

Humility That Opens to Wonder

Text: Exodus 4:13; I Corinthians 15:9

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

Well, I imagine that all week long you had conversations about the election which even six days later has failed to deliver for us in any certainty the President elect. It's a very interesting period of time through which to live. The positive side of it, I suppose, is that we are talking about it together and one can also see some positive significance in the fact that maybe we are learning how important is the single vote, and perhaps we also are taking a look at the whole process, wondering about the Electoral College, for example. And certainly we can see a positive thing in the fact that, although we are at an impasse and stalemate and we don't know just what is going to develop in the next few days, nonetheless, there isn't any panic around. We have a confidence in that long tradition of Constitutional rule and the judicial process and, although however it comes out may not please everyone, nonetheless, I think basically we all believe that somehow or other decently and in order this matter will be resolved. But it also gives us added lengthened opportunity to reflect on the whole elective process, the political campaign that seems to get longer every time. It also gives us occasion to wonder about that point at which we find ourselves when the parties are bought and paid for, when the debate is reduced to sound bites, when the multitude of television ads becomes more shrill and frenzied, asserting an agenda bought and paid for and denigrating the other. Language fouled and conversation polluted.

As a people we wonder, don't we, if there isn't a better way? You may think that Bruce and I consulted about his remarks this morning, but I assure you that we didn't at all. I'm glad that he called us to revisit two weeks ago when Huston Smith was here. Last week being the beautiful All Saints Service, I didn't really have occasion to do it, but I want to revisit that, along with what he said this morning, because I sensed such a sharp contrast in what we experienced in Huston Smith's presence in our midst as over against the shrill frenzy of political rhetoric whose decibels go higher and higher. Here was a gentleman, a scholar, a man of great knowledge, great wisdom, and great grace who was with us in significant conversation, leading us in reflection on matters that are of deep importance to the well-being of society, the well-being of our lives and our future, and in his sermon, "Beholding the Glory," suggesting to us the glimpses, the

intimation of transcendence that come to us in those thin places in our lives if we are able to see them.

A friend knew that I was going to preach on humility this morning and called me with a quote from Huston Smith to the effect that humility is not low self-esteem, but it is, rather, the coming to recognize and distance oneself from one's own separate ego, to be able to step back and recognize that one counts as one, but not more than one, and that in charity the other counts as one, as well. And in that humility that we saw embodied in him, we were able to think with him and see with him the glory, for I believe that humility opens to the possibility of wonder.

Following the worship service, I had the wonderful privilege of sitting here between Huston Smith and his friend of many years and a relationship many years ago, Duncan Littlefair, and we experienced conversation between these two men, conversation that was lively, encountering, engaging, with different personalities, Duncan in his powerful determination to make distinctions that lead to clarity, Huston in marvelous candor, admitting that he always has a hard time choosing between dichotomies and his words "mealy-mouthed Huston." I hope you didn't miss the rarity of that encounter, a conversation between two prophetic figures with decades of experience, knowledge, and wisdom, differing personalities but engaging one another with civility and with candor and with grace and affection, to the end that truth might be glimpsed, not to make a point, not to win an argument, not to establish some absolute claim to the truth, but in the cause of truth in order that understanding might be furthered, conversation sacred, its holy, honest exchange where there is the loss of ego, the dissolving of self and the focus on truth to the end of understanding. My, that was a marvelous and all too rare experience, and we had just heard Huston pointing us to the way to behold the glory, pointing to those places where the layered reality becomes luminous in nature, in art, human relationship, and in the wisdom traditions. The advantage I had over you is that I had also just recently listened to a funeral meditation that Duncan had shared with me in which the transcendent one, the holy, the sacred could be glimpsed if only there are eyes to see it, in a blade of grass or a blossom or a bird or a leaf, or a sunset or a human relationship, and the wonder which is a consequence of the pointers of both of them being exactly the same.

Huston said, "I use the word God." Duncan said, "You don't need to use God, but it's okay if you do. It's a philosophical concept." It is a means of explaining, but the means of explaining is not the important thing. It is the reality, that reality to which it all points. Whatever we call it, whatever language we use, if there has been an emptying of the self, if there has been that vision of something beyond, then that awareness that brings wholeness and holiness to our being, however it is spoken of or expressed as we try to give expression to it, it seems to me that in both cases, the secret is humility. It is not an accident that the word human and humility and humor have a common root, the root of *humus*. You know what humus is - the little residue that worms leave after moving through the soil, it's

vegetative decay; it's that brown-blackish, rather unpleasant stuff. It is no accident that we are named human, for we are of the humus, we are of the soil, we are earthy and therefore, the most appropriate manifestation of the human is humility, and in order to come to an appreciation of the human, humor, because we are rooted in the soil, we are earthly, but we are more than that, as well.

Because we know that we are earthly, we know that we are so rooted, so grounded, we know, as well, that we are more. We know that we are beckoned by the spirit to the experience of spirit, to the life of the spirit. Here we are, these ridiculous animals who know, who experience, who feel, who intuit, who have that sense of transcendence that calls them even while being rooted in the soil. They are anchored solidly. Humus. Human. Humility. And humor, one of the best antidotes to the egoism that shuts us off from wonder, being so filled with self, so self-assertive, so self-securing, so self-aggrandizing that we have no eyes to see nor ears to hear and our life is devoid of wonder and of joy, of grace and of peace.

How do you come to it? Ah, that's where preaching is stumped, for what does one say next? How does one come to it?

Moses came to it, but was given a revelation an epiphany, a manifestation of the sacred and the holy that made his life holy, set apart to a great task because of a great vision that came after the brooding wilderness experience. Someone said in the scriptures it speaks of Moses 120 years old at his death, twenty years in Egypt as a prince learning to be somebody, forty years in the wilderness learning to be nobody, forty years learning what God could do with someone who had learned both lessons. No lack of self-esteem, but a brokenness, an honesty, an awareness, the simplicity of seeing truthfully and then acting in light of the wonder of the vision that comes when we've been emptied of the self. The Bible says that Moses was the meekest man on the face of the earth, but he had a vision, a revelation. Paul, frenzied, passionate, defensive, threatened by this new movement with the name of Jesus, going about to destroy, to obstruct, to hold down, to stamp out, in a moment's revelation, a vision, a light.

How does it happen? I don't know. It's a grace; it's a given. It's not at our disposal, but it happens if we are serious, if we are engaged, if we can come to some honest estimate of ourselves, if we can let go. Moses had to let go of Egypt. Paul had to let go of all that which was sacred and holy to him that structured his whole life. Those security systems that we have built tightly around us - if only for a moment we could let go, if we could see through, there might be a bush that would burn or a light that would shine.

It reminds me of the political campaign - noisy assertion, frenzied activity, absolutist claims, dogmatic assertions, control and manipulation. There is so little honest conversation that seeks not to make a point, but to open the truth more clearly. It is humility, it is that dying to myself, it is that recognition that I

am not God, that life has been given and is gift and if only for a moment I can step outside this frenzied drivenness of contemporary life, I can just pause long enough to look at the face of a child or a flower or a sunset and know that I am embraced in something marvelous and wonderful beyond my imagining - then my life will be bathed in wonder and there will be joy and peace.