a lot like the life of faith.... Among the myriad explanations having to do with the nature of life on earth, perhaps it is poetry that gets closer to the truth more so than other disciplines; perhaps it is the language of the imagination; the language of mystery that connects us to the poetic mind of God... Life itself, the created order entire moves to the rhythm of poetry, I think; the rhythm of the imagination, curious and visionary and courageous.... We would do well to adopt the poet's sensibilities.

So we are continuing our readings from John's gospel... We will finish next week, at Pentecost, for the time being, and we will resume our readings from the gospel of Luke. So let's recollect what we know about this gospel.... It is the latest gospel to be written, probably early second century. It is of course markedly different from the so-called synoptic gospels, the gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke. Those gospels are classical rhetoric... that is, they seek to move their

hearers to do something... they are exhortations to action... and though John's gospel is in many ways rhetorical, it is first and foremost a philosophical treatise as to the identity of Jesus, and moreover a treatise on the identity of those who follow Jesus... and what I want to say this morning is that this gospel uses the language of poetry.... The language of imagination and mystery... and therefore it is honest and trustworthy... It is not a prescribed set of beliefs to which we must assent; it is an expression of beauty.... The beauty of who Jesus of Nazareth is, and the beauty of who we are as followers of Jesus.

You remember the prologue: My paraphrase: In the beginning was the word and the word was with God, and the word was God... nothing has been created except through this Word/ God... and this word/ God is very much like light, the light of the world no less... and the light of the world is the light of humanity... and this light-word became flesh and dwelt among us full of grace and truth... and then today we read from Jesus' farewell discourse to his disciples: I am in them as you are in me.... they will bear my legacy to the world, just as I have revealed you to the world... they are one with you as you and I are one.

Jesus is not describing the world of humankind as fallen from grace... he is not describing a depraved race in need of rescue from the jaws of hell... quite the

contrary. He is extolling the genius of humankind explicitly because of our capacity to love. And he makes the audacious claim that we are sent as Jesus is sent; that those who follow Jesus will do greater things than he... The writer of John's gospel, like the other gospel writers is searching for a way for us to live in the face of the world's complexities; in the face of the paradox of existence... A way to embrace the poetry of life....symbols, twists of phrase, hidden meaning; enigma... dark and light, sorrow and joy, hope and despair, birth and death, good and evil.... The poetry of John gathers the paradox in its arms and makes the bold statement of faith that it is love that can bear the paradox... not love a mere emotion, but love that gives without ceasing; love that is sacrifice for the other; love that bears burdens; love that persists and exults in the good, and stands against evil; love that can bear and endure the poetry of creation... bear it and redeem it; love that makes and remakes the creation good despite the evil that weighs so heavily on our world.

I shall say it again: We brothers and sisters are not here to believe rightly. We are not here to fully understand. Fundamentalist Christianity's most grievous offense is that it seeks to demystify the faith; to make it a certainty, and to some extent that has been true in mainline Christian denominations, and in Catholicism... ... But faith is uncertain. It smacks of mystery.... It is not about ends,

but it is about means.... It is not about a particular goal, but it is about process.....

We are here as witnesses in our practice to God's love alive among us... that is our vocation, our sole reason for living. The poetry of this gospel teaches us that Love is at the heart of the matter.... It is love that creates all things, and it is love that will restore all things.... In the poetic fabric of creation there is surely fear, and anger, and envy, and violence, and greed and suffering... there is racism and homophobia. There is exclusion and elitism... Our xenophobic tendencies have resurfaced yet again, perhaps as virulent as ever... How shall we live in such a world?.... The poetry of this gospel proposes an answer: It is love, because love is stronger than all of these things... nothing can quench love, nothing can last against it... that is what we call the good news! So ours is to persist in love; persist in the practice of welcome and kindness, and forgiveness... we are to persist in our stand against evil; we are to persist in doing justice in the world... The translators of this gospel use the term "righteous Father" in our reading.... But the word in the Greek for righteous is just. 'Just' Father.... The oneness for which Jesus prays is not that we all subscribe to a uniform belief system, all neat and clean... "Father help them get it right!" No.... The oneness for which Jesus prays is a committed solidarity with the broken and burdened of our world; that justice is the means of oneness. Perhaps another way to say it is that we are to live lives of

advocacy for the voiceless... John calls the Holy Spirit, the Advocate. We are advocates until we are one voice in solidarity for the Good. This is what resurrection is all about... we miss its meaning if we believe that it is a once upon a time miracle some two thousand years ago... resurrection life is the persistence of love that will raise up all people and all things into the oneness of dignity and well-being... It is the true light that the darkness will never overcome... Dare we believe that?... Dare we put such poetry into practice?

Dear people of God, live the poem; live the well-wrought Word... Stand artfully, as poets, in the midst of life's struggle and tension.... That is what love does... live true to your birthright... give yourself over to your infinite capacity to love. You were, shall we say, invented for such as this.... We were invented for true humanity... act as if Love is the true way. Trust the poem... that is the prayer Jesus on the night before his death prayed for us... That we may be one with our God, of like mind, of like purpose; of the same sensibility... and with a passion for God's people who suffer within life's mysterious paradox... That is poetry indeed... honest and true and worthy of our trust.... and humming with mystery.