

Creativity and Communion with the World

Psalm 8

October 4, 2015, World Communion Sunday

Tim Phillips, Seattle First Baptist Church

Cherry, Johnson, *Let an Omer Be Kept*

Exodus 16: 13-14, 31-32 RSV

...and in the morning dew lay round about the camp. And when the dew had gone up, there was on the face of the wilderness a fine, flake-like thing, fine as hoarfrost on the ground.

...Now the house of Israel called its name manna; it was like coriander seed, white, and the taste of it was like wafers made with honey. And Moses said, "This is what the Lord has commanded: 'Let an omer of it be kept throughout your generations, that they may see the bread with which I fed you in the wilderness...' "*

**An omer is an ancient Hebrew word for a measure of grain - an amount of grain large enough to require bundling.*

Let an Omer Be Kept

She was no stranger to chilly mornings

Or to wilderness.

And while she probably would not have described herself

As lost,

She often wondered at those

Who felt otherwise.

She once told me she was perpetually

Hungry.

For meaning.

For a sense of belonging.

For peace.

And were it not for the words,

Which fell upon her

Like rain

(Brutal showers of words which soaked through to her bones

And kept her awake;

Gentle drizzles of words which held her softly

And eased her dreams),

Were it not for the words

Which covered the grounds of her darkest mornings

With light
As the hoarfrost makes of dark forests
A shimmering wonder,
Were it not for the words
Which fed her despair and hope alike,
Were it not for the words,
She would have starved.

Before she was old enough
To understand their meanings,
Before anyone had taught her the art of arranging
And rearranging them,
She knew somehow
(As if it had been instilled by the One
Who created her hunger)
That the words were for her
But not for her alone,
That they were for now,
But also for later,
That they were to satisfy her longing,
But they were more than sustenance.

Over time she began to bind them together,
And discovered that there was pleasure
In the binding
And in the sharing of the sheaves
With other word-gatherers.

A harvester of words
Now
For generations,
She gives thanks
To the One who causes them still
To rain upon her
And compels her still
To gather and keep them.
And she gives thanks to the words themselves,
And to all who understand
That they are holy.

Cherry Johnson, October 7, 2014

Choral Anthem: *The Artist* by Craig Courtney

Creativity and Communion with the World

*When I look at the heavens, Psalm 8 says,
the work of your fingers,
the moon and the stars
you have created;
What is humanity ...?*

That's a good question. It's a deep question.

And on this weekend when we have been celebrating the amazing creativity of our sisters and brothers, maybe we catch a glimpse of what our biblical tradition tries to describe as being "made in the image of God;" the creativity of God expressed in our own humanity.

But we celebrate this weekend against the backdrop of a fellow human who walked into a classroom in Oregon and shot and killed his classmates.

And within that horrible scene are the heroic actions of another fellow human who put his own life on the line to save others.

So I find myself this morning, surrounded by all the beautiful creativity that is at work among us, asking the Psalm 8 question, "So, what is humanity?"

Is it the horrible capacity for violence or the heroic potential for life-saving courage? Is it creation or destruction?

Well, apparently, it's both.

And if this weekend teaches me anything it is that the question of what it means to be human is best answered by a healthy dose of respect for mystery – all the armchair psychology, all the searching for causes, all the missed opportunities to recognize and treat whatever illness haunted this young man will only lead us so far down the road to what it was that finally made that young man pull the trigger.

No matter how much energy we give to pinpoint the failure of a person or the system, in the end, there will still be those closest to him who will say they never saw this coming. It will remain, for them and for us, a terrible mystery.

We could hope that somewhere along the line we would have helped this young man deal creatively with his frustration by putting something in his hand, anything in his hand, that was not a gun.

But, once again, we seem destined to settle for all that deadly “stuff” that just happens. We seem willing to use our inability to predict or trace or treat every individual experience of brokenness as the logic for throwing our hands up in despair or washing our hands of any of this violence.

In other words, we have come to use the mystery of human behavior as an excuse for not paying attention to what we do know and what we do understand and what we need to do.

Our tradition teaches us that we are made in the “image of God,” so the mystery of humanity shouldn’t surprise us. If God is Mystery then, to some degree, so are we.

And, if there is anything that bugs me about theology it is that the concept of mystery gets used as an excuse for shutting off the questions rather than pushing us to keep asking better ones.

Just saying “Well, it’s a mystery,” isn’t an answer. It’s an invitation. It’s not the end of the conversation. It’s the beginning of discovery.

The same, I think, is true of the mystery of our own humanity.

My sister is with us this morning. And I remember a time several years ago when we were eating lunch at a restaurant in Evanston. There was a young man sitting behind my sister who kept touching her. He seemed to be troubled somehow but, finally, I had enough. I leaned across the table and said, “If you touch my sister again, I’m going to come around this table and break your arm.”

I was shocked at myself. Where did that come from? Of course I wanted to protect my sister but wasn’t there some more creative way to do so than to threaten breaking someone’s arm?

I couldn’t believe there was the threat of that kind of violence in my heart. But there it was. And the truth is, that experience taught me that, for all I think I know about myself, I am still a mystery – even to me.

And that's not an excuse. It's just my humanity making it clear to me that, no matter how well I think I know myself, there are still things to learn. That's why friends and community and therapy and spiritual direction and time for personal reflection are so important.

The profile, they tell us, of folks who resort to the kind of violence in Oregon is often that they are 'loners' who either don't have or resist the kind of relationships that could pull them out of it.

Our creation story says that God looks at human being and says, "It's not good for them to be alone." Solitude is one thing. Isolation is another.

It is the mystery of our humanity that makes community so necessary.

And if that mystery is its capacity for destruction, it is also its potential for salvation.

What was it that made Chris Mintz, on the birthday of his little boy, walk into that classroom in Oregon and try to talk the shooter down? What was it that made him risk his own life to save others? What was it that moved him beyond the instinct for his own survival to face a gunman with only the sound of his voice?

It's a mystery. There must be all kinds of things that come into play in a moment like that.

But at some point, as every artist knows, there is a moment at which you have to put yourself out there for the sake of something bigger than your own life. It's risky. It makes you vulnerable. It's the courage it takes to not give up on the world.

At some point, the gunman in Oregon gave up on the world. Chris Mintz refused to do so even at the risk of his own life.

So, I think it is especially important for us to be celebrating creativity this weekend not because it is an escape from the mystery of humanity but because it is a way that we can embrace it and it's one of the ways we refuse to give up on the world.

We believe that there are stories still to be told.

There is music still to be sung.

There is beauty still to find form.

There is life still to be born.

There are words still to be said.

I love Cherry Johnson's poem this morning and that line, "were it not for words, she would have starved."

I spend a lot of my time with words and it's a mystery to me that I am always pretty much sure what I could say to be hurtful to someone while I am clueless about what to say to be helpful.

But every so often, apparently I say the right thing or I ask just the right question to open up some new possibility for someone. It always seems mysterious to me when that happens – not because I don't try to be thoughtful or to choose words carefully or to tap into some wisdom greater than my own. I do all that. But when there is this connection – a creative moment beyond my own control when there is a realization that wasn't there before – then I experience that other mystery of human being; that creativity that isn't willing to give up on the world; that power, Ephesians talks about, that is already at work within us to accomplish far more than we can ask or imagine.

It's a mystery.

Our friend Joan Benner has written a great little book which she introduces with this question:

When did we forget we are human beings? When did we begin to demand perfection in so many of the things we do? When did making a mistake become such a trauma? When did we become such intolerant judges of ourselves and others? Or, I have to wonder, was there ever a time when we allowed ourselves to fully experience our true humanity ... Each of us is a conglomeration of many things. We are wonderful, fallible, strong, weak, goofy, loveable, mean and nasty, sweet and endearing ... We are logical and illogical, often without understanding why.

We humans are, in other words, a mystery.

Who could have guessed, for instance, that someone so immersed in the violence and the inhumanity of the slave trade would end up writing these words ...

*Amazing grace how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me;
I once was lost but now am found, was blind but now I see.*

That's the kind of mystery we come to encounter at this Table. It's the mystery of blessing born out of brokenness; that, even in betrayal – whether you have been betrayed or are the betrayer – there is still the promise of a new covenant, a new

creation, a second chance, an opportunity one more time to not give up on the world.

In a way, Communion is a kind of ‘performance art’ of that mystery we call amazing grace.

And today if you hear that voice, do not harden your hearts.

NOTES

The story of what happened at Umpqua Community College in Roseburg, OR is still unfolding. The report about Chris Mintz trying to talk down the shooter was carried on the front page of the Saturday, October 3, 2015 *Seattle Times*. The 2005 little book by Joan Benner that accompanies her “Human Card” is available through the author, Joan Ruez Benner.