**Pax Christi San Antonio**

**Reflections of Its Spirit**

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**Introduction**

From the summer of 2015 to the summer of 2018, the San Antonio chapter of Pax Christi, the international culturally Catholic peace and justice group, began producing a weekly online publication, named *Testimony*. The chapter had had an on-again off-again life for some decades, and the idea was that the publication would help stabilize its existence and make the chapter’s activities more visible than they had been in the past. *Testimony* featured a calendar of local events relevant to peace and justice—lectures, video screenings, demonstrations, and the like. The calendar was followed each week by a brief reflection on the gospel reading scheduled to be proclaimed the following Sunday in Catholic churches. That reflection was followed by a poem. Essays, texts of speeches, book reviews, and news items rounded out each issue. It is expected that the publication of *Testimony* will continue in the coming years.

The present collection of writings presents what, it is hoped, is of more than ephemeral interest in the accumulated three years’ issues of *Testimony*. The purposes of this collection are several. First, it informs those not familiar with Pax Christi San Antonio, what the shared spirit of the group is. Second, it provides material for reflective reading during pauses in the daily rush of activities in our busy world. Third, it is a supply of materials for para-liturgical shared prayer occasions. Fourth, it presents analyses of social issues from a Christian faith perspective. The first section, containing Gospel reflections and poems, is designed with the first three purposes in mind. The second section, containing essays, is designed with the fourth purpose in mind.

The collection is provided with a Table of Contents, an Index of New Testament passages, an Index of Poems, and for the essays an Index of Topics. These do not have page numbers; rather they are numbered, with each liturgical Sunday or listed feast and each essay receiving a number. The reflections on the Sunday gospel readings should be used with the readings themselves at hand, either in a missal or lectionary, or in a New Testament or Bible.

The materials are limited to works created by members of the San Antonio chapter. Though not all of the members of the local chapter contributed to the publication, the various contributions reflect the ethic of the group. Members participated in numerous workshops and demonstrations in San Antonio over the course of the three years, two were particularly involved in the Palestinian rights cause, one worked tirelessly in support of immigrants, another was ever-present in inter-faith projects, and another promoted civic engagement on the part of young adults.

The gospel commentaries are the work of Tony Blasi, a New Testament exegete, moral theologian, and social scientist.[[1]](#footnote-1) The poems included in this compact disk are the work of Tom Keene, catechist, counselor, moral theologian, and, of course, poet.[[2]](#footnote-2) For a variety of reasons, not the least of which is the matter of permissions and copyright, not all of the essays published in *Testimony* over the three years are included here; those that are included are by members of the local chapter.

**Feasts with Unchanging Readings**

**1. All Saints**

**Third Reading** (Mathew 5.1-12)

What is a saint anyway? The point of sainthood is not in an afterlife, since people are declared saints for what they do in their earthly lives. And saints need not be canonized, *i.e.* officially recognized as saints; the Solemnity of All Saints suggests that saintly lives are lived, unrecorded in any official dossiers. The very idea of a feast of “All Saints” admits to some degree of anonymity and even neglect.

To offer one approach to All Saints, the Beatitudes appear as the gospel reading for the solemnity. “Blessed are the poor in spirit….” These poor serve God’s kingdom. They are not poor by default, reluctantly, but with deliberation. Even if they have title to some goods, they live as if not owning them for themselves.

“Blessed are they who mourn….” Mourning over a loss can be an occasion of conversion toward unselfishness. Mourning over others’ losses could be an occasion of compassion.

“Blessed are the meek….” Those who are pushy and consume as much of the earth as possible leave nothing to be inherited. [An old man once told me that environmental issues did not concern him, since he will be dead by the time environmental disasters come.]

“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for justice….” Here, justice is not a velleity or preferential option but a second-nature quest, analogous to hunger and thirst. Many preachers and homilists seem to forget that justice is featured in this core passage of Christianity! Indeed, justice appears a second time in the list of beatitudes where it is noted that those who are persecuted for the sake of justice are blessed.

“Blessed are the merciful, because they will be shown mercy.” This is a way of saying what we pray in the Lord’s Prayer.

And peacemakers are God’s children. Saints’ allegiance is to God as their father and mother; human tribalism is transcended.

*Deeds and Seeds*

All went forth to sow,

one in dread,

certain that within lay

the sickness unto death,

one in despair,

for the moneylenders

were coming to foreclose:

his land lost to eager buyers,

one in hope,

of  reaping enough

to wed his beloved

and together raise children,

one in joy,

at the sheer deed

of planting and growing.

In steadfast time,

all exulted in a harvest

feeding hungry families

with bread

fresh from fiery ovens.

Tom Keene

April 26, 2009

**2. Exultation of the Cross**

**Third Reading** (Johannine Gospel 3:13-17)

“And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, in this way must the son of humanity be lifted up so that everyone who believes in him would have eternal life.”

The passage cites the legend in Numbers 21.5-9, where the people rebelled in the desert against Moses and the Lord. The Lord sent fiery serpents that bit people, many of whom died. After acknowledging their sins, the people asked Moses to pray for them. The Lord told Moses to make a fiery serpent and set it on a pole; and everyone who was bitten could look at the bronze serpent that Moses had made, and live.

With a legalistic, almost commercial religious mentality, some people imagine an angry God demanding that someone die as punishment for sin, and Jesus being substituted for purposes of the punitive execution. That is not what the Fourth Gospel presents. Moses was told that the people had to *see* what was lifted up. Jesus is quoted as saying that those who *believe* in him would have eternal life. It is we humans who must see and believe, not some substitute victim who must satisfy an angry God.

The Feast of the Exultation of the Cross is an opportunity to puzzle over the problem of evil and suffering in the world. It is not because of a mean-spirited God that evil and suffering occur, but rather otherwise un-moved humans must see and be disturbed. After puzzling over the problem, be moved.

*A Finished Work*

It will pass,   
this moment of savor and relish,

having dived into waters,  
brisk and bracing,

having caught the flitting fish,  
pulled it to shore  
for any to see and feel.

Now,   
except for memory,   
to let it go,  
release the work to do its work,  
in the oceans of becoming.

Tom Keene  
February 10, 2016

**3. Epiphany**

**Third Reading** (Matthew 2.1-12)

In the passage that describes what is traditionally termed *Epiphany*, Matthew blends several themes together. There is the infant Jesus, Messiah but very un-Messiah-like. There are the magi, representatives of foreign religion. There is Herod the Great, obsequious to Caesar but obsessed that there not be any alternative to his own petty tyranny. There are the high priests and scribes who know where the Messiah should be but who do not know the Messiah. The scene does not deviate from according centrality to the humble Messiah, but it does give a place of honor to the foreign religions, which point to the Messiah without knowing where to look, until the contours of nature and the potentate’s fears show the way. And the Hebrew scriptures of the Jews are given respect.

Matthew wrote about fifteen years after Mark, using Mark’s gospel and a Greek version of Jesus’ sayings for source material. The narrative about the great star in the east came from a separate tradition that the early Christian bishop of Antioch on the Orontes (today Antakya, in Turkey), who wrote *en route* to his martyrdom in Rome, reproduced in a letter:

Now the virginity of Mary and her giving birth were hidden from the ruler of this age….How, then, were they revealed to the ages? A star shone forth in heaven, brighter than all the stars; its light was indescribable and its strangeness cause amazement. All the rest of the constellations, together with the sun and moon, formed a chorus around the star, yet the star itself far outshone them all, and there was perplexity about the origin of this strange phenomenon which was so unlike the others. Consequently all magic and every kind of spell were dissolved, the ignorance so characteristic of wickedness vanished, and the ancient kingdom was abolished, when God appeared in human form to bring the newness of eternal life…. (*Ignatius to the Ephesians*, Ch. 19, ca. 110 CE)

Superstition and spells are called into question when the appearance of simple humanity comes into view in an infant, and tyranny marked by ignorance trembles when such simple humanity receives the honor due it. God knew what appearance to take on and what kind of Messiah to become to change the perspective, if not, unfortunately, the course, of history.

Matthew made the “perplexity” about the “strange phenomenon” concrete by assigning it to Herod the Great “and all Jerusalem with him.” Rather than the astrological configurations forming a chorus around something new, and “all magic and every kind of spell” being dissolved, Matthew has magi, the charmers who traded in magic and spells, worship Jesus. Bethlehem and the gifts of gold and frankincense served to fulfil the Hebrew scriptures (Micah 5:2 and Isaiah 60:6), with myrrh portending death on the part of innocents and Jesus. What is common to both re-tellings of the legend is God appearing in human form rather than some earthly ruler appearing in God-like form. No wonder a Caesar, claiming divine status, had Ignatius executed.

Legends tend to live on because they resonate with something that is psychologically cogent. Might it be a recondite link between rulers’ extraordinary unscientific claims on the one hand and the magic and spells of charlatans on the other?

*Epiphany*

Did the Eternal Word that Judean night

leap down from bright celestial height

collapsing the light years of distance

into the micro-measurement of presence?

Or, like the shapeless zygote, from which we rose,

did Eternal Form reach itself into toes

and teeth, eyes, ears, fingerprints and face

to drink the mother-milk of our race?

Or, like the reverse of the universe’s primordial explosion

into space and time, did Utter Extension find implosion

in an infant dropped from ancestor’s dreams of destiny

down a maiden’s womb into Bethlehem’s epiphany?

What Patient Force sought to sire in minds the inconceivable,

that our hungry, death-strewn  world now holds the unreachable,

that the fat and strong are cast down from their heights

and the frail and afraid rise in the Wind like kites?

Tom Keene

December 12, 2001

**4. Nativity**

*Vigil Mass* (Matthew 1.1-25)

The third reading for the vigil mass is Chapter One of the Gospel of Matthew, much of it consisting of a genealogy: “Abraham was the father of Isaac, Isaac the father of Jacob….” The *Lectionary* provides the option of skipping the genealogy and taking up the narrative at verse 18: “And the birth of Jesus the Messiah was thus….” But the genealogy is actually quite interesting, going back only as far as Abraham, not all the way to Adam, and following a lineage through David. It concludes, “…Jacob the father of Joseph, the husband of Mary, from whom Jesus, called the Messiah, was born.”

Why did Matthew emphasize the lineage from Abraham to Joseph? Jesus, after all, was “begotten by the holy spirit” (verse 20). One reason would be that Abraham is the father in the Faith, recognized by Jews, Christians, and Muslims. Joseph carries the tradition of the faith up to the time of the Messiah. It is not particularly important who one’s biological ancestors were but whose historical faith one has.

It is well known that Matthew’s gospel is grounded in Jewish tradition, but it clearly broke with any tribalism. Jesus was begotten from outside the tribe, and Matthew belies no interest in the ancestry of Mary. The tradition of Matthew’s nation—and Joseph’s—led outside the nation to a peoplehood that included that nation, for sure, but was not limited to it, not morally imprisoned in a tribe. The implication is that faith should not be used to define a tribe.

*Mass during the Night* (Luke 2.1-14)

Caesar Augustus wanted all the wealth in his “world” registered for “taxation”—not taxing for public purposes as in modern governance but for the private margin that went to the Caesar household. Mr. Octavian Caesar’s governor of the region, Quirinius, took an inventory of the properties of the deposed Herodian operative, Archelaus, in 6-7 CE. Writing about eighty years later, Luke was evidently mistaken about the dates of the birth of Jesus and of the inventory. Luke was therefore also mistaken about the reason Joseph and Mary traveled to Bethlehem. Joseph may well have had a share in some income property near Bethlehem, perhaps occupied by relatives or renters. There was no room where the people lodged (translations that speak of a commercial inn read too much into the Greek). The suggestion is that while Caesar Augustus and his governor are tallying up properties to be taxed, Joseph’s property near Bethlehem was so modest that he and Mary had to spend the night where the animals were kept, and when Jesus was born they had to place him in a feed bin.

Having set the contrast, Luke provides a chorus to comment on the narrative, a host of God’s messengers, saying, “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among people with whom He is pleased.” Somehow, translators have missed the point! With whom is God pleased—Caesars and governors, or commoners so poor that they have to tend their animals in the open country and make do with an animal shelter when travelling?

*Mass at Dawn* (Luke 2.15-20)

The shepherds seek out Mary, Joseph, and the newborn, and after seeing them they returned to their flocks, all the while praising God over what they heard. And Mary tried to understand in her heart what the shepherds had said—that a messenger of God told of a savior being born for them and lying in a feed bin. According to Luke’s narrative, Mary had some sense that something momentous was happening: “…Because He looked upon the lowliness of His handmaid / For behold all generations will bless me from now / Because the Mighty wrought great things for me….” But what did it mean, when they had to stay with the animals and lay the child in a feed bin?

*Mass during the Day* (Johannine Gospel 1.1-18)

This is the well-known Prologue to the Johannine (or Fourth) Gospel. Side notes linking the text to the tradition of John the Baptist have come to be interpolated into the text itself, thereby obscuring what the author was originally saying. Moreover, using the word *beginning* to translate the opening words obscures an allusion to the Greek translation of the opening of Genesis, and while using the term *Word* links the passage to the Logos Theology of the Wisdom books of the Bible, it obscures the fact that the Word is presented as spoken *to* God, thereby making a reference to a conversation within God. The passage anticipates Trinitarian theology in a remarkable way. Hence:

“In Genesis there was speaking, and the speaking was to God, and the speech was God. This was to God in the beginning. Through him (i.e. through the speech—AB) all things came to be, and apart from him nothing came to be that has come about. In him was life, and the life was people’s light. And the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

“…He was in the world, and the world came to be through him, and the world did not know him. He came into his own, and his own people did not accept him. But to those who accepted him he gave the ability to become children of God—to those believing in his name—those who were born not from blood, from the will of flesh, or from the will of a man, but from God. And the speech became flesh and dwelt among us, and we saw his glory, glory as the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth. …For we all received from his fullness one gift in place of another. For the law was given through Moses, grace and truth came about through Jesus, the Messiah.”

In the commercial carnival of seasonal merchandising and the righteous violence that is oblivious of sacred seasons, the world still does not know or accept him.

*Christmas Reflection: 2012*

When truth strikes,

goodness overwhelms,

beauty stuns,

what, we ask, do we do

with these intrusive invisibles?

Consign them to airy abstractions

to drift innocuous in flocks of clouds?

Or embody them boldly in stories,

studded with imaginings,

flowing in music,

incarnating them

in hay-filled mangers,

flights of angels,

one guiding star,

where, as yeast in dough, they spread,

bubble up into brains, down into hearts,

to turn our lives upside-down, inside-out:

a life worth dying for?

Tom Keene

December 6, 2012

**5. Octave of the Nativity**

**Third Reading** (Luke 2:16–21)

The shepherds who had seen and heard heavenly messengers crossed over to Bethlehem and in a hurry sought out Mary, Joseph, and the newborn who was lying in a feed bin. “And seeing, they made known the words that were spoken to them about this child.”

Historical? That would be putting the wrong question. The meaning? The world is in darkness. Even in that darkness heavenly messages can be discovered. Are the shepherds symbolic of Christian hierarchies? In antiquity (and even in remote places today) shepherds were mere boys, not yet heading households; and if the grazing lands of the season were far from their parents’ home they camped out in the open air, like the animals they tended.

And what message did these lowly ones who had no property of their own to distract them—what message did they discover? It comes in the passage before the one read for the Octave of the Nativity: Glory is meant to be God’s, and peace is meant to prevail among humans, and God is pleased with that.

“And Mary treasured all these events, trying to understand them in her heart.” Historical? The point is to make it so.

*Advent reflection*

When truth strikes,

goodness overwhelms,

beauty stuns,

what, we ask, do we do

with these insidious invisibles?

Consign them to airy abstractions

to drift innocuous in flocks of clouds?

Or embody them boldly in stories,

studded with imaginings,

flowing in music,

incarnating them in

hay-filled mangers,

flights of angels,

one guiding star,

where, as yeast in dough, they spread,

bubble up into brains and hearts,

to turn our lives upside-down, inside-out:

a life worth dying for?

Tom Keene

December 9, 2016

**6. Nativity of John the Baptist**

**Third Reading: Vigil** (Luke 1:5-17)

The solemnity has two sets of readings, one set for the Saturday vigil and another for the Sunday masses. The vigil reading has a messenger from God appear to Zechariah in the sanctuary of the Temple in Jerusalem. Zechariah is introduced as a priest whose turn had come up to offer a sacrifice. The messenger says that Zechariah’s wife Elizabeth, heretofore childless, would give birth and that the child, destined to be an ascetic religious leader, taking neither wine nor strong drink, is to be named “John,” “God has shown favor.” The point is that John would have a special call to “turn many of the sons of Israel to the Lord their God.” John did indeed inspire a religious movement which Jesus and some of his disciples had joined, which seems to have included part of the community from which the fourth or Johannine Gospel emerged, and which exists to this day in the Mandaean religion.

**Third Reading: Mass during the Sunday** (Luke 1:57-66, 80)

The gospel reading for the Sunday masses narrates the birth of the child, the dispute between his mother Elizabeth, who wanted to name him John, and the community, who wanted to name him after his father Zechariah. Zechariah, who had been stricken dumb by his experience in the Temple sanctuary, decided the question by writing on a tablet, “John is his name.” From that moment, Zechariah began to speak again.

How did Elizabeth know?

The followers of John the Baptist undoubtedly had many legends about their leader, and Luke evidently incorporated some of them into his story of Jesus and the Christian movement. This reveals a generous spirit in Christianity as Luke knew it, holding that traditions other than the Christian tradition deserved respect and need not be deemed “wrong.” Too bad that later people who identified themselves as Christian would not share that generous spirit.

## *Truths our Poets Confess*

### (at Coffeehouse del Barrio)

In voices, gentle and raging,

they tell us  
of hurt-driven fury at uniformed men  
who kill us without consequence,  
shoot us with impunity,  
and the quiet complicity of uniformed buddies  
conforming to their code of silence,

they tell us  
of warriors returned  
who denounce the lie that they killed for our freedom,  
who declare the Truth of never again ever,

they tell us  
of coordinated, systemic attacks   
on workers to deny us the wages  
lest our families might live with dignity,

they tell us   
of bought and sold politicians  
who cook up laws to keep us from voting,  
having a say in who gets what,

they tell us  
of echoes from our Goddess heritage,  
long before La Virgin and the mother of Jesus,  
when the Great Mother invited us  
to hunt and gather from her   
living things to feed our children’s bellies,

they tell us  
how Truth is like the sun,  
soaking our skins,  
striking our eyes so we see the lies,

how Truth, like the sun, must fall on all,  
lighting our way, warming our souls.

Tom Keene  
June 9, 2016

**7. Pentecost**

**Third Reading** (Vigil: Johannine Gospel 7:37-39)

The principal narrative and imagery for the feast of Pentecost comes from the Pentecost account in the *Acts of the Apostles*, the second reading.

The vigil gospel reading features a traditional Jesus saying: “Now on the major day of the feast” (the Judean Feast of Tabernacles) “Jesus stood up and cried out, saying, ‘If anyone thirsts, come to me, and let anyone who believes in me drink.’ As the scripture said, ‘rivers of living water will flow out from within him.’” The gospel situates this at a time when the Judean authorities were looking for Jesus in order to arrest him, and his neighbors in Galilee were daring him to so much as show up in Jerusalem. He was fully aware of the danger; so he slipped into the city, only to stand up and shout out his appeal to “anyone” and thereby bypass the authorities. The gospel goes on to associate this defiance against fossilized religion with the Holy Spirit, whom later Christians, for whom the gospel was written, accepted as the inspiration of their own defiance against social pressure and governmental persecution.

**Third Reading** (Mass during the day: Johannine Gospel 20:19-23)

The principal narrative and imagery for the feast of Pentecost comes from the Pentecost account in the *Acts of the Apostles*, the second reading.

The gospel for Pentecost Day highlights a different traditional Jesus saying: “As the Father sent me, I also am sending you.” The gospel goes on to associate this saying too with the Holy Spirit. What a troubling thought: “I am sending you”!

Me?

There is undoubtedly the temptation to bottle divinity, not to keep God safe from humans but to keep humans untroubled by the Spirit, to keep us from sensing what we are sent to do. My own experience is that when someone tries to recruit me, it is to draw me into a social bottle, so to speak, a safe environment in which I can say prayers or associate myself with socially approved good works. There is certainly nothing wrong with most prayers and most good works, taken by themselves, but so long as they are inside the institutional bottle, the whole may well be less than the sum of the parts. When Jesus said, “come to me,” he was not risking arrest in order to keep those who thirst from being disturbed. When he said, “As the father sent me,” he was not referring to saying prayers and doing approved-of works within the confines of fossilized religious conventions. Dare we thirst and be sent today?

*Shekinah 33 a.d.*

With a warning howl

she burst upon them:

praying men,

silent women,

playing children,

crashed into the old room

shaking its stone and wood.

She came with

pollen from the desert,

salt from the sea,

pulling their hair,

stirring their blood.

Like wine,

she loosened their tongues

to babble meaning

to the deaf.

People heard.

A fetus of hope

kicked

within the womb of destiny.

Tom Keene

September 30, 1996

**8. Transfiguration**

**Third Reading** (Matthew 17:1-9)

Things are not what they seem to be; they are more. We have a commonplace metaphor for this: the tip of the iceberg. The narrative of the Transfiguration of Jesus, featured in this Sunday’s reading, presents us with a similar message. Peter, James, and James’ brother John hike up a mountain with Jesus—plain old Jesus. And they discover there is much more about him than they imagined. But when they hike back down from the mountain top, Jesus seems to be his plain old self again. He even tells them not to carry on about the glory stuff.

The reading is from the *Gospel of Matthew*, which in turn is based on the narrative in the shorter *Gospel of Mark*. As is often the case in Mark’s gospel, Peter is accorded the role of the non-stellar disciple, slow to get the point that the rabbi Jeshua is making. Here, Moses and Elijah, personages representing the Law and Prophet sections of the Hebrew Bible respectively, appear conversing with their rabbi. Peter would construct three separate booths for them. The apparition, of course, does not isolate the three from one another but has them conversing. A voice, obviously divine, cuts Peter off: “This is my beloved son. Listen to him.” If Moses and Elijah converse with him, who is Peter to separate them? Such is Mark’s narrative, putting in written form Peter’s self-deprecating testimony.

Matthew’s gospel would draw another lesson from the narrative. The writer whom we call Matthew appears to have written from the perspective of a Judean group that had left Judea and settled in what is now Jordan. He was much concerned with the Law and with the tradition of the Hebrew Scriptures in general. He adds to the depiction of the transformed Jesus the detail that “his face shone like the sun.” This may well have been an allusion to apocalyptic imagery found in the *Book of Daniel*, but it is likely more to the point that the *Book of Exodus*, chapter 24, has Moses going up the mountain and coming back down with his face shining. Matthew begins the narrative with a reference to six days, as does *Exodus*. Matthew has a radiant cloud overshadowing the disciples as Peter was speaking, and *Exodus*, chapter 40 refers to the cloud of the divine presence overshadowing the tabernacle so that Moses could not enter.

In Matthew’s gospel, the voice from heaven adds, “by whom I am pleased,” to what Mark’s gospel has. It is because of passages such as this that Christians speak of a new, or renewed, covenant.

The Law described and prescribed a just world, as best as a very ancient people could conceive of one. The prophets urged upon the people and especially their rulers the just society that the wealthy and powerful had failed to maintain. Jesus was engaging in a conversation with that world, using the discourse of that kind of society. Who was Peter, and who are we, to place such imperatives in mummified form inside tabernacles?

*We See At Last*

(Peter muses: Luke 9: 28-43)

On ascending,

We sit in a circle.

We see ourselves brilliant,

a gazing into sun without going blind.

Elijah, Moses, Jesus, John, James, me.

Hard to tell us apart,

Blurring, bleeding into one corona,

where notions of each other

make sense no more.

On descending,

we find the man,

screaming blather,

flailing futility,

begging to burst his prison.

Our common gut

seized by a loathing,

a panic to flee, to cast out.

Then, as in a sudden dawn,

he’s struck with calm.

We see at last,

from heady highs

to feet-in-the-dirt hurt,

the Healing Wholeness.

**Year A**

**9. First Sunday of Advent (A)**

**Third Reading** (Mathew 24: 37–44)

“You do not know what day your Lord is coming.” Advent season brings us the strange juxtaposition of end-times readings and anticipation of the Nativity of Jesus. The apocalyptic rhetoric concerning the end-time does not really have much appeal to us; the way it uses troubling imaginings to bring to mind what cannot be seen tries our patience. The expectation of the Nativity, technically not appropriate until a few more weeks, with its warmth-within-the-winter imagery that characterizes the Christmas season, plays better in the psyche.

But there is a truth about the apocalyptic: “Then two will be in the field; one will be taken and one left; two grinding in the mill, one taken and one left.” In my own experience, one cousin rejoiced in her athleticism and sociality, characteristic of young adults, until settling comfortably into middle age; another died from a stray bullet in a pizza parlor, a newly enlisted soldier on leave. And this is not to mention classmates, friends, colleagues, and students, many of whom died young.

In the theology and philosophy classes I attended as a youth, the contingency of “being” was a matter of analysis. The idea was that “being” had a history, with what is now being caused by something beforehand, and the latter caused by something before that. The point of the argument was that the concatenate causes had to lead back to a first cause. Though a theist, I never found the argument particularly persuasive—and a few learned educators held that against me. For what it is worth, I am impressed by the doubt inherent in faith and not impressed by the certitude some promote in lieu of faith. In any event, at a more mature age I appreciate the contingency that the old scholastic argument highlights, if not its certitude about its conclusion. People populate that contingency; how dare I take any one of them for granted?

*A Toast*

To the One in whom we are one,  
to the One coming with us  
in our journey   
  to being other,  
  (Blessed be otherness.)  
  to being different,  
  (Blessed be difference.)  
  to being unique.  
  (Blessed be the unique.)  
Blessed be us,  
as we return with the One  
back to the One.

Tom Keene  
February 10, 2005

**10. Second Sunday of Advent (A)**

**Third Reading** (Matthew 3:1-12)

Legend tells us that Jesus was from Nazareth, a town in Galilee, and that he followed John the Baptizer, whom Matthew tells us was in Judea. Far as we are from the Middle East and from the era of the Roman Empire, the difference between Galilee and Judea might be lost on us. But Judeans were not quite sure Galilean religious tradition was a true one, and Galileans were suspicious of the “official” interpretations of the Law that issued from Judean elites in Jerusalem. Jesus was born in Judea, came of age in Galilee, and came to be fascinated with the Judean prophet John the Baptizer. He would himself have two distinct followings—Galilean and Judean. The difference would be an explanation of two (of the four) canonical gospels—that of Matthew and the fourth or Johannine gospel.

Even in the Galilean gospel, the Judean prophet John the Baptizer is a captivating figure. He lived in the wilderness and condemned the clergy as a brood of poisonous snakes. He was even irresponsible, refusing to be a leader himself but insisted instead that someone else would come, worthier than he.

The Baptizer was not the only prophet in history. Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a theologian who condemned the religion of his day, which accommodated the Nazi regime. Mario Savio was a student leader who condemned the University of California administration for blocking students from collecting donations for the civil rights organization SNCC. The Baptizer and Bonhoeffer were decapitated; Savio was smeared, surveilled, and reported on in hundreds of pages of FBI surveillance notes. The Baptizer made it into the Bible; Bonheoffer, albeit posthumously, into the lists of best-selling authors, Savio into the official enemies files. The Baptizer is safely contained now in Advent readings. Bonhoeffer is held a bay as a troublesome read. And Savio—like most Catholics he did not engage in sufficient God-talk to be either contained safely or listed in theology syllabi.

## *Industries and Corporations*

When wanted we peace,   
they prepared us for war.  
When we wanted clean air,   
they kept on polluting.  
When we wanted health care free and for all,   
they said wait.  
When we wanted public transportation,  
they urged more cars and freeways.  
When we wanted the ingredients   
of factory-made-food listed on labels,  
they resisted.  
When we wanted lead out of gasoline   
so kids could breathe free of brain damage,  
they dragged their feet.

When will we want to start organizing  
for control of the controllers  
and power to we the people?

Tom Keene  
December 21, 2008

**11. Third Sunday of Advent (A)**

**Third Reading** (Matthew 11: 2-11)

“Are you the one coming, or should we expect someone else?” John the Baptizer was in prison, not yet decapitated at the whim of someone in the Herodian household. Jesus had been a disciple of this prisoner, and John sent two other disciples to ask whether someone more impressive than John himself would be appearing. It must have been a depressing errand for the Baptizer’s two other disciples.

“Going, report to John what you hear and see: Blind people see again….” Do they? How much insight do people seem to have? Some weeks back I found myself picketing a “Christian” church that was holding a celebration in honor of the Israeli state, a state known for the theft of people’s lands, analogous to the actions of such regimes as those of Hitler and Putin. Theft is still contrary to Christian teaching, isn’t it? Why does a Christian church need to be reminded of that?

The crippled walk and lepers are cleansed. Do they? Are they? It depends on their insurance, and that has become, gratuitously, a political football.

And deaf people hear. Maybe, but do they listen?

And “the dead are raised and the poor are given the good news.” The martyrs must be agitated indeed, at the idolatry of gold and authority that is disseminated in so many sermons and televised church services. Neither John the Baptizer nor Jesus had much patience with the religion of their day. Maybe it is too much to expect better in our own. The real problem in the days of John and Jesus was that there were blind people, incapacitated people, people considered impure, unheard and unhearing people. Go tell John that Jesus had to work miracles!

So, “Who did you go out into the wilderness to see?” What do you seek?

*The Little Soul*

(With thanks to Neale Donald Walch)

When I was a little soul,

born,

not out of the One

but in to the One,

into sudden bliss,

utter completion,

some worm/word of wonder

gnawed at my innards:

More. I want more.

“There is a way,”

said the One that I was,

“become with me a co-creator.”

“From this Oneness

plunge into otherness,

into illusions of duality:

            male and female,

            hurts and healings,

            ecstasy and despair,

            wins and losses.

“Make of your separate self

a life of gifts to others in their separations,

that out of seeming otherness,

out of seeming chaos

we celebrate our inner secret:

            That All Is One.”

Yet to know what my choice would bring,

I dared to say, “Yes!”

Tom Keene

November 25, 2016

**12. Fourth Sunday of Advent (A)**

**Third Reading** (Matthew 1:18–24)

Of the four evangelists, Matthew is distinctive for being a stickler for the Law—properly interpreted, of course. But Matthew states in plain terms that Jesus was begotten out of wedlock, and he says this was happening through divine intervention. The Abrahamic and David lineage had been traced earlier in Matthew’s narrative, only to have it lead up to Joseph, who did not really beget the savior. That Jesus would have a family environment at all would be an outcome of an act of mercy on the part of Joseph.

How many people are with us, against the rules? Fatherless children at a certain age crave attention—Emmanuel, God with us! Female spirits in male anatomies and male spirits in female anatomies—God with us! Persons with same sex attraction—God with us! Pan handlers where the public does not want them and international migrants whom officials have not lined up and processed—God with us! Half a century ago it was young men who did not show up for military induction; before that, it was interracially married couples—all God with us! How many people are actually rule-perfect anyway?

It seems that there is a powerful flaw in western civilization. Our religiosity is an ethical one; it makes morality an aspect of faith. No doubt, that is an achievement. However, we have confused morality with rules and the ethical with the customary. Miraculously, the early disciples of Jesus knew this would happen; indeed, they saw it happening in their own time. So they let it go on record that salvation came about through rule-breaking.

So should we set about breaking rules? Matthew was a stickler for the Law, and that is a paradox. What is wisdom for anyway?

*Nativity Scene*

It haunts us still,

that long ago

oft told story.

A woman, a man,

far from home,

their villages, their families.

Just arrived in a town

full of strangers.

A birth at the edge of happening.

The woman’s womb-waters already flushed,

her rhythmic pangs quicken,

no time to find a midwife.

Between her deep gasps,

the woman whispers:

Help us.

Through the man

thunderous thoughts

race as lightning:

:

*This is no work for men.*

*Women’s blood forbidden.*

*A forever shame to touch.*

*Holy Mother Eve,*

*who might midwife her, but Adam?*

*Where was the taboo then?*

The woman tells him what to do.

Tells him what she learned

helping other mothers.

The man kneels.

He waits between her thighs,

at last receives the baby.

He washes its warm body,

the woman, himself.

Water from the animals’ trough.

The woman

takes from him the baby,

puts it to her breast.

Soon they sleep.

The man steps from the shelter

into crisp night air.

He stands under stars to wonder.

Tom Keene

January 3, 2012

**13. Feast of the Holy Family (A)**

**Third Reading** (Matthew 2:13-15, 19-23)

The reading takes up Matthew’s nativity narrative at the point where the magi had just left Bethlehem. Herod the Great intends to kill the infant that was said to be a king. Joseph realizes this in a dream and takes the child to Egypt. The selected reading skips Herod’s massacre of children in Bethlehem, and resumes where Joseph realizes, again in a dream, that after the death of Herod the Great they can return with the child to Judea. However, Joseph believes that the new Herodian king, Archelaus, is also a threat; so he brings his family all the way to Nazareth in Galilee, outside the territory of Archelaus. Throughout the narrative, Matthew cites passages from the Hebrew Bible to make a point about biblical predictions being fulfilled.

We do not know how much of this is history; none of it appears in the other canonical gospels. It must have been based at least on legends; otherwise Matthew’s readers and other early Christians would have rejected it wholesale. It would not have been lost on ancient readers that the household of Jesus, Joseph, and Mary was out of sorts with the puppet regime under the Empire, and it is similarly not lost on modern readers that Jesus came from a refugee family. Joseph was said to be a *tektōn*, more accurately translated as “builder” than “carpenter”; today we might call such a person a “contractor.” The Herodian rulers pursued ambitious building programs and were likely patrons of a builder such as Joseph; Joseph did not seem to want their business. We know little else about Joseph, only that he was a just man.

*Holy Innocents*

*From deep within conscience comes*

*a voice of the terrorists.*

You call us cowards?

Compared to whom,

B-52 crews saturating villages?

When you stopped food and medicine,

we watched as half a million Iraqi kids died.

We don't hate you for that.

We admire power.

So when we turn passenger planes

into stealth bombers

we deserve your respect.

But now, at least, we have your attention.

Let's make a friendly bet:

who can kill the most innocents per killer?

Consider the odds.

With just hundreds we kill thousands.

It takes millions of you to kill our hundreds.

Millions? Yes, add it up.

Your paid killers,

(oh, excuse us, your military)

plus your tax paying citizens,

complicit killers in the hundreds of millions.

Complicit? Of course.

You are a democracy, aren't you?

When the contest ends,

when we both run out of innocents,

we can shake hands and

acknowledge one another,

brothers in killings,

devotees of Mars,

worshiping at our common altar.

Tom Keene

September 16, 2001

**14. Baptism of the Lord (A)**

**Third Reading** (Matthew 3:13-17)

Jesus comes from Galilee to John at the Jordan to be baptized by him. John protests that it should be the other way around but relents after Jesus says, “Let it be for now, for it is fitting for us to fulfill all justice this way” All justice? Every justice? It can be translated either way, but what does it mean?

Matthew had begun the narrative with John the Baptizer preaching conversion in preparation for a kingdom of heaven. The Pharisees and Sadducees approach him, but he turns them away, calling them a brood of vipers. The Baptizer would then turn Jesus away too, but on account of a quite different sentiment. However Jesus would have the just judgment completed with a decision in his favor. A line referring to casting the chaff into an unquenchable fire and gathering the wheat into the granary places the proceeding into a Last Judgment framework; the casting of the chaff would be incomplete without the gathering of the wheat. Jesus did not want to appear to be turned away in the way the religious elite were turned away.

When baptized, Jesus had a religious experience. The “heavens opened up to him and he saw the spirit of God descending like a dove.” And he heard a voice saying, “This is my beloved son, by whom I am pleased.” Fully human, Jesus had to come to a realization of his calling.

*Celebrating Frustration*

How do we  
celebrate the universal   
in the particular?

the forever, world without end  
in this here, in this now?

the good in the conflicted?  
truth in illusion?

beauty in seeds of becoming?  
unity in duality?

the All-That-Is  
in mere words?

Tom Keene  
February 25, 2005

**15. First Sunday of Lent (A)**

**Third Reading** (Matthew 4:1-11)

“If you are the son of God, speak so that these stones may become bread loaves.” Jesus was not interested in what would be convenient magic: “Not by bread alone shall a human live, but by every utterance coming through the mouth of God.” *Every* utterance—the problem is not that Jesus could be hungry but that his impact would be incomplete.

The tempter led Jesus to the pinnacle of the Temple, the top of a religious edifice. “Throw yourself down, for it is written, ‘He has instructed his messengers about you….They shall carry you on their hands, lest you dash your foot against a stone.’” How often people who present themselves as religious select proof texts from scripture, out of context, in order to demand faith in unlikely claims. To some people, faith must be placed in something unlikely and difficult for reason to accept, before they accept that faith as genuine. Again Jesus is not interested; he would not have people testing the divine.

Then the tempter points to kingdoms and their glory: “All these I will give you if, falling down, you worship me.” Again Jesus is not interested. Ultimate commitment is to God alone.

This narrative is often interpreted in terms of Jesus rejecting material comfort, false religion, and devotion to worldly power. It is interesting, however, to consider what Jesus accepts: those aspects of revelation that are not about oneself, those aspects of religion that are not about proving oneself religious, and ultimate commitment. The narrative is about purifying religion.

*Knowing and Doing* *in the Time of Trump*

Lord, make us instruments of your peace.

Help us to know that our highest wisdom

is to know we do not know.

That out of this unknowing we trust your knowing

and out of that

do your knowing

so that out of the dark depths of our unknowing,

            of friend verses foe,

            supporters verses resisters,

            walls verses bridges

hope verses despair,

            love verses hate,

we do your knowing

so even in our

adversarial adversity we come to know

our adversaries as you know them,

so in that and out of that we come

to do the justice that does your peace.

Tom Keene

February 11, 2017

**16. Second Sunday of Lent (A)**

**Third Reading** (Matthew 17:1-9)

Mathew takes over the Transfiguration narrative from Mark’s gospel. Mark had alluded to Moses ascending the mountain to meet the Lord: “And six days later Jesus, taking Peter, James, and John with him, brought them to a high mountain by themselves” (Mark 9:2). “Then Moses went up on the mountain… (Exodus 24:15). Matthew adds a description of Jesus’ transformed appearance that specifically cites the episode of God giving the terms of the Covenant to Moses: “…and his face shone like the sun…” (Matthew 17:2); “when Moses came down from the mountain, Moses did not know that the skin of his face shone because he had been talking with God” (Exodus 34:29). Matthew, who addressed his gospel to a Jewish Christian community, was clearly indicating that the covenant was being changed as Jesus was being changed. And what was the change? “And Jesus came forth and touching them said, ‘Arise and fear not.’ And lifting up their eyes, they saw no one but Jesus himself….”

The new covenant is not reserved to some glorious theophany far removed from mere mortals. For sure, the glory and reserve had—and still have—a significance, but Jesus chose to touch his followers in an ordinary way. Yes, the glorious Resurrection was to come, and the truth that was to be communicated would be incomplete without the glorious Resurrection. However, the communication would be equally incomplete without the ordinary earthly touch.

Not too many years ago linguists debated the language of the liturgy. “The Lord be with you”; “And also with you” *versus* “and with your spirit.” The former response is a reciprocation of the call for God to be among those gathered in His name; it was a call for God to be working in the ministry of the celebrant. The latter response is—well, I must admit that I never have comprehended what it is supposed to communicate, and perhaps the obscurity is the point, not unlike the cloud in the Transfiguration narrative.

Homilies, which come after the gospel reading, need to touch the followers of Jesus in an ordinary earthly way. Homiletical Docetism, a tendency to reserve the significance of the gospel to a distant realm of spirits and phantoms, can be a genuine problem. The Messiah of Christianity was a human addressing the anxieties of a human world; he was not a phantom messiah.

*Child of Empires*

She knew and felt herself a child of empire:

Egypt, Babylonia, Persia, Greece,

China, Rome, Aztecs, Incas, Spain,

France, Britain, Russia and now us,

all with armies and navies, soldiers and sailors,

herded by kings and queens, Caesars and Czars,

corporate powers, frantic for land to own,

control of women and men,

the ones who work land and factories,

for from that is squeezed power and wealth for us few

and servitude for the rest:

empire’s quintessence.

She knew and felt herself a child of hope:

in her clarity that, as with all parasites, empires die,

she sensed her inner spark ready to flame,

how the dignity of all will make us a working kindred,

knowing power, not over, but with others

to make ourselves, our world, worthy of trust.

Tom Keene

October 5, 2017

**17. Third Sunday of Lent (A)**

**Third Reading** (Johannine Gospel 4:5-42)

The Lenten readings include some highly symbolic passages from the Johannine Gospel, one of which is the narrative of “the woman at the well.” Since ancient times, people have understood the Johannine Gospel to have different levels of meaning and as being more “spiritual” than the others. So while the Samaritan woman at the well has been taken to be a type for repentance and conversion, there is also much else that is to be found in the narrative.

“Give me some to drink.” The water is from Jacob’s well, a source that was there from the beginning for both Samarians and Jews. Despite their common source, however, Samaritans and Jews would not even discuss giving one another refreshment from that common source. Today one might speak of Palestinians and Israelis, or of “illegals” and people who think of themselves as un-hyphenated Americans.

“If you recognized the gift of God and who it is saying to you, ‘Give me some to drink….’” This is obviously not a historical quotation; Jesus was not so crude a person as to dwell upon his own importance. Rather this is the way the Johannine Gospel presents the insight also found in Chapter 25 of the gospel of Matthew—that a work of mercy done for the least of those who inhabit the world with us is done for Jesus the Messiah himself. Whatever we do to the Palestinian or the Israeli, to the “illegal,” to the Muslim, or whomever—we are doing it to Jesus the Messiah. To ban the “undocumented” is tantamount to prohibiting the sacrament of the Real Presence!

“Give me some to drink” is the opportunity to exchange ordinary water for living water. “‘Everyone who drinks from this water will thirst again, but whoever should drink from the water that I will give will never thirst again…’” There is a lasting satisfaction in refreshing the alien.

“‘Sir, I see that you are a prophet. Our fathers worshiped on this mountain; and you Judean people say the place where it is necessary to worship is in Jerusalem.’” The day will yet come when the worship will be “neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem.” For the Samarians to insist on their mountain betrays a lack of understanding. By implication, even though the Messiah is linked to Jerusalem, to insist on that mountain represents a comparable lack of understanding. “God is a spirit,” and it is necessary for those worshiping God to do so in spirit and truth.

*Dualities*

Dawn’s coming light,  
dusk’s emerging dark.

Gnaw of hunger,  
bliss of kitchen aromas.

Nights of fear,  
days of courage.

Depths of loneliness,  
heights of intimacy.

Within,  
somewhere, somehow,  
we live them out,  
forging one story:

   Starting innocent,  
   ending tested.

Tom Keene

**18. Fourth Sunday of Lent (A)**

**Third Reading** (Johannine Gospel 9:1-41)

“Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he would be born blind?” The temptation is always to blame the victim. Jesus would have none of that: “Neither did he nor his parents sin, but it was to make the works of God be manifest in him.”

In the symbolism of the Johannine Gospel, blindness is not simply physical visual impairment but an inability or, more tellingly, an unwillingness to share in the Christian community’s spiritual insights. Thus often when Jesus speaks, his disciples understand him but his critics do not. Those who come around to understanding him are, in a sense, created anew:

But “a mist went up from the earth and watered the whole face of the ground—then the Lord God formed a man of dust from the ground….”

Jesus “…spat on the ground, made clay from the spittle, smeared his clay onto the eyes….”

“Smeared” could also be translated as “anointed,” and thus calls to mind conversion and baptism.

A series of denials follows the resultant cure. First the formerly blind man’s neighbors deny that it is the same old beggar who was made to see. Today the phrase “fake news” would be heard. Then the Pharisees deny that a prophet of God had done the deed, since he made clay and spread it on the man’s eyes on the Sabbath. The Pharisees let their religiosity get in the way. Then the Judean authorities denied that the man had been blind to begin with, but when presented with evidence they resorted to dismissing him as someone born in sin; nothing good could come from unapproved of folk!

After interviewing the formerly blind man, Jesus, referring to himself as the one whom the man was seeing, quips, “I came in judgment against this world, so that those not seeing may believe and those seeing may become blind.” Huh? Those not seeing in the in-group Christian way may believe nevertheless—one thinks of Jews and Muslims, who believe in the same God as the Christians do, but not seeing in the in-group Christian way. And those who are so sure they see are blinded by their certitude.

*Parable*

Deeds of hope for justice

are scatterings of seeds.

Not all will survive – those that do multiply.

Of the harvest we know not when.

Its coming we know

surely as life begets life.

Tom Keene

March 2017

**19. Fifth Sunday of Lent (A)**

**Third Reading** (Johannine Gospel 11:1-45)

In this part of the Catholic liturgical calendar, the assigned Sunday readings are lengthy. The meanings that the symbolism in the readings call to mind are often self-evident and require no explanation. The selection for the Fifth Sunday of Lent is a case in point. It features Martha, industriously preparing the household for the mourning rituals on the occasion of the death of Lazarus as well as preparing the household for the visit of Jesus, her sister Mary whose emotion and weeping lead Jesus to weep as well, and Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead. Repetitions and breaks in the story suggest that three early Christian legends had been edited together to form the narrative as we now have it. Here, I will leave the images that the legends present to speak for themselves.

The introduction to this part of the Johannine Gospel is an interesting one. The two sisters in Bethany, a Judean village, send word to Jesus, who had taken refugee “beyond the Jordan,” in the wilderness beyond the place that John the Baptist used to conduct his ministry: “Sir, the one whom you love is ailing.” Jesus procrastinates two days; the Judean authorities posed a real threat to him. Finally, he makes his decision: “Let us go back to Judea.”

“Rabbi, the Judeans are seeking to stone you now, and you are going back there?”

“Are there not twelve hours of daylight? If people walk in the day, they will not stumble because they see the light of the world. But if people walk in the night, they stumble because the light is not in it.” He had decided not to hide in the “darkness.”

Light is a symbol known throughout the world for mental insight and knowledge in general. Darkness is a similar symbol for ignorance, including willful ignorance. It is often “safe” to play dumb, to ignore truths that anger powerful authorities. But the narrative has Jesus decide that he will go about in the daylight, and if there are people who want to do him harm he would let them do so and reveal themselves for what they are—reveal themselves to others and perhaps even to themselves.

Why are evil deeds evident in the world? Sometimes it is because people stop hiding themselves and thereby stop hiding the unseen evil that propels such deeds.

*Agni*

(The Hindu god of fire)

Zeus raged in lightning tantrums.

Vulcan vomited lava and flame.

Satan smiled and conjured nightmares.

For Prometheus had stolen their fires

and given it gratis

            to women for cooking,

            to children for warmth,

            and men for melting the metals of earth,

            for Cain's and Abel's offerings,

            for Moses to find in the desert,

            for Elijah's swooping chariot,

            for the Spirit's eruption at Pentecost,

            for Hiroshima's victims and victors.

"They are becoming like gods," cried the gods,

"and nothing, not even us, can be as we were."

In drunken joy, the people grieved,

"We are gods becoming. Who can save us now?"

Fire,

in its smoldering thoughts,

ignited a hymn to itself

and crackled.

Tom Keene

March 24, 1990

**20. Palm Sunday (A)**

**Gospel Readings** (Matthew 21:1-11, Matthew 26:14-66)

There are two gospel readings on Palm Sunday. The first one precedes a procession with palms at the beginning of the service. The second is a lengthy one within the service itself. Both have the people physically enact what the readings narrate. Matthew 21.1-14 narrates Jesus entering Jerusalem amidst a celebratory welcome, with the populace waving palm branches. (The palm branches indicated an opening to symbolic goods from afar, since palm trees did not grow in mountain cities such as Jerusalem.) The congregation stands outside the church for the reading and then, palm branches in hand, processes into the church. Matthew 26:14-66 is a lengthy narrative of the arrest, trial, and execution of Jesus, which calls to mind all that contrasts what is celebrated in the narrative of the parade with palm branches. Even when the congregation is advised to sit through the reading, rather than stand as usual, the effect required to focus for the duration can be fatiguing. The fatigue calls to mind the suffering of the Passion, as well as the many passions to be found in the world.

There are many provocative scenes in these readings, each one deserving of a meditation. I want to focus here on the very first one, which rarely receives attention: “Jesus sent two disciples, telling them, ‘Go into the village which is opposite you, and straightway you will find a she-donkey tied up and a colt with her; loosening them, bring them to me.’” After the two obtain the animals, “the disciples led the donkey and colt, and placed garments on them, and he sat on top of the garments.” In his usual manner, Matthew cites a passage from the Hebrew scriptures being fulfilled: “Say to the daughter of Sion, Behold your king is coming to you, Meek and seated on a donkey, And upon a colt, the foal of a draft animal” (see Zechariah 9:9).

Why this elaborate setup? First, it is in all likelihood historical. Jesus had two networks of followers, one in Galilee and one in Jerusalem. The narrative presented in Matthew is from the perspective of the Galilean network, in which Peter was a key figure. The lending of the animals and, later, the making available of a venue for the festival meal were the work of the, largely underground, Jerusalem network.

Second, there is some symbolic importance in the presence of a she-donkey and a colt in the scene, which explains why Mathew kept the historical detail in the written tradition. It may be lost on us, people as we are of the automobile world, but a she donkey separated from her colt would become wild and uncontrollable. Similarly, a colt taken away from its mother would immediately become anxious and highly agitated. Keeping them together kept the peace. Which animal did Jesus ride? The adult donkey would be the likely selection for most of the parade, but a few token steps on the colt to fulfil the Zechariah passage would have brought on a chorus of cheers.

If Jesus kept two lowly donkeys at peace by keeping them together rather than separate them, would he not be also disposed to keep families together rather than cause them anxiety? We live in a time in which deportations of “illegal” parents threaten to break up families, a time in which children who are citizens by birth are separated from their parents after the parents are arrested for living where they wish. And this is done in the name of law! Is there anything more likely to undermine law then exercising law in contravention to nature—nature as divinely created?

*Taking the Dare: On Engaging the Trump Mentality*

He dares us, this rabbi of old, of ever new.

“Love your enemies. Pray for those who oppress you.”

From the mire of anger, he ever-nagging urges for vengeance,

We rise to inhale the fresh air of freedom.

We feel the force where, “turn the other cheek,”

Becomes a Judaic Judo,

Letting the absolute impotence of those who hate

Trip them up.

We tap into our revolutionary roots

At the wellspring waters in us all,

These ever burning fires biding their time to clarify

This befuddlement of who we are and what we can do.

Tom Keene

February 25, 2017

**21. Easter Sunday (A)**

**Third Reading**

(Three alternatives: Johannine Gospel 20:1-9; Matthew 28:1-10; Luke 24:13-35)

*John 20:1-9*

“We do not know where they put him.” Different gospels tell the story from their unique perspectives. The *Johannine Gospel* adds a recollection by the Beloved Disciple, a youngster at the time of the event, running ahead of Peter; the two were reacting to Mary Magdalene’s description of the body of Jesus being gone. The non-canonical *Gospel of Peter* tells the story from the perspective of Mary Magdalene: Fearing the Judean authorities, she and some other women had gone to the tomb in the dark of the early morning to mourn and prepare the body in the customary manner. On the way they wondered who could move the great stone at the entrance of the tomb. The implication to be drawn from the problem of the stone is that a prankster in the dead of the night could not be expected to have moved it and absconded with the corpse.

God, it turns out, is the ultimate prankster, leaving humans to wonder where Jesus could be contained. People firmly convinced of the adequacy of everyday human knowledge doubt the reports of the empty tomb, but perhaps doubt should be directed instead to the adequacy of any effort to contain Jesus. Joseph of Arimathea undoubtedly meant well, as would later devotees with their ornate tabernacles.

*Matthew 28:1-10*

“And behold a great earthquake occurred, for a messenger of the Lord, coming down from heaven and approaching, was rolling away the stone; and he sat over it. And his appearance was like lightning and his clothing white as snow.” Matthew customarily uses angels to provide theological context for events in the life of Jesus; this time the angelic messenger takes on some features of a theophany. Nevertheless Matthew was willing to cite natural events as instruments through which God works—an earthquake moved the stone that had been placed over the entrance of the tomb. The theophany-like event, which so frightened the guards that they fell to the ground and froze, accompanied the messenger, not the body of the Lord. Then the women came, witnesses to the aftermath, and they leave to inform the disciples. On their way they encounter Jesus, who gives them the message to meet him in Galilee.

There is a narrative of events here—first one thing happens, then another, and then still another…. More profound is a narrative of quest: If you do not find the Lord in one place, go on to another. Do not cease, even when gendarmes and death seem to be in the way.

*Luke 24:13-35* (meant for Sunday evening services)

On the way to Emmaus: “…some women among us astounded us. Being at the tomb early in the morning, and not finding his body, they came speaking also about seeing a vision of messengers who said he was alive.” Hope does not end but begins with an Easter experience. It may lack direction, even as our footsteps lead to a definite but unimportant destination; but then hope provides its own direction when everyday plans can be put on hold. Hope lives when the one they tried to kill is nevertheless alive.

Resorts to power are frequently intended to hide facts, stifle initiatives, dampen prospects, kill the spirit. The Easter experience, in contrast, is the ultimate “nevertheless” in the face of resorts to power. In its aftermath the conversation is to go on, until those who have entered into it want to continue into the evening breaking of bread.

*How the Poet Lives in Us*

The girl finds herself playing with words and letters,

how things new can be made out of old,

how STOP spelled backwards is pots,

how guns spelled backwards is snug.

So she makes herself a poem:

            I’d rather be snug than shoot guns

            I’d rather bang pots than stop.

Order out of disorder, meaning where meaning was not.

Tom Keene

July 27, 2016

**22. Second Sunday of Easter (A)**

**Third Reading** (Johannine Gospel 20:19-31)

“Doubting Thomas!” I always, even in childhood, recoiled from sermons about Doubting Thomas; they invariably criticized him for a lack of faith. Perhaps it was a personality flaw that, even as a child, I thought skepticism was a sign of honesty rather than a tendency that I should suppress. Later in life I discovered that the Johannine Gospel, where we meet “Doubting Thomas,” approves of reliance on evidence. “And he who watched has given witness, and his testimony is true, and he knows what he is saying is true, so that you too may believe” (John 19:35).

A recent dramatic portrayal of the life and spirit of Dorothy Day (a saint who did not want to be regarded a saint lest she be turned into a lifeless pillar like Lot’s wife) emphasized her amazement that the Catholic Church, to which she had converted, offered so little evidence of the kind of moral life its teachings demanded. The portrayal highlighted the social teachings of the Church, especially Jesus’ rejection of violence and war. Is there not much to be said for demanding evidence of such morality being really present in the life of the Church?

Doubting Thomas was particularly intent upon seeing Jesus’ wounds: the nail marks and the puncture in the side. In fact, the Johannine Gospel’s account of Thomas’ demand is the only evidence we have that the Romans used nails in the crucifixion of Jesus, probably to keep him and the other two convicts who shared the crossbeam from trying to slide their arms closer together for better leverage. The demand to see the wounds leads us to another implication of seeing evidence: It is incumbent on us, as Christians, to see and be moved by the damage done to those who share the world with us. It is not the role of the Christian to deny, numb ourselves, or engage in cover-ups.

*Presence*

In your presence nothing is wasted.  
Wherever my thoughts go, you are there.  
Wherever my gut feelings are, you are there.  
Wherever lingers my absent mind, you are there.

Waiting,  
so together we can make new  
a single awareness that startles,  
one insight bringing us one inch closer.

Then, together, let be our becoming.

Tom Keene

June 10, 2016

**23. Third Sunday of Easter (A)**

**Third Reading** (Luke 24:13-35)

“Are you the only foreigner in Jerusalem not also knowing what happened there in these days?” So asks Cleopas of the unrecognized Jesus on the way to Emmaus. *Cleopas* was the commonly used nickname for *Cleopatros*, a foreign name to any native Judean. Cleopas and his companion did not yet recognize Jesus in the Galilean they met on the road, also a foreigner. The two expected the typical foreigner to see what the natives to Judea did not see: How the legitimate Judean officials handed over an innocent prophet to a death by crucifixion.

We have a cliché for what Cleopas understood: the gold fish not knowing that it is in water. Local routines and expectations serve as blinders sometimes, blocking any recognition of what is most salient in a life situation. Yes, the early American Jesuit superiors could agree that slavery was technically an evil, but why were the church bureaucrats in Rome insisting that they be the only plantation operators in Maryland to free their slaves? Yes, technically the church teaches that workers are entitled to a living wage but why should the clergy be the ones to say so to Catholic and other Christian business owners? Yes, the principle of subsidiarity, which would leave families free to decide where they are to live and work, is technically a Catholic Christian doctrine, but why expect bible-believing Christians to welcome foreigners and refugees? The blindness or insensitivity in question might be termed the *Cleopas phenomenon*.

“Stay with us for it is evening and the day has already receded.” And he went in and stayed with them. And it happened while he reclined to eat with them taking the bread, he blessed it, and breaking it he gave it to them. And their eyes were opened….” The time of worship is the time to clear away the mental syndromes that keep us from being insufficiently foreign to our accustomed worlds.

*Easter Monday Meditation*

News item, San Antonio, Texas, April 8, 1985

A hundred cheering Sanctuary supporters at the Greyhound bus station welcomed convicted refugee worker Jack Elder as he arrived to begin a 150-day sentence at a half-way house. The well-wishers walked Elder to nearby St. Mary's Catholic Church, where pastor Bill Davis led a thanksgiving prayer service and hosted a breakfast for Elder and his supporters.

*Epiphany, Somewhere in the Memory of the Sanctuary Community,*

*April 8, 1985*

*As the curved universe enfolds into itself,*

*eventually this event forecasts,*

*indeed, prophesies,*

*the inevitable turning under,*

*the incessant subversion.*

*Laurita says it in her own way,*

*"Listen to me, people!"*

*Her tossing braid,*

*long, dark, silver-stranded,*

*is a clue to the revving of internal motors.*

*"Now that the city elections are over*

*we need to talk to some people*

*about making San Antonio a sanctuary.*

*And then we want to make some changes at the White House."*

*Yes, Laurita,*

*America as sanctuary.*

*Imagine America:*

*not as oppressor of the poor,*

*not as number one arms seller,*

*not as great grain merchant*

*holding hungry bellies hostage,*

*but the home of hearts*

*whole enough*

*not to fear our freedom,*

*nor to turn away the stranger,*

*so recently executed,*

*of whom Father Bill spoke,*

*in retelling the story of Emmaus.*

Tom Keene

April 8, 1985

**24. Fourth Sunday of Easter (A)**

**Third Reading** (Johannine Gospel 10:1-10)

The *Johannine Gospel* has footnotes, as it were. They are not placed at the bottom of a page, since the original was written on a scroll. Rather, in all likelihood, the notes were placed in the margins. In the case of the *Johannine Gospel*, those margin notes included excerpts from a list of sayings of Jesus that began with “Amen I say to you….” When the narrative about Jesus and the accompanying discourse reminded the ancient author or editor of one of these sayings, that person, whom we identify as an “evangelist,” wrote “Amen” at the spot to refer to the “Amen saying” to be written in the margin. So when reading the passage aloud for copyists to make copies, the result was a double “amen” followed by the saying. It is useful to keep this in mind because the reading for this Sunday could otherwise become a confusion of mixed metaphors. The first double “Amen” saying talks about a thief breaking into a home not by coming through the front door, which would have a fenced-in sheep yard in front of it, but by climbing in at some other place.

The main text is not about a thief climbing in over a wall but about a familiar scene in which a shepherd approaches with his sheep after some days away; a gate-keeper recognizes him and opens the gate so that he and the sheep can come into the yard for the night. The next morning the gate-keeper opens the gate again, and the shepherd heads out toward the pastures, with the sheep following the one whose voice they know.

A second double “Amen” saying interrupts the narrative again. Similar to the first one, it talks about thieves and bandits. When the main narrative resumes, Jesus is saying that he actually *is* the sheep gate; shepherds often spent the night out in the open, sleeping in the opening of a circular rock-fence enclosure to keep the sheep safely inside it at night.

Note that the evangelist(s) of the Johannine tradition used multiple sources of information and imagery. They did not simply stick to one preferred way of presenting Jesus. They found one voice with which they were familiar and comfortable, but through multiple ways.

*Facts and Truths*

*I pledge allegiance to the flag…and to the republic for which it stands.*

Our flag, its size, stars and stripes are facts.

Our republic, for which it stands, is a truth

if, and when we make it work.

The bible, as just a book, its weight, cover and thickness are facts.

The meanings we find there are truths - or not –

depending on whether we live them out.

Our bodies, heart, lungs, skin and skeleton are facts.

We find their meanings, their truths

in what we do with them.

Facts just are.

They sit there

being what they be.

Truths, like goodness, beauty and life itself

dawn on us, impel us to look for

and sometimes find, more.

Tom Keene

April 11, 2017

**25. Fifth Sunday of Easter (A)**

**Third Reading** (Johannine Gospel 14:1-12)

“Do not trouble your heart; believe in God, and believe in me.” The scene is one of the *Johannine Gospel’s* versions of the farewell address of Jesus, set in the context of a Passover meal. By custom, the disciples of a rabbi ask questions. As Jesus spoke of going to the Father, Peter asked, “Why is it not possible for me to follow now?” Indeed! Why can’t we all just be swept up in a rapture and not be troubled with living in the world? Don’t worry: “There are many abodes in my Father’s house.” “And you know the way….” Then Thomas asked, “Sir, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?”

As union with the Father became imminent, the way to Him became less evident. There was a good reason for this: One of the ways we depict God is as the Creator. Our depictions are unavoidably inadequate. As suggested by the Trinitarian nature of God, even *number* as a category cannot be used to describe God in any adequate manner. To speak of *the* Creator suffers in this respect. Similarly inadequate is what we mean by *Creator*―someone who has a plan and sets about realizing it. But God is not the big clock-maker in the sky; philosophers for centuries have spoken instead of Pure Act rather than an ultimate planner modality set apart from an ultimate construction modality.

In one sense God knows what is to be in the future; however, there can be no before, during, and after in God. Consequently, in another sense unknowing, rather than knowing, is characteristic of deity. The more Peter, Thomas, and we seek to know the way to the Father, the less we actually know. The more we are ready to accept open-endedness, the closer we are to knowing the way. And the indeterminateness inherent in open-endedness is precisely the feature of everyday life that could trouble us. So we need to bother with life in this world―out of control as that is―but we should not “trouble our hearts” over that.

*Take, Eat, Drink*

He would leave them,

these friends and relatives,

these men and women.

So he gathered them

for one last meal.

            Soon I’ll be gone, he said.

            I ask you to do this again so

when my body is dis-membered,

            you can re-member me.”

            Take this bread, made from grains,

crushed and ground to powder,

mixed with life-giving water, living yeast,

to rise in the baking fires.

Take this wine, made from grapes,

also crushed but left to ferment,

to transform themselves to spirits.

This bread embodies me for you. Eat.

This wine is for you my spirit-filled blood. Drink.

Let me come alive in you as food, air,

sunlight live on in you,

as friends and lovers are held in memory.

Do this, not alone, but with one another,

because meals are meant to be shared.

Do this in love, with hugs and kisses of peace.

Tom Keene

April 24, 2017

**26. Sixth Sunday of Easter (A)**

**Third Reading** (Johannine Gospel 14:15-21)

“If you love me, keep my commandments. And I will ask the Father and He will give you another Paraclete to be with you forever.” This passage from the Last Supper discourse in the *Johannine Gospel* is featured late in the Easter season because of the promise of “another Paraclete.” Jesus was leaving, but God will still be with his followers because of the sending of that Paraclete. Pentecost is soon to come.

However, when the passage elaborates on the promised presence of God, the language becomes quite mysterious—at least as translated. “A little while and the world will no longer see me, but you will see me, because I live and you will live. On that day you will understand that I am in my Father and you are in me and I am in you.” *In* translates the Greek ἐν, en. In English the primary meaning of *in* is to be inside a container, though we also speak of having faith *in* someone or investing *in* a venture. Greek is less precise than English; ἐν can equally mean *by* as well as *in*. So try an experiment:

I am, by my Father.

You are, by me.

I am, by you.

The Messiah is with us, by an act of God the Father. We exist, in a new way, by the activity of the Messiah. But the Messiah is with us by our activity. Because of its broader meaning, the Greek is not as cryptic as the translation, but it still needs some dwelling upon, especially the clause, “I am, by you.”

*Uniforms* (Advice to recruits)

Their danger, not so much

that one form fits all,

but all made to fit one form.

See for yourself. Put one on.

Army, Navy, Police, Wall Street.

Learn to play the role.

Feel the vibes.

Meet the expectations.

Note the melding and confusion

of identities: self and other,

*who* you are and *what* you are becoming.

The *who* that is your soul, the *what* that is a tool.

Yourself as subject. Uniform as object.

One a power within, the other a power without.

Balance: that’s the thing.

Too much uniform and you are their pawn.

Too much soul-self and you are out.

If this is your thing here’s the trick:

Play the role. Don’t be the role.

            When role endangers soul, time to quite

Otherwise, keep your balance.

Ride the waves of your powers

to renew this world.

Tom Keene

May 12, 2017

**27. Solemnity of the Ascension (A)**

**Third Reading** (Matthew 28:16-20.

The brief reading from the *Gospel of Matthew* sets the scene for the Ascension with a most curious line: “And the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain that Jesus indicated, and seeing him some paid him homage, but some hesitated.” And only after mentioning hesitation does the narrative proceed to have Jesus give the eleven their final missionary charge. Some weeks ago a passage from the *Johannine Gospel* had Thomas resolving doubt by seeing, but here some of the eleven see and still doubt.

I think the Matthean narrative is trying to depict faith, and faith is not so much a cognitive assent as a resource for engaging in a mission. The cognitive assent is a dimension of faith, but the resource for activation is as necessary, if not more so. What “works” in mission is the contagious *coming* to faith. Receiving a cognitive conclusion does not activate the missionary or the missionized, but the coming to faith activates because it itself is an activation.

In order to come to faith, it is necessary to have a prior lack of faith or, at least, a state of lesser faith. Faith is not certainty but doubt. Certainty involves a satisfaction that what one cognizes largely corresponds to that object which one would know; but since any cognition that would correspond to God is necessarily as false and inadequate as it would be true and adequate, we do not have certainty in the ordinary sense of that term. Thus we have interested doubt, as opposed to disinterested certainty or disinterested skepticism.

If faith is to be truly faith and not certainty, it must include that element of interested doubt that moves one, and others, from an absence of faith or from a lesser faith to a presence or increase of faith.

The problem with a religiosity that is intolerant of doubt or even of alternate avenues of faith is that it idolizes and mummifies.

*The Cross of El Salvador*

Facing the desk, and any who sit there,

the Cross of El Salvador,

its inlaid images enliven the village,

nestled among hills,

under the warm arching sun,

          white stuccoed homes,

          tiled roofs,

          trees draped in their fruit,

          a visiting cockatoo,

          two hens and their rooster.

In its silence,

the cross asserts a pledge,

that out of war’s flesh eating mouth

rebirth will rise.

Tom Keene

May 2, 2017

**28. Trinity Sunday (A)**

**Third Reading** (Johannine Gospel 3:16-18)

The *Johannine gospel* has a Pharisee and ruler of the people, Nicodemus, interview Jesus secretly. The reading for this Sunday follows some dialogue from that interview scene. It is unclear whether the reading is meant to be part of that dialogue or a separate reflection occasioned by it. Inexplicably, the Lectionary editors skip the introductory clauses t the passage. What they omit reads, “No one indeed goes up to heaven except he who has come down from heaven, the son of humanity.”

There is a temptation to project our earthly condition, with its time and space coordinates onto God. Thus there would be a time in which the Word existed but had not been yet spoken. There is a truth in that kind of statement—that the Word is not “created” by being “spoken” in time—but also an untruth—that there is a sequential time coordinate to divine existence and activity. Thus speaking of the one “who has come down from heaven” not only imposes “up” and “down” coordinates in language that can only be taken metaphorically, but also “before” and “after” coordinates. The message, set apart from the coordinates, is the elevation of humanity in the Word. This is an act of the Word; humans only help make the Word audible. The text uses the language of visibility rather than audibility: “And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness in this way must the son of humanity be lifted up so that everyone who believes in him would have eternal life….”

And this is where the gospel reading takes up the discourse: “…for God loved the world in this way; therefore He gave the only begotten son so that all who believe in him would have eternal life.” Early on in Christian history there was a tendency to substitute a judicial process for one in which the son “coming down from heaven” shows in a human way what the divine life is like. “For God did not send the son into the world to condemn the world but that the world would be saved through him.” This salvation is not a judicial reward for good behavior but a revelation of the good life.

What might be called a strong doctrine of original sin can lead one to approach others in a judicial or judgmental frame of mind. In that frame of mind, people are to be kept at a distance until they are proven acceptable. The *Johannine Gospel*, in contrast, counters judgment with an unconditional welcome to all. When it rejected Jesus on account of various conditions spelled out in the Law, religion “lifted up” Jesus as some sort of snake.

*Bread, Wine, Remembering*

            According to the story, a certain rabbi decided to spend his last full day with friends, food and drink, as they had done together so many times. At the high point of their celebration, he held out a piece of bread, a cup of wine, and told them: Take. This is my body. This is my blood. With that, he gave them to eat and drink.

            Can we give over to our imaginings how he might have elaborated on what he meant by that? Might it go like this?

*I give myself to you in* ***all*** *ways. So, take these simple ways:*

*This bread, this wine, so every-day-common to our gatherings*

*to typify* ***all*** *those ways.*

*These common things, and we commoners, who consume them,*

*are, indeed, holy, whole and healing as are all things and all who*

*gather in love like this.*

*When you remember me, do this. Do this for me, for yourselves,*

*and for the healing of the entire human family. These things,*

*these happenings heal because we do them in love.*

*We celebrate and play with this bread and wine, with our bodies*

*and our blood, with our words and our meanings, with our presence*

*and our transcendence.*

*With all this, we invite into our seeming separations an all-pervading*

*Oneness, a holy, healing wholeness that is a more which we ourselves*

*are, a more that is becoming us.*

*As we do these things, let’s not get stuck in them. Let’s*

*go for their meanings: love, courage, truth - meanings that nourish*

*our work for a world of justice that there may be peace among us.*

*Let this nourishment be found in all we do. That nourishment is here*

*and now in our sisters and brothers. Especially, let us find it*

*among those most in need: the homeless; prisoners, the cold and hungry.*

*Food, when prepared with love, feeds body and soul as one.*

*That is the kind of deed that makes holy, that makes sacrament.*

Tom Keene

**29. Feast of the Body and Blood of Christ (A)**

**Third Reading** (Johannine Gospel 6:51-58)

The lectionary selection begins, “Jesus said to the Jewish crowds.” That sentence does not actually appear in the gospel passage. Rather, the gospel narrates the multiplication of the loaves and fishes, with obvious Eucharistic symbolism, and then follows it up with a series of relevant sayings, all situated in Galilee, not Judea. Thus either the *Johannine Gospel* is referring to Galileans as “Jews” (hence, one would translate it that way rather than as “Judeans”), or it is placing Jewish vs. Christian disputation discourse from a later time into the gospel narrative.

In addition to “Double Amen” statements (in this passage, “Amen. Amen I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the son of humanity and drink his blood, you do not have life within you.”), the *Johannine Gospel* contains “I am” statements (in this passage, “I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats from this bread, that one will live forever; but the bread that I will give is also my flesh for the life of the world.”).

Catholics may hear these sayings with some satisfaction, in light of their explicit belief in the real presence of the risen Messiah in the Eucharistic celebration. But one may ask what the point of the real presence might be. In antiquity, beliefs in deities and revelations did not pose intellectual problems; such beliefs were culturally acceptable. The intellectual problem with the Christian tradition was the Incarnation, the presence of God in human corporeality. Indeed, it was in response to that problem that the church spelled out in doctrinal form that Jesus was human as well as divine and that Mary was therefore the mother of God. The Church also instituted the Feast of the Nativity, Christmas, as a major feast day.

Today there are sincere people who say they are spiritual but not religious. This is analogous to the ancient acceptance of deities and revelations without these being corporeal in any way. They take in the wonders of creation and sense the awesomeness of the Creator. Spirituality, taken alone, cultivates a valuable interiority, a resource for principled action in the world, but its potential is stymied without action.

There can be, of course, principled action in the world that is not religious, but such seems to force a muteness about the source of principled action. Religion makes principled action articulate, gives it voice. The incompleteness of spirituality without religion, of course, can be compared to another incompleteness—religious symbolism that neither nurtures a consciousness of the divine (religious motions without a developed mentality or intellectual dimension) nor issues in action. The point of a corporeal real presence takes the form of a “both…and,” a consciousness of revealed deity and this-worldly corporeal action, both made explicit in sacramental form: An openness to God’s initiative in the Word and a pledge to take on and continue that Word’s life.

*The Bastard Messiah*

In the minds of his Nazarene neighbors

he was a conceived-out-of-wedlock bastard.

He was not the son of Joseph,

they called him son of Mary.

In the minds of his friends and followers,

he was a messiah, a gift of God to the people,

to Israel, to the world.

Two mindsets.

How to reconcile, bring them together?

A story! A virgin, an angel, a decision, a yes, a birth.

Handed down from one generation to the next

and the next to this our day,

a story of how rejected rocks become cornerstones.

It is the story of ourselves.

Tom Keene

May 19, 2017

**30. Second Sunday in Ordinary Time (A)**

**Third Reading** (Johannine Gospel 1:29–34)

“Look! The lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.” By the time of the Fourth Gospel, the phrase “lamb of God” referred in a general way to quite different images. In the strange apocalyptic visions of the end time, a Christian version of which is presented by the book of *Revelation*, the lamb is the conqueror who overcomes the evil of the world. In the liturgical imagery, the lamb’s blood recalls the sprinkled doors that the angel of death bypassed in Egypt. The first image represents an inversion, wherein a gentle and harmless creature overcomes the worldly forces. The second image reflects the favor of God in selecting those whom he will fashion into a refugee nation.

To “take away” sin in the Greek means literally to lift it up and carry it off. The implication is that sin is lifted off of us, and we are no longer to be burdened by it.

If the austere John the Baptizer of history said such a thing, he would have had the first image in mind. His insight into a world that deserved the wrath of God matured and deepened into a reversal wherein divinity would be lamb-like yet overcome all. The ancient writers, collectively called “John,” who gave us the Fourth Gospel reflected the second image, a household free of the distress and destruction that loomed in the darkness outside. These evangelists, however, take the image beyond that of a tribal household, with the blood of the lamb warding off not an attack of a national foe but the sin of the world.

Culturally distant as such images may be, they yet resonate with us if we dwell on them and yield them time.

*A Tale of Two Planets*

One has Coca Cola up for grabs

everywhere to any who can pay

and lets twenty-one thousand

hungry children die every day.

The other does just the reverse.

Which to bless, which to curse?

Tom Keene

November 4, 2016

**31. Third Sunday in Ordinary Time (A)**

**Third Reading** (Matthew 4:12-23)

The *Gospel of Matthew* turns from the symbolism of the nativity narrative and takes up that of Jesus’ ministry: “Hearing that John was arrested, he withdrew into Galilee.” At first sight, this is puzzling. Herod Antipas, a son of Herod the Great, had arrested John the Baptizer, and Jesus withdraws—from where it is not clear—into Galilee, which Herod Antipas ruled. It turns out that the withdrawal was *far* into Galilee, all the way to Capernaum on the largely gentile north shore of the Sea of Galilee. A Jewish prophet would be a problem to the crown, even a crown of a petty client king of the Roman Empire, amidst a population of Jews; however, a Jewish prophet would not be a problem to that crown amidst a largely gentile population. Jesus would be trouble even in Nazareth, south of the lake in lower Galilee, but not in Capernaum, north of the lake in upper Galilee. Was he being politically astute?

Jesus evidently had two followings in his lifetime, one consisting of Judeans—the community behind the early stages of the Johannine gospel—and one consisting of Galileans from upper Galilee—the community behind the synoptic narratives. He picked a leadership team of four for the upper Galileans, the Palestinian brothers Simon Peter and Andrew and the similar brothers James and John, sons of Zebedee. These were people who were accustomed to living and working in an ethnically diverse community. At least one of the future expanded leadership, Philip, had a Greek name. That the Jesus movement had from the outset denominations (the Judean and the Galilean) and internal ethnic diversity within a unity is instructive.

It does not follow, however, that a generally uniting ethic needs be acritical. A purportedly religious organization whose teachings and activities are entirely inconsistent with the Sermon on the Mount, for example, would hardly be considered a part of the Christian movement. A purportedly Christian organization that promotes the power and prosperity of the powerful and prosperous, and ignores the marginality of the powerlessness and poverty of the poor, can hardly be considered the work of the desert prophet who withdrew into the margin of upper Galilee. I am reminded of people devoting huge sums of money to Christmas season light shows, featuring spectacular facsimiles of the nativity stable wherein Jesus lay in a feed bin because of the inadequacy of the local lodging.

*Sacred Secularism*

To resist Big Brother impositions on conscience, any and all.

To welcome and cherish the Holy Wisdoms of East and West.

To dare to speak of them openly to any and all.

Tom Keene

December 30, 2016

**32. Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time (A)**

**Third Reading** (Matthew 5:1-12)

The reading presents the Beatitudes, one of the most familiar passages in the New Testament. It depicts Jesus directing his teaching to his disciples in the presence of “crowds.” Thus there is a double impact in mind, one for the disciples and one for the crowds. The disciples are given instruction, and the wider audience is to see that people can actually accept his radical teaching.

“Blessed are the poor in spirit.” There is an analogy between this and the Buddhist teaching, wherein happiness comes from not seeking gratification in the first place. Jesus’ teaching does not stop with an inner peace of indifference toward the state of the world, which the western ancients called *ataraxia*, but continues: “Blessed are they who mourn.” To actually mourn, it is necessary first to be able to mourn, to not be numb toward what happens. One needs especially to have empathy, to be able to mourn for others. This is the reason why followers of Jesus pray for people—not that the mind of God needs to be reformed or the divine heart improved upon, but rather our own minds need to be redirected and our hearts moved.

“Blessed are the meek.” The calm, rather than be cultivated as an inner peace, is an outer, visible, practical calm. Meekness allows people’s admirable projects to come to fruition and people’s virtues flourish. The point of Jesus’ ethic does not consist of self-promotion.

“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for justice.” The quest for justice is not an addendum to Christianity; rather it appears right in this central statement of Christian ethics. Why is it that it is so seldom heard in Sunday homilies?

“Blessed are the merciful.” Mercy is not giving charitably but finding pain in the world and relieving it. Giving charitably is moved by how one should act oneself, but mercy is moved by how someone else should be treated.

“Blessed are the pure of heart.” Purity of heart is the most difficult of virtues because it requires removing one’s very self from consideration. Perception of one’s self is implicit in any awareness of the other *as other* because there is no self except in contradistinction from other and no other except in contradistinction to oneself. Self and other are mutually related, much as is the case with left and right, and up and down. For purity of heart, one needs to comprehend people not as others but in essence in union with our very consciousness.

“Blessed are the peacemakers.” All this is not principally occasioned by sponsoring negotiations to end an ongoing war; it is largely a matter of preventing war in the first place. If poverty in spirit, the ability to mourn, meekness, justice, and mercy are in place, war would not be in place.

“Blessed are those who are persecuted for the sake of justice.” It is one thing to be punished for a misdeed, but persecution is administered for promoting justice. It is characteristic of persecution to pose as punishment; “for thusly they persecuted the prophets who were before you.”

*Minutes of a Meeting*

(Pax Christi of San Antonio, July 19, 2008)

We look for mottos

to proclaim our purpose,

words for T-shirts and banners

to tell what we do:

   “War is expensive. Peace is priceless.”

   “Blessed are the peacemakers.”

Ten of us,

all roaming Catholics,

nine parts women,

five parts activist nuns,

all seekers of

a justice that makes peace,

truths that heal our separations,

courage that completes our unity,

one ingredient of yeast

fermenting to enliven

the waiting dough of the world,

a recipe for revolution.

Tom Keene

July 20, 2008

**33. Fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time (A)**

**Third Reading** (Matthew 5:13-16)

This Sunday, the First Reading, Isaiah 58:7-10, catches attention more readily than does the Third. The Isaiah passage reads, “Share your bread with the hungry, shelter the oppressed and the homeless…. Then your light shall break forth like the dawn….” If our light is shining, then we will be feeding the hungry and sheltering the oppressed and homeless. The import of the gospel reading, in contrast, is less obvious and requires some thought. In fact, its own meaning has been faded by its metaphors becoming clichés.

“You are the salt of the earth.” The salt that we know comes in cylindrical boxes that are sold in supermarkets; the expression “salt of the earth” seems even odd to us. In the time of Jesus, salt had to be mined or gathered from distant locations where sea water had evaporated; it was a valuable commodity that people used as money. The Empire, in fact, often paid its soldiers in salt. Valuable as it was, if it became bland people threw it out. The “you” in the statement is in the plural; it suggests that *we* are like salt—not you or I but we the people. A special value is lost with a singular you or I, but retained when there is a genuine we.

“You are the light of the world.” In both Greek and English “world” can be either the earth or the total human environs. We the people are light for the earth and the total environs. We the people are what make all persons see and have insight. We are like a city that cannot be hidden. “So let your light shine before people.”

Just as Isaiah was not counseling merely personal charitableness but speaking to his nation, Jesus is speaking to us, a people. We are called to see to it that the hungry eat and the oppressed and homeless have a home. The point is not to maintain a mean society so that we can be isolated points of light in it, if so inclined, but to maintain a home illuminated throughout by our people’s light.

*The Juggler, Our Lady and the Abbot's Liberation*

A long time ago, before there were hospitals, a juggler, who travelled from town to town with minstrels and tumblers, took sick. His companions brought him to a monastery where the monks gave him a bed to rest, food to eat and prayers to heal. When he got well, he asked the monks to let him stay. The abbot did not approve of entertainers. But the monks had taken a liking to the juggler who made them laugh with sly jokes and sleight of hand tricks. They got the abbot to let the juggler stay and help in the kitchen.

One day, in spring, the monks stopped their work to celebrate the feast of the Annunciation, remembering when an angel spoke to the girl for whom the monastery was named. Amid the celebrating, the juggler yearned to join in with the monks' prayers and songs but he did not know the words and music.

That night, the juggler borrowed half a dozen long knives from the kitchen and went to Our Lady's chapel. He stood before her carved wooden statue and juggled the six knives, their blades catching and flashing the soft lights of candles.

Behind the juggler, the abbot stood in the door. He had come for one more prayer to Our Lady. He watched the juggler and thought to himself: Who is this dishwasher who brings such worldly tricks into our holy chapel? He opened his mouth to stop the jugging. Then in a wink, faster than the juggler's hands, the abbot, with the eyes of his soul, saw the statue of Our Lady smile, laugh and clap her hands. The abbot returned to his cell to reflect.

The juggler, so intent on his knives and the Lady, did not notice the abbot. Soon he laid aside the knives and turned to juggling his thoughts. Then he set aside all thoughts and entered into a silence he shared with the Lady, a silence that carried itself over to the abbot in his cell.

Adapted by Tom Keene from a medieval folk tale.  
June 28, 2005

**34. Sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time (A)**

**Third Reading** (Matthew 5:17-37)

“Do not suppose that I came to destroy the law and the prophets; I did not come to destroy but to fulfill.” I do not know what religious educators do today; they face the fundamental dilemma that the Christian ethic reaches far beyond merely follow rules while children are hardly at the stage of understanding general rules, let alone going beyond them toward principles and values. As a child I was required to memorize some rules, the Ten Commandments.

However, according to the reading, Jesus did not come merely to not destroy the law but to fulfill it, and—what is often overlooked—to fulfill the prophets, the prophets who had spoken of hope, God-with-us, justice, and peace. The religious experts at the time, and in our time too, often focused on rules; but Jesus was saying that our sense of justice had to go beyond that: “For I tell you, unless your justice exceeds that of most scribes….”

It is not enough not to murder and not to commit adultery. The Matthean passage evidently uses hyperbole when it says that growing angry is subject to judgment; expressing anger and especially acting upon it afterward are different from merely feeling it. The hyperbolic nature of the passage is evident in the statements about throwing out one’s eye or cutting off one’s hand.

While the passage as a whole calls for going beyond rules and law, two sections, ironically, are often read as rules. The first reads, “It is said, ‘Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.’ But I say to you that everyone who divorces his wife except by reason of sexual irregularity, makes her commit adultery, and whoever should marry a divorced woman commits adultery.” The first part of the “but I say to you” saying shifts attention from the legal way of divorcing and to the situation that such an action of a man forces his wife into, since in antiquity a divorced woman usually had no option but to become a prostitute. And any man who tries to disguise his patronizing a prostitute by exercising the mere ceremonial of a quick marriage and divorce would be committing adultery. The point is not the ritual but the presence or absence of a proper intention.

The second section that is often read as a rule says, “Again you heard it said to the ancients, ‘You shall not swear falsely, but you shall keep your oath to the Lord.” But I say to you, do not swear at all…. But let your word be yes, yes, no, no.” It would miss the point of the whole passage to see in it a rule against taking an oath, without one’s word being entirely reliable even without an oath. Moreover, in the first century Jesus and his hearers would not have had in mind the Anglo-Saxon legal custom of making statements in judicial proceedings “under oath.” Deceiving people, even when not under oath, is not fulfilling the law and the prophets but rather perpetrating an injustice against those who are being deceived. Justice is the issue, not the ritual used in the proceedings of a system of justice.

*Soup*

*(for soup makers and soup eaters at the soup lines of the world)*

The soup makers feel the urge of ingredients:

            carrots call, “cut us,”

            celery says, “slice us,”

            beans and greens, “throw us in,”

            rice and spice, “add us too,”

            “Gather us, mix and make us,

            plunge us in water, cook us with fire.

            We hunger to be taken by hunger,

            we live that our life be for life.”

The soup makers simmer the soup

till smells seep into corpuscles

of brains and bellies

of babies and children, mothers and men,

to rouse smoldering hopes hidden

under the inedible ashes of dread.

They place the pot on the table, gather round,

Dip in the ladle to pour steamy scoops into waiting bowls.

Soup fills them all, feeders and fed.

Soup becomes them and whispers,

“We are the recipes for revolution,

when all who hunger are filled with good things.”

Tom Keene

January 20, 1992

**35. Seventh Sunday in Ordinary Time (A)**

**Third Reading** (Matthew 5:38–48)

“But I say to you….” This is a challenge to rise above resisting someone who would perpetrate an evil on oneself. Contrary to a common interpretation, the saying does not counsel inaction before evil, but non-resistance toward oneself being an object of malice. The self is not to be the central concern. “You heard it said, ‘an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth!’ But I say to you….” The occasions listed in the saying are an assailant striking someone on the cheek, wanting to sue someone in the courts, taking one’s shirt, forcing someone to go a mile. The point is to forget oneself.

“Give to the one asking for something from you.” Good is to be accorded to all, because God makes the sun rise on the evil as well as the good and rains fall on the just and unjust alike.

What is the proper response when an assailant strikes someone else, takes someone else to court, steals from someone else, or forces someone else to go a mile? It would hardly be commendable to remain inactive while someone else suffers an injustice, in order to appear as a good Bible-citing Christian. One would not endorse striking back in kind, but resisting evil in other ways is a duty for all who are able to defend and protect others. Creatively turning another cheek: “Here, hit me instead!” That cannot but shame the assailant. “Here, have some of my clothes too!”

There is a palpable need in the present hour to associate oneself with those whom some would attack, exclude, criminalize, and vilify out of prejudice. Where economic injustice causes poverty, there is a need to adopt some visible element of voluntary poverty. Some of the ancient philosophers, who called themselves “cynics” after dogs, became street people to shame the wider society. The medieval Francis of Assisi adopted the lifeways of beggars. The point is not being homeless or destitute just for the sake of being so; such states are not exactly what they were in earlier ages anyway. Perhaps the “occupy movement” of a few years ago comes closer; it led many to visit them in their camping places and listen to them talk about important matters. Important matters—so much that is wrong with the world is founded on unimportant attainments.

*What Can Happen When Activists Conspire.*

In our weekly communion over tacos and talk,

we, each in our own way, discover and share how

*when our sole concern is just for our own safety,*

*without a care for safety of others,*

*our safety’s bedrock crumbles,*

*for we are all connected such that one person’s*

*loss of acceptance and belonging is also ours.*

*No airy idea this but feet-on-the-ground fact.*

In brief silence, we pause, reflect and Larry says,

“Enjoy your taco.”

Tom Keene

February 3, 2017

**36. Eighth Sunday in Ordinary Time (A)**

**Third Reading** (Matthew 6:24-34)

“No one can be a slave to two lords…. You cannot be the slave of God and Mammon.” The reading would clearly lead one to avoid materialism in one’s personal way of life. It is also clearly incompatible with the “Prosperity Gospel” that is fashionable in some circles today. But there is more: Consider the introduction to this section of Matthew’s Gospel which the lectionary omits: “The eye is the light of the body. So if your eye is clear, your whole body will be full of light. But if your eye is evil, your whole body will be full of darkness. So if the light that is in you is darkness, how great is that darkness” (Mathew 6:22-23). Worry over material objects—what to eat, what to drink, what to wear—distorts people’s vision. It is not simply the darkness that comes from an absence of light (ignorance) but is itself a kind of “light” that is evil, a darker darkness.

Anxiety over not having more than what is really necessary is something that hatred and prejudice feed upon. There is a whole industry today of raising anxieties through the media and doping hapless people with hate speech. People who daily drive long distances with talk radio going, and those house-bound with the cable-fed television on are particularly vulnerable to this media-industry addiction. As with other kinds of doping, it leaves the user unable to communicate with family and (former) friends. People who sit long hours smoking, drinking, and beclouding their vision with this darker kind of darkness have three kinds of addiction reinforcing one another through a habitual association; they find it particularly difficult to free themselves.

“So do not be anxious, saying ‘What will we eat?’ ‘What will we drink?’ ‘What will we wear?’ For the gentiles seek after all those things; for your heavenly Father knows that you need all these. But seek first the kingdom of God and its justice….”

*Creators*

*Look, I am about to do something new. Now it begins to happen.*

Isaiah 43:19

Be a co-creator with me.

Enter into kinship with our dirt-strewn earth,

grow things nourishing and new,

with babies, girls and boys, women and men

make new their lives

with gentle gestures of care,

from whatever we happen upon

birth yourself with me

into what we are becoming,

together, let us make new this world of ours.

Tom Keene

February 10, 2017

**37. Ninth Sunday in Ordinary Time (A)**

**Third Reading** (Matthew 7:21-27)

This is one of those familiar sayings passages whose meaning is easily lost in its familiarity. “Not everyone saying to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter into the kingdom of the heavens, but the one doing the will of my Father Who is in the heavens.” So the Christian life is not a matter of God-talk but of conduct? Not quite; the next saying seems to assert the reverse: “On that day many will say to me ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name? Did we not cast out demons in your name? And did we not perform great work sin your name?’ and then I will declare to them “I never knew you….’”

By placing the saying sin context, they take on a different significance. Just before the Matthew placed a saying against false prophets and explaining that a good tree does not bear bad fruit nor a bad tree good fruit. This suggests that the point is not to pronounce religious discourse or to engage in great works but that it is a matter of the quality of the consequences of speech and deeds. But how is one to judge consequences?

What is left implicit is that one *can* make judgments—about good and bad trees, good and bad fruit, good and bad consequences. People do not need to be told about such matters. Rather, Jesus used metaphors and parables, which served more to call upon our powers of judgment than provide them conclusions to which they are to arrive. Thus people are *responsible* for their judgments, not for a mechanical replication of traditional religious discourse or performance of prescribed works.

The Abrahamic religious traditions—Jewish, Christian, Muslim—articulate a doctrine of creation. God is a creator; consequently the divine intent can be ascertained in the contours of creation. With the powers of the mind instructed by the logic and science developed from creation a human becomes capable of responsible conduct and admission to the “kingdom of the heavens.” That is no small challenged.

*Questers*

In its ribald replication of infinite forms  
is the Essential Question so polymorphously perverse  
that unsated perverts like us must in our mad hunger  
devour every item back to genesis,  
catch every sound wave to decode its cry,  
inhale every atom to absorb its secrets?

Or must we, like Sisyphus,   
roll our experiences back to their peaks,   
to repeat and repeat our cyclic search  
tossed between galactic whirlwinds  
in a universe's infinity of self-reflecting mirrors,   
a closed circle of dominoes, endlessly falling and rising?

Or might some Eternal Trickster play cosmic hide-and-seek  
and blindman's buff with the earth-inheriting-meek  
granting glances to lovers and poets, children and fools,  
who play in the crevasses between chaos and rules,  
who let each sun be the sun and each rain be the rain,  
who let the Trickster be trickster and laugh at his game?

Tom Keene

**38. Tenth Sunday in Ordinary Time (A)**

**Third Reading** (Mathew 9:9-13)

This brief passage has two sections—the call of Matthew the tax collector and Jesus’ response to critics who were commenting on his dining with tax farmers and sinners. The lessons to be drawn are obvious: “Not the strong have need of a physician but those doing poorly,” and “‘I wish mercy ad not sacrifice,’ for I did not come to call the just but sinners.” These lessons are usually taken to give hope to those of us who are aware of our faults and weaknesses.

It is significant that Jesus is calling a tax collector in this instance and not some other person who is subject to social disapproval. Taxes in the Roman Empire amounted to a mechanism of oppression. Unlike many of the taxes we pay today they did not fund help for the needy or education for the children of the common people; rather they were an economic transfer from the poor to the wealthy, socialism in reverse. Mathew may have been the object of social disapproval and considered a “sinner,” but he was thriving in his society, not barely getting by at its margins.

In our own communities, we have discovered police targeting ordinary people, especially if they are not “white,” for trivial violations in order to discover more serious violations. I \n some small jurisdiction, one cannot drive through, whether “white” or not, without being ticketed for one trivial reason or another. If a poor person cannot pay a fine, the courts impose further financial penalties. There are even cities that balance their budgets with such fines; in some cases they are relatively prosperous suburbs that prey upon the working class motorists who are compelled to drive through to jobs, so that in effect these cities are imposing a tax on working people of modest means and not taxing their own prosperous residents at a just rate.

In the gospel passage, Jesus I calling Matthew out from such business. If the Matthews of the world would cease cooperating with this kind of oppression would the mechanisms of “order” be undermined? Jesus was subversive.

*Seekers*

Somewhere within we seek  
the breathing force in gaseous galaxies,  
that seeks to know itself,  
that forges itself in suns,  
explodes into fiery planets,  
cools to mirror itself   
in polar ice and tropical pools,  
and brings the mix to life,  
from pulsing molecule to single cell,  
then many, so that we and our children  
will launch our craft, our selves,  
to sail the gaseous galaxies,  
seek the seeker,  
know the knower,  
whence we come.

Tom Keene  
January 30, 1990

**39. Eleventh Sunday in Ordinary Time (A)**

**Third Reading** (Matthew 9:36-10:8)

“But seeing the crowds he had compassion over them because they were weary and downcast, like sheep not having a shepherd.” Matthew read this in the *Gospel of Mark*, which he used as a basis for his own gospel. While Mark utilized this verse as a set up for the multiplication of the loaves and fish narrative, Matthew uses it to describe the organizing of a church. First he adds a traditional Jesus saying that also turns up elsewhere in the early Christian writings: “the harvest is great but the workers few; so ask the lord of the harvest that he send out workers into his harvest.” He does not understand this to mean, “Make one church grow,” but to make the Christian movement as a while grow.

First, Matthew names the leadership groups of two ancient denominations; the leadership groups were the *Disciples* and the *Apostles*: “and having summoned his twelve disciples he gave them power over unclean spirits to expel them and cure every sickness and infirmity. And the names of the twelve apostles were….” Mark had written only of “the twelve,” while Matthew speaks explicitly of Disciples and Apostles. By the time Matthew wrote his gospel, the number and names of leadership groups had multiplied ad blurred, all of them tracing their development back to “the twelve.” Matthew’s leadership group ministered to “the lost sheep of the house of Israel”—evidently followers of the Jesus tradition who had left Jerusalem for some locale east of the Jordan River. “Do not go onto the road of the nations, and do not go to the city of the Samaritans. But rather go to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.”

Like many Christians, I have felt offended when some missionary presses a pamphlet into my hands and insists that I must convert to the missionary’s organization “to be saved.” I am shocked when young missionaries from North American denominations founded a mere century or so ago go to Egypt to “save” through conversion Christians whose traditions go back to the first and second centuries. Such imperialism! Such arrogance! When pressed about the reading of the scriptures, I find myself of being deceived by an evil spirit because I prefer to study from the original Greek of the New Testament rather than from a seventeenth century Elizabethan English translation. If the King James Version was good enough for God, I am told, it should be good enough for me!

Matthew’s denomination was not the only one going back to the twelve companions of Jesus, and Matthew seemed to be aware of that. And of course Jesus had companions other than the twelve, including the women who supported his ministry and children such as the one who would come to be called the “Beloved disciple.” Now, can we bring ourselves to recognize the workings of God in traditions other than those in the Christian trajectory?

*Spin Off*

When the One just was,  
before sex or even time,   
how did that un-neutered entity  
decide to create?

What pondering of possibilities,   
foreboding of Frankensteins  
weighed in the balance   
with being content?

“‘Tis not to be, I question,”  
said the One to the nihilic shadow.  
“Being is all,  
world without end  
or beginning.  
The dilemma  
is whether to do,  
to extend:   
  eternity to time  
  infinity to space  
  self into other  
  the singular subjective  
  into the objective all  
the exclusive I  
into the inclusive We.”

Better to do nothing  
and let nothing be,  
thought the shadow,  
than by doing  
to let our secret go.

The One deliberated,  
took a deep breath  
and in a big bang  
said, “Yes...

Tom Keene  
1985

**40. Twelfth Sunday in Ordinary Time (A)**

**Third Reading** (Matthew 10:26-33)

The gospel passage is the one about preaching from the roof tops. The point is not simply to be bold, but to stand for what might elicit retaliation. “And do not be afraid of those killing the body but cannot kill the spirit.” “So do not be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows.” The heavenly Father will protect what is worth saving.

I do not think human retaliation would be elicited by most Sunday homilies. Most of them consist of feel good discourse and appeals to be nice and give to the poor. So it is worth taking pen in hand and listing what should be said in public but which one might be weary of saying because of retaliation. Different people will likely create different lists. A caution about trying to enter the ranks of the undeserving rich would make most people’s lists.

I once had a pastor who was courageous or foolish enough to let me help out in the RCIA program—the formation program for adults wanting to become Catholics. In leading a discussion on the problem of materialism, I posed the question, should a Christian spend good money on an impressive car rather than on one that is simply good enough for getting around. I thought the question was straightforwardly Christian enough, but it was a pedagogical disaster. The local cult of race cars, flashy cars, cars with psychological implications that I could not quite fathom—this cult of chrome and motor simply had too strong a hold over the otherwise open-minded and “liberal” people. Vocal members of the class objected to the very idea that one might question the value represented by THE CAR. I was surely failing as a catechist.

One week later, a young lady pulled me aside. She told me that she had been embarrassed by her own beat-up car with a side door that was a different color from the rest of the body. She actually parked it at her in-laws’ house every Sunday and would borrow their car to show up at the middle-class Catholic church for mass. Not this Sunday: She came in her own car, and onlookers in the parking lot could think what they may.

*Forces*

Our Ancients saw them as four:

air, water, earth, fire

and a fifth beyond naming,

a quintessence,

leaving us Moderns

who put them to misuse:

            life-giving air and water,

to lift planes and drones to kill,

            to float navies to conquer,

            earth, to be owned by the few,

            worked by the many,

            fire for Hiroshima and Bagdad,

leaving us poets, artists, dancers,

music makers and story tellers

to work with Essence Number Five,

that fused Singularity,

Pervader of Truths,

with which we

transform ourselves

and our world.

Tom Keene

August 26, 2017

**41. Thirteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time (A)**

**Third Reading** (Matthew 10: 37-42)

“’One who loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and one loving son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me.’” So begins the gospel for the thirteenth Sunday in ordinal time. (For some reason the ecclesiastical translators insist upon using the wrong adjective, *ordinary*, for the counted Sundays in the liturgical calendar. I will return to this below.) Historically, homilists have associated this passage with the sacrifices related to clerical and religious celibacy.

The passage, taken in isolation, prioritizes matters of faith over family. Placed into context, however, it addresses conflict within families, not merely a setting of priorities. Immediately before the first verse of the reading comes, “’Do not suppose that I came to bring peace upon the earth. I came not to bring peace but the sword. For I came to turn a man ‘against his father, and a daughter against her mother,’” and so forth, citing the prophet Micah 7:6.

During the heated 2016 American political season, statements of prejudice and discrimination against, and exclusion of Latino economic migrants, Latinos in general, and Muslims divided families. Family celebrations of the Thanksgiving holiday that year were particularly delicate or disastrous depending on how matters went. Pastors encouraged people to maintain domestic peace; their advice do doubt reflected wisdom and legitimate concern. But is there a limit to what one should tolerate from loved ones?

The passage from the *Gospel of Matthew* goes on to say, “One who accepts a prophet as a prophet will receive the reward of a prophet, and one who accepts a just person as a just person will receive the reward of a just person.” One would not demand that prophets be just and just people inactive because of family.

Wisdom counsels us to know the difference between issues that should be tolerated, such as the ecclesiastical practice of using the wrong adjective (*ordinary*, as opposed to *ordinal*) and ones that should not be. And while not everyone needs to be the prophet in every instance, one needs accept and even defend prophets in every instance: “And whoever would give merely a cup of cold water to one of these little ones as disciples, amen I say to you, will by no means lose his or her reward.”

*Eye of the Fly*

He traveled the country,

jacking up awareness:

            solar power,

            cleaning up,

            animal rights.

I asked, “What got you started?”

“I was a bio-physicist,

studying fruit flies –

university research.

“Peering into a microscope

at the eye of a fly,

I saw what

I’d never seen before.

“That year,

I quit my job.

I went out

to change the world.”

“What did you see?”

“The eye of God.”

Tom Keene

February 1, 2009

**42. Fourteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time (A)**

**Third Reading** (Matthew 11:25-30)

The sayings of Jesus textual material that Matthew uses in his gospel includes a section where Jesus pronounces woes on cities that witnessed his miracles but still did not a believe in him. Then it adds the passage for this Sunday: “On that occasion Jesus said while answering someone, ‘I give praise to You, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that You hid such things from the wise and astute and revealed them to the childlike.’” Those who are not childlike have reasons not to see what is evident; those vested with “interests” are frequently in denial.

Being in denial, straining to maintain the plausibility of ideologies that are self-serving but cannot be acknowledged as such, brings with it a psychological burden. It takes great effort to maintain the lies that are enticing because they justify ethnic, racial, and class prejudice and support related senses of self-superiority. The unproductive and undeserving privileged in particular have much to work at. In contrast, the Jesus sayings lead one to an untroubled recognition of the truths of the environing social world: “Come to me all who toil and are burdened, and I will refresh you.”

That to which Jesus calls his hearers has its own, rather different trouble, but it does not take the form of a psychological burden from within that would blind as well as bedevil: “Take up my yoke on yourself and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls; for my yoke is easy to wear and my burden is light.”

There are two stages to the freedom from burden that this passage describes. One is a freedom from—freedom from the psychological burdens of blinding ideology. A second is a freedom to—freedom to criticize openly what needs criticism and to seize opportunities to act against the injustices that ideologies inspire.

*Patriots*

Only slightly discordant, the trumpet blares

Anchors Aweigh, The Marine Corps Hymn,

The Air Force Song’s Wild Blue Yonder.

Caissons Go Rolling Along.

Some of the restaurant’s customers applaud.

One combat veteran does not.

He recalls what his regiment’s commander said:

            My men did not give their lives,

their lives were taken.

Tom Keene

May 5, 2017

**43. Fifteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time (A)**

**Third Reading** (Matthew 13:1-27)

“On that day when leaving the house Jesus sat by the sea. And a great crowd congregated about him; so boarding a boat he sat down, and the whole crowd stood on the shore.” This is the set-up for the parable of the sowing of the seed. It would be a mistake to dismiss the set-up as interstitial material between more important passages. This “framing” distances the speaking done by Jesus and the hearing—be the latter merely hearing or engaged listening—done by the crowd. Lest the point be missed, right after the parable comes, “Someone who has ears, listen.”

“When anyone hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand, the evil one comes and seizes what was sown in that person’s heart.” It is obvious but frequently forgotten that this pertains to church members, who hear the word, not people who have not heard the word. One might think of medieval tales of malevolent devils when mention of the “evil one” is made, but thinking of political clergy who propagate hate fits better. “That is the one sowing on the roadway.”

“And the one sowing on rock ground, this is one hearing the word and straightway accepting it with joy. This one does not have a root within but is tentative, and when affliction or persecution on account of the word occurs, this one is straightway caused to stumble.” There is not much affliction or persecution on account of the word today, especially when the word is clothed with comfortable conventionality and feel-good verbiage. After two millennia, unrooted Christians have devised ways to avoid being afflicted or persecuted.

“And the one sowing among thorns….” Thorns, or thistles, were used in ancient Palestine to mark off property lines and repel roving animals. It was the barbed wire of the day. “And the one sowing among thorns, this is the one hearing the word, and the worry of the age and deceptions of wealth crowd out the word….” Worrying about boundaries and holding onto property ironically crowds out what is of value.

“And the one sowing on good ground, this is the one hearing the word and understanding it….” Note that the one hearing and understanding is not merely inert ground; it is the person sowing on the good ground. Hearing and understanding is an activity in itself, not a passive reception.

There is a temptation to limit hearing to our responsiveness to scripture. One also needs to be attentive to the “Book of Life,” i.e. the world around us. Is it simply there, merely sensed, or do we make it into an environment to be comprehended?

*Horrors*

Rare, flashing moments

when we glimpse

our heritage of holocausts:

            of Jews and Slaves,

native peoples of the Americas,

           zealous burnings of witches,

           pious inquisitions,

           quixotic crusades,

           our civilized empires’ massacres,

prisons, torture chambers.

Could there, nevertheless, be some

dimension of reality, extension of being,

where these deepest horrors

are rescued from our tribal amnesias,

and redeemed, in an eternity

of transcendent meaning?

Tom Keene

April 9, 2017

**44. Sixteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time (A)**

**Third Reading** (Matthew 13:24-43)

Surprise! The full third reading of the day has three parables about surprises in the “kingdom of the heavens”: The farmer who sowed good seed and discovered noxious tares growing up with the wheat, the tiny mustard seed growing into a tree, and yeast expanding the size of bread. The shortened reading that may be used in some services has only the surprise of finding tares growing along with the wheat. While the other two parables come from Mark and “Q” (a sayings source also used by Luke) respectively, the surprise of finding an infestation of tares is unique to Matthew’s gospel; it is something he uniquely wanted to communicate. He wanted to point out that it was not merely the growth of the Christian movement that was surprising, but that it was also contaminated.

“An enemy did this.” The farmer makes a cold assessment. He does not blame the seed or the slaves who handled it, but analyzes the situation. “Let them both grow together until the harvest….” The slaves will have the added labor of harvesting the tares and the wheat separately; the farmer will be inconvenienced in having to direct a work made complex by an enemy. In general, those who would make themselves into enemies inconvenience their rivals, burden workers, and dishonor themselves. Note that it is the people low on the totem pole who most endure the effects of malice.

*Springboards*

This table’s feast.  
That daylong hunger.

This accepting yes.  
That final no.

This gift of love.  
That burst of anger.

This presence of life.  
That moment of death.

Springboards  
into emerging unknowns.

Tom Keene

February 6, 2016

**45. Seventeenth Sunday in Ordinary Time (A)**

**Third Reading** (Matthew 13:44-52)

“Finders keepers!” That is what I accepted as common wisdom when I was a child. So the brief parable that begins the reading for the day long mystified me: “The kingdom of the heavens is like a treasure that had been hidden in the field; when someone finds it he hides it and in his joy sells all that he has and purchases that field.” Why purchase the field? Well, it turns out that happening upon something of value is not an entitlement to own or control it. Even when purchasing a major item, one takes care to determine whether the seller actually owns it in the first place; one would have a title search done when purchasing real estate, for example.

It turns out that much of the wealth in our world is, legally speaking, in the hands of people who inherited it. Did they do anything to merit it? They happened upon it, but, figuratively speaking, there has been no equivalent to purchasing the field in which it had been hidden. Furthermore, there is no real inquiry whether the wealth had been accumulated justly or honorably in the first place. When it comes to governmental power, Americans are suspicious of inheritance; it is even in our Constitution that noble entitlements to power are not to be recognized. However, people tend to be less democratically inclined when it comes to resources such as wealth that can be critical in obtaining governmental power.

The heavenly kingdom is similar to the treasure hidden in a field. One may simply happen upon it, but one takes care to establish rights to the property where it is found lest someone else, who happens to own the field, claim it. So we happen upon the realm of divine things, and we dispose of all else so that our claim upon that realm is secure.

Sometimes we forget that transcendent treasures do not come to us transcendently but hidden in earthly life. Our grasp of the latter needs to be secure; we cannot simply assume that claims upon what is valuable do not inhere in the everyday world. We may need to dispose of what we think we possess in order to afford that field in which the treasure is hidden. We may think in terms of a spiritually childish “Finders keepers!” But a secure grasp depends upon a disposition and acquisition, a process that turns out to be a genuine project.

*Wordless with my Father*

We never really talked, I thought,

not in the words I was learning to love.

But I knew of you more than I knew. I

knew-not-knew your code:

your tools, your bricklaying, your care of the Buick,

that your bought brand new in forty-one

and sold to me fifteen years after for a dollar I never paid you.

In the dream, you drove our first car I ever remember,

the tall, slim, rumble seated Ford, black, on skinny wheels,

across a winter field, cropped with harvest stubs,

straight to a well, tapped into Underworld's dark river waters.

the car returned without you.

The dream fled, hiding its face,

but returned to stay after the call came.

To be with you, I hitchhiked across the cold December desert,

deferring to the random fortune of sequential cars:

rides-no-rides to take me to our talk-no-talk,

the silent drives to the clinic, the patient hush of the waiting room.

Later, I sent letters that I knew you'd not return,

streams of recollections, beneath the absence of words,

sifting for nuggets of connections.

Like the time, while learning to drive,

I tore the door off the garage, and we worked all day to fix it,

 without one chiding word from you.

When next I saw you, the robber and radiation

had reduced your workman's body to bone-hung flesh.

As if it were all that was left,

you put my wordless wish, at last, into words,

"I hope when you die your son takes as good care of you as you have me."

The night before the funeral, my sisters and I had dreams of you.

In each you showed off your vigor with leaps and strides.

Next spring, the stingy citrus you had long tended,

dug round and fed, burst into lemon-yellow utterance.

**46. Eighteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time (A)**

**Third Reading** (Matthew 14:13-21)

The reading is Matthew’s version of the narrative about the multiplication of the five loaves and two fish. The crowds follow him into a desolate place, where he had hoped to be alone. He felt compassion for the people and healed the ill among them. And when his disciples suggested he dismiss the crowds so that they could go to some villages to purchase food, he invites the crowds to sit and then fed them all with the mere five loaves and two fish—just as Matthew found the narrative in Mark’s gospel.

The narrative is obviously filled with symbolism and can be read at several levels. The place is described as desert-like, thereby calling to mind the biblical account of the Hebrews’ forty-year trek in the desert. The loaves and fishes narrative as found in *Matthew* comes after the account of Herod Antipas holding a big birthday party and having he head of John the Baptist given to the daughter of Herodias—a quite different kind of meal. One meal is offered out of compassion, the other singularly lacking compassion. And “taking the five loaves and two fish, having looked up into heaven he blessed them, and after breaking them…. This is obviously reminiscent of the Eucharistic celebration. And after breaking the bread, “he gave the loaves to the disciples, and the disciples to the crowds.” This obviously refers to ministry and to participation in the Eucharistic meal.

After this passage comes the narrative of Jesus making the disciples set out on the Sea of Galilee by boat. The theme of mission thus accompanies those of compassion, Eucharist, and ministry. All these form a unit. Consequently something is missing that should be there if there is compassion without Eucharist, or Eucharist without compassion; compassion without ministry to ministry without compassion; compassion without mission or mission without compassion.

*The Question Become Quest?*

Is there something that does or does not connect  
whatever it is we call everything,

all that smells, tastes, is felt, heard or seen  
and all that is not,

all that goes in and out of existence,  
all that evolves and does not?

In our ache to know this beyond-conception-something  
must we cast away any and all our preconceptions,

forget this hunger to name it,  
surrender this hope it may name itself?

Must we let the question be quest,  
a fertile ground seeking seed,

an alphabet arranging itself  
into the poems we are becoming?

This universe we share. Is it matter becoming conscious  
or is it consciousness becoming universe?

What is left but to let ourselves and it  
be the oneness we are?

Tom Keene

May 24, 2014

**47. Nineteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time (A)**

**Third Reading** (Matthew 14:22-33)

In this reading Mathew inserts the allegory about Peter walking on the water into the brief narrative found in the *Gospel of Mark* about Jesus appearing on the Sea of Galilee during a windy storm. Wind is commonly symbolic of the Holy Spirit in Christian imagery. Jesus appearing and being mistaken for a ghost is a similar reference to the Easter experience. In such a context, Peter can be understood to represent the Church.

In the early era in which the *Gospel of Matthew* was composed, the Christian movement had spread beyond Palestine to lands where most people were not culturally Judean. Indeed, the Jewish War and destruction of Jerusalem had forced the followers of Jesus into new unfamiliar lands. This is “Peter walking on the water.” When the Spirit blew where it willed, Peter, the Church, was fearful and even had doubts.

One can think of the effort of Matteo Ricci to insert Christianity into Chinese culture in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries; the Church authorities found fault with his efforts and mandated that Christian missions had to convert non-European people into a Latinized version of Christian tradition. It took three centuries for that policy to be changed, at the Second Vatican Council. Ricci, not his authorities, is still remembered with appreciation in Chinese history; in 1987, when I was asked by Chinese scholars in Taipei what “Blasi” means in English and replied that it is an Italian name, they began to exclaim “Li Ma-to! Li Ma-to!” (Matteo Ricci!).

At the present time in the United States, the composition of the society and of the Christian churches is changing. Inevitably American Christian culture will change; indeed it is already changing. The challenge is not to be paralyzed by fear and doubt.

*Sister Aimee*

Age six, first grade.

Sister Aimee tells us of guardian angels:

*Everyone has one.*

*You do too.*

*Give yours a name.*

*Move over in your seat.*

*Invite them to sit with you.*

*Remember, you are never alone.*

Age eighty-two, retired and tired.

            Moments of terror and bliss.

            Years of delight and despair.

            Decades of surplus and scarcity.

            Yet never alone.

**48. Twentieth Sunday in Ordinary Time (A)**

**Third Reading** (Matthew 15:21-28)

The reading for today is another instance of Matthew reworking a narrative from the older *Gospel of Mark*. Mark had Jesus retreating “to the region of Tyre and Sidon,” in what is now Lebanon, and trying to hide from the public: “And entering into a house, he did not want anyone to know and he was unable to escape notice” (Mark 7:24). Mark’s recurring theme of secrecy, which made sense given his experience in Rome where there was persecution, had little meaning for Matthew and his community east of the Jordan River. Matthew’s narrative presents a quite different situation; he has a Canaanite woman coming for help and Jesus not responding for a time. While Mark’s Jesus is disinclined to help her because he wants to escape notice, Matthew’s Jesus remains silent, and the disciples ask him to dismiss her because she kept crying out to them. Jesus finally replies, repeating the policy of his disciples: ‘I was only sent to the lost sheep of the house of Israel” (Mt. 15:24).

A Canaanite woman! There was no place called Canaan in Jesus’ day. Matthew is making no pretense of his narrative being a historical report; rather he was using a deliberate archaism to raise the issue of relations with historical ethnic enemies. He has the “Canaanite” woman embarrass Jesus and his disciples by calling upon their compassion: “…even the puppies eat from the bits that fall from the table of their master.” After that, Jesus relents and tells the woman that he has healed her daughter who, we are informed, was evilly possessed.

The lesson to be drawn about ethnic and other inter-group relations is obvious and need not be dwelt upon. So also is the lesson about circumscribing Jesus’ ministry. It is worth considering, however, what was the guiding principle, the North Star as it were, that made Jesus finally relent in the narrative—compassion.

## *Love in Auschwitz*

Breaking the last bit of bread together,  
taking beatings for friends,  
sharing blankets,  
encouragement when needed,  
knowing glances on stepping  
into gas chambers.

Tom Keene  
November 27, 2012

**49. Twenty-first Sunday in Ordinary Time (A)**

**Third Reading** (Matthew 16:13-20)

In this reading, Matthew develops his narrative once more by expanding what he had found in the earlier *Gospel of Mark*. Jesus is traveling with his disciples into the district of Caesarea Phlippi and asks them who people were saying he was. The answers were John the Baptizer, Elijah, and one of the prophets. All of these were remarkable identities that involved a return from the dead. Mark had Peter answer, “You are the Messiah.” Here Matthew adds much more: “And replying Simon Peter said, ‘You are the Messiah, the son of the living God.’”

In a previous chapter, Matthew has Jesus walk on the Sea of Galilee, enabling Peter to join him on the water and calming the wind. At that point, the disciples say, “Truly you are a son of God” (Mt 14:33). The added words Matthew assigns to Peter’s response, “the son of the living God,” allude back to that previous narrative.

Matthew has Jesus reply, “Blessed are you, Simon Bar Jonah….” Matthew generally avoids Aramaic expressions and translates them into Greek, but here he makes a point of using the Aramaic form of the name of the disciple. This too is an allusion; in Matthew 16:4 he had the Pharisee and Sadducee authorities demand a sign from Jesus and Jesus reply, “An evil and adulterous generation demands a sign, and no sign will be given it but the sign of Jonah.” The legend of Jonah had Jonah angering God by refusing to preach in the pagan city of Ninevah; when he fled by sea rather than do that God stirred up a violent storm that only calmed when the terrified sailors threw Jonah overboard: “And the Lord appointed a great fish to swallow up Jonah; and Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights” (Jonah 1:17).

Peter, or Simon Bar Jonah, had fears and doubts about culturally different churches and culturally different people in general. At one point Saint Paul openly criticized him for that (see Galatians 2:11-13). In the *Acts of the Apostles* Luke describes Peter as gradually learning to accept culturally different people (Acts 10:34).

After Peter comes to really recognize the son of the living God, after he emerges from the fish-belly-like darkness of non-recognition, only then do we hear: “and I say to you that you are Peter, and upon this rock (*petra*) I will build my church….”

Which is it? Is it the Baptizer redivivus, Elijah redivivus, a prophet redivivus, or Nineveh all over again?

*What Is Meditation?*

When asked, the teacher,

so quick with answers, hesitated in surprise.

“I don’t know. I’ll have to think about it.”

Days later, his child toddled up,

stretched out her arms in expectation.

Taken up, she laid her head on his shoulder.

When satisfied, she wiggled to be let down.

As she ambled off he had his answer:

*Meditation is being quiet*

*with someone you love*

*and who loves you.*

Tom Keene

November 5, 2011

**50. Twenty-second Sunday in Ordinary Time (A)**

**Third Reading** (Matthew 16:21-27)

“Get behind me, Satan; you are my stumbling stone, for you do not think the things of God but human things.” This is Jesus’ well-known rebuke when Peter protested against Jesus going to Jerusalem to “suffer many things from the elders, high priests, and scribes, and be killed, and be raised on the third day.” Peter had not really said anything evil; he simply had not recognized what Jesus saw was inevitable. The absence of evil, however, was insufficient. Jesus was insistent that he was to follow his calling rather than expend his energies avoiding what could not be avoided.

And “be raised on the third day”: Mark had written “after three days,” and Matthew changes the text to “on the third day.” What was at issue was Matthew’s preference for highlighting an allusion to Exodus 19:18: “for on the third day the Lord will come down upon Mount Sinai in the sight of all the people.” Being raised on the third day was to parallel being in the sight of all the people.

An old saying has it that there is no Resurrection without a Crucifixion. There must be a rising from the wrath of officials and other people—all of them all too human. “If anyone wishes to come after me, deny the self and take up one’s cross and follow me.” It is not possible to square such language with proper and respectable churches that are staffed by safe professionals who maintain chaplaincies for worldly forces.

*Prayer of St. Terminus of CIA*

Lord, make me an instrument of your Empire:

            where there is confidence, let me bring fear,

            where there is questioning, deception,

            where there is privation, dependence,

            where there is leadership, assassination,

            where there is progress, interference,

            where there is democracy, puppetry.

O Great Controller, grant that I may not so much seek

            to be informed, as to dis-inform,

            to be secure, as to secure others,

            to be liberated, as to dominate,

for it is in taking that we get,

it is in repressing that we are free,

it is in possessing that we are possessed by Thee.

Tom Keene

for the martyrs of Iran, Guatemala, Chile, Indonesia and the Third World.

November 18, 1986

**51. Twenty-third Sunday in Ordinary Time (A)**

**Third Reading** (Matthew 18:15-20)

Buford Boone was the retired publisher of the newspaper in Tuscaloosa, Alabama. A young interim, or “visiting,” assistant professor at the University of Alabama, I had made an appointment to meet with him in his garage—for tax purposes he was relegating everything related to his former career to his garage. It was a mere 45 minute interview late on a hot afternoon, during which I asked only a few questions and he, sitting in a swivel chair with his feet on a desk, chatted continuously about events twenty years before in 1956. Once the interview was over, I drove to my office and typed from memory for two hours what he had been telling me.

The South was a new and strange world for me. Some of the old white men I interviewed referred to me as a “Yankee,” indicating they would talk to me anyway. Mr. Boone never put me into any regional category; I was just a young writer and he had spent much of his life helping young writers get the facts.

Why did I seek out Buford Boone? I had come to Tuscaloosa and found that people were still talking about the governor “standing in the school house door” at the old university auditorium to block racial integration a dozen years beforehand, and even more about efforts to assassinate Autherine Lucy, a courageous young lady who tried to integrate the university in 1956 but, after a white non-student mob threatened violence and even trapped her for a time in a classroom building, the university expelled her for reasons of public safety. Mr. Boone editorialized against the university’s action the next day, himself running the risk of attempts on his own life (which were rumored) and boycotts against his newspaper (which were in fact attempted).

Buford Boone’s editorial did not focus on race relations but on the rule of law. The target of the mob was Autherine Lucy: “Her ‘crimes’? she was born black, and she was moving against Southern custom and tradition—but with the law, right on up to the United States Supreme Court, on her side.” He continued, “What does it mean today at the University of Alabama, and here in Tuscaloosa, to have the law on your side?” The question haunts us all, not simply people living in a small city in Alabama in 1956.

The rule of law eventually prevailed, though not for Autherine Lucy personally. Governor Wallace stepped aside before a token show of force by a campus ROTC unit and allowed the registration of two African American students in 1963. The governor later repented standing in the way in the first place, admitting that he had been wrong. It is my impression that many repented along with him.

The *Gospel of Matthew* endorses the rule of law and respects what we would call due process. “But if your brother sins against you, go reprove him between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you gained your brother; but if he does not listen, bring one or two with you besides, so that every word may be confirmed by the mouth of two or three witnesses. But if he ignores them, tell the assembly.” If the offender ignores the assembly, “let him be for you like the gentiles and tax farmers”—i.e., as someone who is morally ignorant. Matthew follows this up with a saying addressed to a plural “you”: Whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.”

*Crocus*

Petals, each white as sun-bathed cloud,

together make one six-pointed star,

centered around a gold colored stamen,

tipping a flagpole stem,

unbending in still of morning.

A clear, soundless declaration

for itself and us, observed and observers:

I am. We are.

Tom Keene

August 12, 2017

**52. Twenty-fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time (A)**

**Third Reading** (Matthew 18:21-35)

The reading presents the familiar parable of two officials (called “slaves,” in an ancient usage) in a king’s court. One official owed the king a huge sum of money. After beginning to sell the official and his family into slavery and readying the official’s property for auction, the king had compassion and forgave the debt. That official, in turn, was owed a much smaller amount by a fellow official and threw him into debtor’s prison. The people in the court were shocked and reported the matter to the king, who proceeded to treat the first official as the latter was treating the second official. The meaning and implications of the parable are obvious. Its lesson should come to mind every time we recite the Lord’s Prayer: “Forgive us our trespasses….”

My late friend Jim Stone used to talk about what happened a few years after his father had been murdered. His father had retired and, to have something to keep himself busy, worked part time at the cash register in a liquor store. A robber shot him, killing him, in the course of robbing the store. Jim said the murder disturbed him, kept bothering him. He went into a period of depression because of it. It seemed to sour every aspect of his daily life. One evening he received a phone call; it was from a chaplain at a prison. The young man who had shot his father wanted to know if Jim would forgive him. Jim didn’t know what to say, but in the end said he forgave his father’s murderer. As Jim explained his experience, he did not know whether forgiveness did any good for the young man in prison, but it did a great deal for Jim himself. The whole weight of the tragedy was lifted from his consciousness.

Jim’s story, and much else about his life, gave me much to pack into the eulogy I gave at his funeral.

*River of Blood*

It was the 1980s.

With neither approval nor permission

from We the People,

our nation’s CIA hired mercenaries.

Calling themselves Contras,

they raided Nicaragua’s isolated villages,

killed the workers for health, literacy

and terrorized the rest.

One of them tells his story:

*We found the teacher,*

*laid him in a newly dug ditch.*

*Following orders,*

*I plunged my trench knife into him,*

*till his screams and breathing stopped.*

*Later, I went to the river*

*to wash my hands and face.*

*In a flash, the river turned to blood.*

*That night, I slipped away,*

*never to return.*

Imagine us taxpayers walking away

from our Afghanistans, Iraqs, Vietnams

and their rivers of blood.

Tom Keene

August 26, 2017

**53. Twenty-fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time (A)**

**Third Reading** (Matthew 20:1-16a)

“You go into the vineyard, and I will give you whatever is just.” This, of course, comes from the parable of the vineyard owner who kept finding people unemployed and waiting to be hired; he hires them on the spot. He pays them all “whatever is just” for a day’s work, even though some of them worked only part of the day.

I have heard homilies interpret the parable as a lesson about the salvation of gentiles, relative latecomers to the worship of God, being a reward equal to that of the Jewish worshipers of God. That is a possible interpretation, but it does not make sense without a more straightforward reading: that an employer, and by extension a society, should pay workers what is just.

And what is just? We cannot read the text in a fundamentalist manner because the first century coin, the denarius, is no longer a currency. So a criterion of reasonability comes into play. If the pay does not sustain the worker and the worker’s dependents, the pay scale is not a reasonable one. There are actually two aspects to this—workers’ pay and prices. Legend had it at a small college where I once taught that the president and his family owned most of the housing in the small college town, and that every time the pay scale went up the rents rose by the same mount. The connection between pay and prices may not be so personal in the world at large today, but it is still a certain connection. In medieval thought, economic justice was articulated in terms of just prices. Bernardino of Siena, for example, railed against bakers who raised the price of bread when a large group of pilgrims came through town. In modern thought, economic justice is articulated in terms of the just wage—or more precisely, a living wage that includes both pay and benefits.

It is interesting in the parable that the laborers who worked a full day for a just wage resented the fact that those who worked only part of the day received the same pay: “…they grumbled against the master of the household….” There are two circumstances in which someone may not work “a full day”—being unable and being unemployed.

I recall being unable to work at my university—not the small college mentioned above—because of open heart surgery. On the first day of the semester I met a morning section, but that afternoon a stress test occasioned my being wheeled into a hospital for surgery, and I was unable to meet classes for the remainder of the semester. I remained on the payroll, however, because of the state university’s benefits package. It is doubtful that anyone was envious of my situation.

How about unemployment? National governments have levers through which they can affect their national economies, and policies for promoting full employment comprise a requirement for economic justice. Companies can realize profit margins in two ways—creating scarcities while raising prices and raising production levels to ones needed in the market while receiving a lesser margin on each sale but with a greater number of sales. Promoting the latter condition is essential to a full employment policy. Economists generally define full employment as a statistical 4% unemployment rate.

We are entering an era of computerized automation where employment may not be the common source of income. What should be the guiding parable in such a future?

*Every once-in-a-while*

Through our classroom windows

blared sirens of ambulance;

fire truck; squad car;

halting the hum

of student work.

Out of the silence

that held our

unsaid dread

of unknown perils,

a nun’s voice came:

   Someone’s in trouble.

   Stop and say a Hail Mary

   for them.

We did

and went back to work,

knowing a power

that couldn’t be said.

Tom Keene

May 18, 2009

**54. Twenty-sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time (A)**

**Third Reading** (Matthew 21:28-32)

“From where comes the baptism of John? From heaven or from humans?” (Mathew 21:25) This question, which Jesus posed to the Judean religious authorities who had challenged him in the Temple enclosure, sets the stage for today’s reading. Jesus had come to Jerusalem, at great risk to his life. He proceeded to cause an incident in the Temple, interfering with the exchange of commercial currency for ritual currency and upsetting the selling of ritual sacrificial animals so as to put a stop to the religious routines. Then he had the gumption to come back the next day.

“By what authority are you doing these things?” asked the high priests and elders. He answers with a question of his own: “From where comes the baptism of John?” If he were merely countering a question with a question, it would have been a facile rhetorical ploy. In fact, however, his question is the same as theirs: Does (or does not) authentic religion require authorization?

This is the context for the continuation of the back-and-forth between Jesus and the authorities that today’s reading presents. “What do you think?” Jesus asks. “A man had two sons. And approaching the first he said, Son, go, work today in the vineyard.” The son replies he would not, but then repents and goes to work. The second son does the reverse, saying he would but not actually doing so. The contrast is between actuality and pretense.

“Amen I say to you, the tax farmers and prostitutes are preceding you into the kingdom of God. For John came to you in the way of justice, and you did not trust him; and the tax farmers and prostitutes trusted him….” Temple, high priests, elders—all the trappings of religion, but no faith or trust in John the Baptizer, the desert preacher who came in the way of justice. Tax farmers were from the wrong political establishment, but they were open to someone who came in the way of justice. Prostitutes—in antiquity divorcees who had been abandoned by their husbands and engaged in their trade out of desperation—were from an unaccepted element of society, but they too were open to someone who came in the way of justice.

*Report to King Charles V by Alvar Nunez Cabeza de Vaca*

Published in the year of our Lord, 1542

Ship wrecked and washed up on shore, our band of four survivors was lost, cold and abandoned to desperate hunger until the People of the land took us in and put us to work. Though we were strangers, the People demanded we heal their sick. We explained we were neither physicians nor priests. They said “Cure us or starve.” We went to work with Hail Marys, signs of the cross, prayers to God. The sick got better, the wounded healed. We found within us, working through us, a power we had never known.

As if these gifts were meant for all, the People passed us on from village to village, tribe to tribe, so that the blessings of healing others might bless them too. I must also report how sometimes when alone in thought, or amid the energy of healings I would hear a strange yet compelling music that both lifted and plunged me into the depths of my being. This went on for eight years before we found our countrymen. In that time we learned the ways of the People, ways our countrymen had long forgotten.

Sadly, I must also report that on returning to our own people we lost not only this mysterious power of healing, but also our desire to heal. But we remember and will tell of it to any who would hear.

Tom Keene

September 2, 2016

**55. Twenty-seventh Sunday in Ordinary Time (A)**

**Third Reading** (Matthew 21: 33-43)

This Sunday’s gospel is the parable of a householder “who planted a vineyard and placed a wall around it and dug a winepress in it and erected a tower; and he rented it out to tenant farmers and journeyed away.” When he sent a slave to collect the landlord’s share of the harvest, the tenant farmers killed the slave. They did likewise with a second delegation and even the householder’s son. Patently Matthew has Jesus aim the parable at the Temple authorities, whom Jesus characterizes as avaricious and treacherous.

By the time Matthew was composing his gospel, the Temple and Jerusalem authorities were things of the past. A more primitive version of the parable (*Gospel of Thomas* logion 65) leaves out an exchange between Jesus and the authorities that Matthew places after the parable: “‘Then when the lord of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenant farmers?’ They say to him, ‘He will put the wicked to an end and lease the vineyard to other tenant farmers….’” The addendum is obviously meant to refer to the role of Christian church functionaries.

The parable presupposes the first century economy, in which there were no banks, stock markets, and stock and bond portfolios. Savings took the form of land and slaves. The householder in the parable is described as foregoing field slave ownership and, instead, leasing his fields out. It is an interesting exercise to consider what the equivalent situation would be in our economy. There are still people who invest in property and collect rents, often through retirement plans rather than directly. But there is far more to it than that. We have enormous corporate entities that operate enterprises with investors’ funds. This is true of the private sector—manufactures, for example—as well as the public sector, where the funds in question have been taxed by a government.

So who are the equivalents of the avaricious and treacherous tenant farmers? Chief executive officers, especially ones who control enough shares of a corporation to be beyond the control of other stockholders, may enrich themselves well beyond their worth to the corporation. In doing that, they enable city managers, non-profit executives, and university presidents to argue that to obtain talented executives such as themselves extraordinarily high compensation packages are necessary. The avarice of such people is evident, but are they treacherous? Many who have worked in a large entity have seen the injustices perpetrated on employees who dare point out that the policies and practices that enrich the CEOs but weaken the effectiveness of the entity itself. There is no limit to the lengths CEOs (and those who sell out to them) will go to discredit their critics, especially when the critics are right.

*Hymeneal for Francis*

In his unsealed celibacy

Francis did not deny love

or try to force it,

but let it squeeze itself

into all forms and beyond.

The wet dream from which he woke,

in red stained stigma,

promised the consummation

his hungry heart had courted.

A lover’s juice

oozed from his hands,

feet and side,

a once invisible ink

legible at last.

Ultimately,

Sister Death and Francis,

engaged since birth,

completed kept love.

Like a Jewish groom’s

crystal crushing step,

they shattered the glass

that separates.

At Death’s patient urging

Francis broke her bloody seal,

bled himself into the waiting womb

of the Universe.

Tom Keene, October 4, 2017

**56. Twenty-eighth Sunday in Ordinary Time (A)**

**Third Reading** (Matthew 22:1-14)

The reading is Matthew’s version of the parable of a man who invites purported friends to a dinner, and the intended guests turn him down, preferring to spend the time pursuing their business interests. The man then opens the feast to whomever his slaves could find. Matthew rewrites the narrative, making the host a king who was inviting people to a wedding feast for his son. Matthew also adds a reference to some of the invited guests killing the slaves who were delivering the invitation; the king sends an army to kill the murderers and burn their city—perhaps a reference to the Romans suppressing the rebels in the Judean War and burning down Jerusalem in the year 70. Matthew also adds the curious narrative of an unworthy guest at the banquet who came without a proper wedding garment; the king has him bound hand and foot and thrown out into the darkness.

In Matthew’s hands the parable is made to refer to more than social graces. The king is obviously a figure for God and the wedding a figure for the assembling of the church for Jesus, the human Son of God and messiah. In antiquity an important personage would make a point of inviting high society to banquets and seating them in rank on floor-level couches, with the most important people next to himself. This king, however, learns that socialites are unworthy; so he invites in common folk, from whom he expects proper conduct.

I suspect Matthew added the curious narrative about the guest coming in improperly attired because of a temptation on the part of Christians to be smug about not being counted among the invitees who did not come. The following of Jesus is not limited to not being a Judean authority in Jerusalem. Too much can be made of belonging to the “correct” religion or “chosen” denomination.

Poem

It was the 1980s. U.S. tax payers and the Reagan administration were funding El Salvador’s military to make war on its own citizens. Between army massacres, air force bombings and death squads, 80,000 Salvadorans were killed. Mostly, as usual, women and kids. To this day, El Salvador remains the most bombed out nation in the Western Hemisphere.

Many U.S. citizens worked to raise awareness of what our government was doing. After college, Jennifer Cassolo, served as an American volunteer helping escort North American visitors to El Salvador to see their tax dollars at work. Jennifer was arrested and taken to prison for questioning at the time a Salvadoran army unit murdered six Jesuit priests and their housekeepers. She was interrogated amid the screams of other prisoners being tortured, then released and forcibly returned to the U.S. She told her story on a nation-wide speaking tour.

Her story included the heart to heart conversation she had with her interrogator, a young lieutenant who joined the military to help feed his family. Jennifer refused the lieutenant’s demand that she confess and name names. He asked her, “Why do you want to suffer?” A woman’s interrupting scream pierced their ears. Jennifer, in her solidarity with the suffering, pointed in the direction of the scream and said, “How can I not?” As they continued to talk, Jennifer’s candor and courage won the lieutenant’s respect, which hopefully led to a questioning of his life.

It is this hope of someone breaking through into the hearts of the torturers, and we taxpayers who fund them, that cries out in the voices of those tortured and killed. So, this poem is called…

*Cry of the Savior’s Martyrs*

(for Jennifer Cassolo)

Who will be our voice

and speak to our killers’ consciences,

remind them that someone,

Someone/All is watching?

Who will be our hands

to touch the hands of our torturers,

naming their work the cruelty it is,

deeming it more hurt to themselves than hurt to us?

Who will ask our interrogators

the questions that turn their hearts,

hearing their confessions,

opening them to forgiveness?

Who will cleanse with pain-hardened truths

the eyes and ears of blind and deaf,

the nameless who pay our assassins’ wages,

pay for the bullets that pierce our bodies?

Who will nourish initial doubts and whispered thoughts

into growing convictions and stubborn resistance,

broadcast the seeds of critical mass

till stilled hearts rise and cry as One?

Who will hail us from our graves

to hear our cries transfigured

into choruses of justice, symphonies of grace

when we come, bright and sure as morning suns?

Tom Keene        February 5, 1990

**57. Twenty-ninth Sunday in Ordinary Time (A)**

**Third Reading** (Matthew 22:15-21)

“Then render to Caesar what is Caesar’s and to God what is God’s.” Pharisees were trying to trap Jesus by bringing along Roman allies—“Herodians,” presumably agents from Galilee since there was no Herod in power in Jerusalem—and asking Jesus about paying a census tax to the Roman emperor, “Caesar.” They were trying to have Jesus reported to the Romans as an anti-government agitator. It turned out that Jesus was not opposed to government: “then render to Caesar what is Caesar’s….” Nevertheless, he was not going to buy in to the divinization of the emperor—“and to God what is God’s.”

If he wanted to, Jesus could have made an issue about the census tax, a tax exacted from slave and free persons aged 12 or 14 to 65, to be paid in Roman currency. The denarius coin that would be used, bearing an image of Emperor Tiberius, bore an inscription as well: “Tiberius Caesar, august son of the divine Augustus, high priest.” Was the late emperor Augustus divine? Was the current emperor, Tiberius, really a high priest in the eyes of Jesus and his followers? However, Jesus was not looking for an argument with the government.

There are church officials who object to filling out a form for their agencies’ employees to be exempted from medical insurance coverages for birth control pills, on the theory that contraception is irreligious and that furthermore some such pills are abortifacients. The latter presupposes the conclusion that a conceptus is a living human prior to its attachment to the uterine wall. This appears to be a quest for an argument with government.

*Letter to Linder*

(April 28, 1987, near Jinotega, Nicaragua, Engineer Benjamin Linder, 27, of Portland, Oregon died in a CIA funded contra ambush as he was taking water-flow measurements near the village of San Jose de Bocay.)

Dear Ben,

Last month,

like last year,

and the year before,

I filed my income tax return.

As always,

it saved me the hassle with IRS

and loss of my house

or prison for outright refusal:

all in all, a bargain,

a paltry fee for my liberty.

Last week,

you were the age of my children

when hired guns,

with a bullet to your head,

put an exclamation point

to your life:

my portion of the powder

that blew you away

was a small price to pay.

May 3, 1987

**58. Thirtieth Sunday in Ordinary Time (A)**

**Third Reading** (Matthew 22:34-40)

“‘You shall love the Lord your God with your whole heart, with your whole soul,’ and with your whole mind….” This is e well-known response by Jesus to the question, “Which is the greatest commandment n the Law?” His response continues, “And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’”

Here Jesus is depicted quoting Hebrew scripture; the first several portions about loving God are from *Deuteronomy* 6:5, and the second commandment s from *Leviticus* 19:8. Loving God “with your whole mind” is Matthew’s own teaching, changing the word from Mark’s “from your whole strength.”

The underlying teaching is the priority of loving God and neighbor. Regulations and practices that do not have one accomplishing those two objectives can be set aside, and they ought to be set aside when they prevent one from loving God and neighbor.

Matthew was deliberate in the way that he composed his gospel. His community consisted of people who were familiar with the Hebrew scriptures and, in all likelihood, with the traditional Jesus sayings—and possibly even with the *gospel of Mark*. Matthew’s added wording, “…and with your whole mind,” would have stood out as an emphasized point when Matthew’s version was read aloud Here, “mind” translated *dianoia*, which means “commons sense” or “intelligence in the use of knowledge.” Why did Matthew introduce this?

This Christian and Hebrew scriptures comprise a hefty volume. It can be quoted with a wrong purpose in mind; the narrative of the temptation of Jesus in the desert has even the devil quoting scripture. In addition to scripture, many religious traditions and communities have additional rules, regulations, precedents, and extrapolations. Matthew’s point is that one cannot legitimately hide behind texts, be they canon law, customs, or even scripture itself. It is necessary for all to think for themselves with skill and circumspection, in deciding what loving God and neighbor requires. Such comes not by way of license but obligation.

*Credo*

I believe in source,

That life comes from life,

Knowing comes from knowing.

I believe in source made known

In shapes of trees, sounds of songs,

Divulged in darkest silence.

I believe in the airy presence of source,

In faintest breeze, hurricane force,

In what we breathe.

Tom Keene

September 19, 2017

**59. Thirty-first Sunday in Ordinary Time (A)**

**Third Reading** (Matthew 23:1-12)

“The scribes and Pharisees have sat on the chair of Moses. So do and observe whatever they recite for you, but do not act according to their deeds….” In antiquity, ownership and access to the scriptures was limited. Those who had access “sat on the chair of Moses,” as it was phrased, to read a text to other people. With the invention of the printing press and expansion of literacy, one no longer depended on a few experts, whose principal qualification was literacy, to have access to the scriptures Matthew considered the scribes and Pharisees his rivals and thus advised against acting “according to their deeds”—i.e., lines of conduct following upon their interpretations and applications. “They tie up heavy and difficult burdens and place them on people’s shoulders….” The “difficult burdens” of religion can create a scheme of honorifics so that those who have fewer tie-consuming responsibilities can multiply religious activities and be scored highly while ordinary people would be scored at some lower level.

The cultivation of superficial honorifics is inherently objectionable. However, there is a disturbing secondary effect as well. The initial objection pertains to the people who cultivate honorifics; the secondary effect pertains to those who do not. These latter may regard themselves morally inferior and feel less inhibited rom victimizing others. Responsibility is diverted in the direction of the “honorable,” who have in fact fewer responsibilities, and away from everyone these. This can be particularly dangerous where ordinary people follow orders and carry out the misdeeds of honored people.

*Bible*

Not a book but a library:

Legends from the Ancients,

Survival stories of escape from slavery,

Prophetic poetry,

Love songs,

Wisdom from elders,

all from a people in search of the God

who searches for them.

So

who are these preachers

who shrink it to a book of rules?

Tom Keene

February 11, 2017

**60. Thirty-second Sunday in Ordinary Time (A)**

**Third Reading** (Matthew 25:1-13)

“Then the kingdom of heaven may be likened to ten maidens, who taking their lamps go in to meet the bridegroom.” The marriage custom was for a bridegroom to visit the home of the bride’s father and to bring the bride back with him. The parable has five of the maidens who brought extra oil for their lamps when they held vigil in the bridegroom’s home and five who did not bring enough oil and were away buying more when the bridegroom belatedly returned and the celebration could begin. The “foolish” five were unable to get in and celebrate when they arrived afterwards with their oil.

The parable contrasts the five sensible maidens with the five foolish. All ten were to have lamps for light. Such lamps, even in our own day, symbolize wisdom and learnedness. Being supplied with enough oil for the lamps obviously refers to being ready to shed light, apply wisdom. Oil is a multi-themed symbol, calling to mind both the Holy Spirit and being anointed for personal calls and mission.

It is notable today that for some people facts do not matter when it comes to making decisions about public policy. There are people who are more impressed with the forcefulness with which claims are asserted than with carefully assembled evidence. This is particularly true with questions about such ecological phenomena as climate change and the effects of fracking. The parable favors wisdom over spin, light over noise. The symbolism in general calls upon us to use our skills and opportunities open to us rather than simply pray for a magical intervention from God.

*Hope in Despair*

*Blessed are those who hunger for justice.*

Blessed?

More like cursed.

What am I, or even, we,

in the moon-drawn tides

of this controlling system?

I, we, drown in the depths of despair

where even help seems no help.

Yet still I thirst for power

and the hope it brings,

for hope and the power it brings.

Don’t offer me your words ringing hollow.

If you would have me make real

any powers possible, do me with deeds.

Don’t tell me. Show me.

Tom Keene

September 23, 2016

**61. Thirty-third Sunday in Ordinary Time (A)**

**Third Reading** (Matthew 25:14-30)

The reading is the parable about a man who places slaves in charge of talents while he was away for an extended time--five, two, and one talent respectively. The parable is sometimes used for homilies on the theme of using one’s abilities; that pertains to the performance of the slaves in what they do with the treasures placed in their hands. The talent, however, was a measure of weight, in this case indicating quantities of silver. The treasures come from the master, i.e. from a stand-in for God. So it is worthwhile inquiring about what the treasures are that come from God, as opposed to human abilities that we may develop in the course of life.

An important treasure given us by God takes the form of both a natural sense of fairness and justice and the biblical concern for justice. Both forms have issued in the traditional social justice teachings of the Church. One cannot help lamenting the homiletical neglect of these teachings, and their displacement by sentimentality, psychology, and charities. The mandate implicit in the parable’s imperative is to make such treasures productive. Burying them for safe-keeping hardly satisfies the gospel mandate.

*Strangers*

They approached,

along the sidewalk

in surroundings strange to both,

each a stranger to the other.

One said,

*Can you help me?*

*I need a bus ticket to Dallas.*

*I have the cash but the bus company*

*only takes credit cards online.*

Together, they went to a public library

and to a stranger working a computer.

*Can you help us?*

*Can you go to this web site*

*where we can use a credit card?*

He did. When done, the two thanked him. He said,

*De nada..*

Tom Keene

October 10, 2017

**62. Feast of Christ the King (A)**

**Third Reading** (Matthew 25:31-46.)

“Christ died outside the walls as he was born outside the walls. If we are to see the light, the sun, of Easter, we ourselves must go outside the walls.” “I am not here to convince the convinced or take care of the well. I’m here to support the ill and offer a hand to the lost. Does a bishop remain in his cathedral or does he go into the street? …I made my choice.” So said Jacques Gaillot after he was ordained bishop of Évreaux, France. Acting on his conviction, he proceeded to repeatedly upset the “restorationist” Pope John Paul II. For example, he supported a conscientious objector to military service and opposed an episcopal document supporting the French possession of the nuclear bomb (1983). He declined to defend parochial schools (1984) and supported the first Palestinian Intifada (1985). In the same year he signed an appeal on behalf of underpaid Catholic school teachers, along with the French Communist leader Georges Marchais. He spoke out for disarmament at the United Nations (1987). Also in 1987 he went to South Africa to meet a young anti-apartheid militant who had been imprisoned, rather than participate in an annual Lourdes pilgrimage. The next year he advocated the ordination of married men and defended the use of condoms, and blessed a homosexual marriage. 1989 found him in a protest against nuclear weapons testing in French Polynesia. The French church establishment proceeded to attack him publicly, while some spread rumors about his character. This led to something of a public controversy between him and most of the French hierarchy. On January 13, 1995, Pope John Paul II removed Bishop Gaillot from Évreaux by transferring him to the no longer existing see of Parthenia, in antiquity a diocese in what is now Algeria—in fact where the young Jacques Gaillot once served as a draftee in the French military.

Why mention the controversies that surrounded the Bishop of Évreaux in connection with the reading, the well-known 25th chapter of the Gospel of Matthew (…when you did it to the least…)? It is Bishop Gaillot’s conviction that he should “go into the street.” After being removed from the Évreaux Diocese he moved in with illegal squatters in Paris. His new fictive diocese, Partenia, had no borders; and he saw that as an opportunity to be a bishop for the excluded.

Bishop Gaillot went to the Call to Acton conference in Detroit, Michigan, in 1995, as a keynote speaker. There I heard him describe how he and his fellow squatters (most of them Muslim descendants of illegal immigrants, the descendants having lost retroactively, by a government action, their rights to own homes or receive government benefits) moved out of an unheated abandoned railroad station in winter and into the parish church of St. Ambrose in Paris—after all St. Ambrose was the patron saint of the poor. The congregation welcomed them, housed them in the church, fed them, kept them warm. Before a nativity scene settled a young family. Before the Eucharistic table a food service was set up. As the government assembled an armed force to invade the church, a collection of well-known personages—singers, comedians, movie stars, even intellectuals—surrounded the church and linked arms. A standoff endured for some weeks. The government finally forced its way into the church in the dark of an early morn. “Whatever you do to the least….”

Today one may find the Partenia website with many of Bishop Gaillot’s homilies, but with no recent updates: www.partenia.org/english/patenia\_eng.htm

The bishop met with Pope Francis in September 2015, who, it is said, encouraged him to continue his advocacy for migrants and refugees.

*Taking the Dare*

He dares us, this rabbi of old, of ever new.

“Love your enemies. Pray for those who oppress you.”

Inhale the fresh air of freedom from the mire of anger,

the ever nagging urges for vengeance.

Feel the force where, “Turn the other cheek.”

becomes a Judaic Judo,

letting the absolute impotence of those who hate

trip them up.

Tap into our revolutionary roots

at the wellspring waters in us all,

these ever burning fires biding their time to clarify

this befuddlement of who we are and what we can do.

Tom Keene

February 25, 2017

**Year B**

**63. First Sunday of Advent (B)**

**Third Reading** (Mark 13:33-37)

The First Sunday of Advent marks the beginning of a new liturgical year; the third reading selections will usually be taken from the *Gospel of Mark* rather than, as has been the case for the past twelve months, from the *Gospel of Matthew*. The passage for this coming Sunday appears in *Mark* immediately after the Markan apocalyptic end-times section. It says repeatedly and with different images, “Be watchful!”

There is a perennial danger of taking biblical passages too literally and confining transcendent insights and realities within the concrete depictions and verbalizations that we humans can manage, as opposed to the capacities of the divine. The Coming, said to be expected at the end of time, does not follow and will not follow a human bureaucratic development plan or a schedule as marked by clocks and calendars. To play detective with apocalyptic passages in the Bible in order to foretell the Day and Hour is a fool’s errand.

Incidentally, I was never so vilified in my life as I was when I volunteered to teach a course on world religions at a state university and, in the treatment of the Hebrew and Christian traditions, made this point about timing the end times. The course was much in demand, and an ordained minister who regularly taught it could not provide enough sections; he asked me to offer a section as a favor. When word reached him that I was not sticking at all to a fundamentalist line he proceeded to denounce me to university authorities and encouraged students to file complaints about my alleged anti-religious bias. Christians can be so unchristian when threatened by references to the divine escaping controllable categories—

Do I digress? Not really. If we fixate on where we imagine the divine to be found, we will not be watchful enough to notice where the divine chooses to be present.

*Irony*

*I love the smell of napalm in the morning.*

Apocalypse Now (1979)

 The observer at Rita’s Fiesta Café, watches

as the pre-teen boy and grandparents

seat themselves.

In bold letters, the boy’s T-shirt front proclaims,

I LOVE THE SMELL OF JET FUEL IN THE MORNING.

The shirt’s back reads: THE SMELL OF FREEDOM.

The observer recalls the Vietnam photo:

A pre-teen girl runs toward the camera,

her companions running after

splattered with that which burns to the bone.

Tom Keene

August 4, 2017

**64. Second Sunday of Advent (B)**

**Third Reading** (Mark 1:1-8)

This brief introduction in the earliest of the four gospels clearly aligns the “good news” of Christianity with the Hebrew prophetic heritage. “The origin of the good news of Jesus, the Messiah, son of God,” is to be found in that tradition. Mark cites a famous prophetic text: “A voice shouting in the wilderness, ‘Prepare the way of the Lord.’” Mark goes on to introduce John the Baptizer with language reminiscent of the description of the prophet Elijah (2 Kings 1:8). Prophetic concerns are not to be at the fringes of normal religion and pastoral care but rather comprise the origin, the very root, of the Christian tradition.

Historically prophets had condemned the rulers of Juda and Israel who abandoned God and God’s people, not only by adopting cults brought in from foreign allied powers but also by failing to secure the common people’s loyalty through justice; instead they allied themselves with seemingly mighty empires. John the Baptizer’s message was a call to turn away from the cult of power and quest for influence to be had from the Roman Empire. All Judea and Jerusalem, says Mark, went out to repent and be baptized by him, voting with their feet, as it were, against the ritual baths available in the centers of power.

It is more than a coincidence that the *Gospel of Mark* was composed in the imperial center of power, Rome, where the followers of Jesus had been persecuted by order of Emperor Nero. What was it about the small Jesus following in the imperial capital that Nero and his court feared?

*Meditation*

Sipping Time

to know this very now,

as Adam knew

The Mother of All that Lives.

Plunging into the urge

of moon-drawn Tides,

in a Silence

that conceives, births

the hum of galaxies.

Tom Keene June 1, 2015

**65. Third Sunday of Advent (B)**

**Third Reading** (Mark 1:14-20)

“The kingdom of God has drawn near; convert and trust in the good news.” Here we go again! John the Baptizer had preached out in the wilderness, and the Herodian tetrarch, Antipas, put an end to that by having the Baptizer arrested. Now Jesus comes onto the scene stirring things up again. Mark calls Antipas a “king” in order to highlight what the problem was with Jesus’ teaching: “The kingdom of God has drawn near.” Moreover, the new prophet began to recruit operatives—Simon and Andrew, and Zebedee’s sons James and John.

Today we think of monarchs as historical heads of nation states. They stood at the head of governments, and those governments were responsible for the common interests of the people and had fiscal regimes that were separate from the personal wealth of the monarchs. This was not the case before the early modern period; ancient and medieval kings were simply strongmen who captured a population, or they were half-willing underlings of stronger men who were also called “kings” in antiquity but labeled “emperors” by modern historians. The people were not citizens in the sense of modern citizenship but subjected people; they paid tribute rather than today’s kind of tax.

Domination by self-serving strongmen who usurp power and garner wealth for their own purposes rather than for the common good is inherently unjust. That they crack down on those who agitate for other interests is a natural and essential aspect of their rule. Agitation for other interests, even spiritual interests, is a natural response that is inherent in the condition of subjugation. The Jesus movement was such a response. Is today’s Christianity? Do churches agitate against self-serving seizures of power and national wealth?

*Thy Kingdom Come*

We are the world that has.

This is how we dream:

Along everlasting assembly lines

we put ourselves together

suited to designs of fashion

to fit intentions of entrepreneurs

who follow leads of markets

that care not to know what we do

so long as doing gets done.

We dream of machines that mold us to fit

to become interchangeable parts

till obsolescence or wear

send us to recycling bins.

We are the rest of the world.

This is how we dream:

Fitfully, amid babies' cries.

We harvest colonial garbage cans,

ponder melting into mountains with machetes and guns.

Poets, we celebrate our desperate hopes.

Painters, we color our future and wake to a cold gray now.

We are the tribe of dreamers.

This is how we live:

Becoming a people to make a people of all who dream.

We wear on our faces the blueprints, store lumber,

             brick and mortar in the basements of our minds.

Seeds, dormant in winter's dirt, we wait for spring.

Yeast set aside, we wait for the wheat and the fire.

Tom Keene

October 21, 1986

**66. Fourth Sunday of Advent (B)**

**Third Reading**(Luke 1:26-38)

Unlike the *Gospel of Mark*, Luke’s gospel has a nativity narrative. Like the earlier gospel that Mark had written, however, Luke wanted to start with the prophet John the Baptizer. So he begins by presenting the legends pertaining to the birth of the prophet. Only after that does he begin the story of Jesus. God sends a messenger to a young woman in the obscure village of Nazareth; the messenger addresses her formally: “Hail Gifted Lady! The Lord is with you!” After dealing with her perplexity, the messenger goes on to say that Holy Spirit will overpower her and that she will conceive and bear a son who will be named *Jesus* and that great things will be said about him.

He will be called “son of the Most High.” The text is not itself a theological claim but a historical one about how a public will regard this yet unborn Jesus.

“God will give him the throne of his ancestor David.” There was no such throne at the time; the allusion to the ancient king of Judah and Israel, wrapped in legend, was more a statement about the chosen nature of God’s people than a political kingdom. And “he shall rule over the house of Jacob for eternity….” This allusion goes even further back into legendary ties. Moreover, unlike the kingdom of the Davidic dynasty this new one will have no end.

For sure, statements about an eternal kingdom are not about a resumed political and military dynasty. Luke was writing late in the first century, and he knew that Caesar’s kingdom had crushed the Jewish revolt and burned Jerusalem to the ground. He knew and would even report that the Romans had executed Jesus because they thought he represented a negative reflection on Caesar, if not a political or military threat to Caesar’s kingdom. Yet in another sense the messenger from God was indeed making a statement about the powers of this world; Jesus would indeed be a negative reflection on the pretentions of dynasties—of seized power and wealthy lineages. What the promised kingdom would be was, and is, as important for its being a kingdom as for its not being a kingdom. Interestingly, we still pray that this kingdom come.

*The Sum of Us Parts*

You and I,  
sun, moon and galaxies,  
we search ourselves  
in quest of some singularity  
that sings us  
out of separation  
into harmony,

a chorus that hints  
at what knows  
whence we came,  
hones our becoming,  
awaits our completion.

Tom Keene

November 21, 2015

**67. Feast of the Holy Family (B)**

**Third Reading** (Luke 2:22-40)

Some parishes may choose to use a short form of the reading, Luke 2:22, 29-40.

The passage narrates Joseph and Mary bringing the newborn Jesus up to Jerusalem since he was a first-born. The narrative has them doing this when the days of their purification had been completed; “their” in this case would refer to Mary and Jesus. The Law specified a length of time of impurity for new mothers, and by tradition a new born infant was impure by association with her. A circumcision could occur after this period, eight days after birth. The narrative presents the family as ritually observant.

Luke’s narrative has the family meet Simeon, “a just and decent man,” in the Temple precincts. This seems to be a legendary reference to Simeon the son of Hillel. The point of the reference is that ritual observance was not an end in itself but an expression for a forward-looking hope, since Simeon was “awaiting the comfort of Israel,” and “it had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he saw the anointed one of the Lord.”

“And there was a prophetess, Anna, daughter of Phanuel, from the tribe of Asher. She was advanced in years, having lived with a husband seven years after her maidenhood, and she had been a widow for eighty-four years.” No doubt this is another legend. She “thanked God and kept talking about him” (the infant) “to all who were expecting the redemption of Jerusalem.” Anna would have been about 105 years old, a parallel to Judith (see Judith 16:23), who in a popular work of fiction freed her people from an oppressor.

Unimportant families situate themselves in the matrices of history and the social world by preserving passing relationships with notables; the notables themselves may not recall the non-notables at all or only if reminded. My late “Uncle Tony” (first cousin once removed) earned a medical degree at his father’s alma mater in Rome, it being noted now and then that his father had been a classmate of Maria Montessori, the first woman to earn the M.D. degree in Italy as well as being a noted educator. The legend about Uncle Tony is that he earned money while a medical student as a chess hustler, playing chess with notables for large sums of money and letting the notables win now and then so that they would not give up. Years later back in the U.S. he was recruited by the OSS (predecessor to the CIA) to accompany Vice President Truman on a ship to Malta; from there Truman would go by air to Tehran on a diplomatic mission. In the course of the trip as far as Malta, Uncle Tony was to keep the Vice President from being photographed with any Fascists or Communists—all of whom Uncle Tony knew. The legend is that the two got along very well, both tending to use rather earthy language. The fact may be, however, that we can blame Harry Truman for my cousin’s manner of speech.

So Jesus was blessed by Simeon the son of Hillel and the 105-year-old prophetess Anna. His own family was not notable; at the time he was otherwise not notable either. But now we try to set our calendars by years before and after his birth; it was not so in Luke’s day. And Jesus’ family behaved like a non-notable family, repeating legends about dealings with notables.

“And his parents went every year to Jerusalem for the Paschal Feast. And when he was twelve years old, they were going up at the feast as usual…. And after three days they found him in the Temple precincts sitting amidst the teachers listening to them, and questioning them….(A)nd his mother said to him, ‘Child, why did you do this to us?’ …and he said to them, ‘Why were you looking for me? Did you not know that I had to be in the house of my father?’”

Luke leaves us clues that he was drawing a parallel with the Passion, Death, and Resurrection of Jesus. It was the Paschal time. At age twelve, Jesus was ready for a transition of some kind. He was away three days.

Luke’s passage is occasioning in our thinking feelings and attitudes about Jesus. The *mind* about Jesus, how we are to regard him, is that we miss him, that we hope to find him, and that we cannot understand why he is absent, or seems absent, even when he is God with us. The fact that he became very much with us and then leaves, leaves us precisely how we ourselves are supposed to be for the time being. Our religion, the way that we are with him and he with us, is but a prelude. In order for him to *seem* as he really *is*, as an absence because of his dwelling in a house not of our making and beyond our understanding, is not only disquieting but humbling. And if it is too much for us, he will go down to Nazareth with us—for a time.

*331 East Kings Highway*

When sounded, the words, for us,

are more than an old address,

touching us still, half a century later.

At a monthly rent, we could barely afford,

we moved in with kids, ages two, three and five,

to find rooms of breakfast, dining, living, sleep,

even one for office and visitors.

Space, enough to share,

with hippies from the coffeehouse,

newlyweds who lived in our attic.

          The priest who returned to Mexico

and passed the word to travelers

that, in San Antonio, a welcome awaited them.

Eight years.

Then the letter came: the house is sold.

We had thirty days to pack and get out.

Our oldest,

her voice edging to tears,

asked us, Why?

It rests now, that abode,

in the mists of memory.

More than a shelter

to eat, sleep, hang our clothes.

A space and time where happenings,

beyond all saying, happened.

For Marilyn.

Happy anniversary, August 30, 2017

Tom Keene

**68. Baptism of the Lord, First Sunday after Epiphany B**

**Third Reading** (Mark 1:7-11)

John the Baptizer preached, “One greater than I is coming after me, the strap of whose sandals I am not fit to loosen. I baptized you with water, but he will baptize you in the holy spirit.” Jesus comes, is baptized, and sees the heavens torn asunder.

Why torn asunder? Mark opens his narrative of Jesus’ ministry with the real heaven being torn asunder, and closes it with the curtain in the Temple, which depicted the heavens with their stars, being torn asunder after the crucifixion. Jesus sees his mission in the renting of the appearance of the heavens. He sees the spirit come as a dove, and a voice says, “You are my beloved son, I am well pleased with you.”

The actual curtain in the Temple was not torn asunder. In fact, the Romans seized it in the year 70 CE and paraded it along with other Jerusalem loot in Rome. The meaning of the mere depiction of the heavens, however, was truly torn asunder, to be forgotten, just as the mere appearance of the heavens themselves is rent in two before the eyes of Jesus. It was time for the appearances to be discarded and give way to the presence of the One from heaven.

*Natividad Nekane*

(For Yvonne Libertad Sanchez and her son

Natividad Nekane Sanchez at his baptism.)

We have baptized you, Natividad:

   born at Christmas,

   you bear the human heritage.

   The race has spoken again.

   Its word took flesh in you.

We have baptized you, Nekane:

   Emerged at winter solstice,

   you are a new-born sun,

   called to rise from darkest depths,

   ride the heights and

   dare to plumb the dark again.

We have plunged you, Natividad,

   into the death-fraught waters of rebirth.

   What those not yet born regard a curse,

   we bestow as blessing:

that your belly ever growl for justice,

your vision ever hunger for wholeness.

We have immersed you, Nekane,

   into a company of commoners,

   a band of seekers,

   whose souls reach to the roots of the race,

   that, with us, you will feel in all,

   no matter the color and tongue,

   our yearning ache in your gut,

   the surge of our bile in your blood.

We have pledged you, Natividad Nekane,

   hijo de Libertad,

   to your destiny.

Tom Keene

May 2, 1987

**69. First Sunday in Lent (B)**

**Third Reading** (Mark 1:12-15)

“And straightway the spirit casts him out into the wilderness. And he was in the desert forty days, being tempted by Satan, and he was with wild beasts, and messengers cared for him.” It is tempting to take this as a historical account; however, even the text has no witness for what it narrates. And if there had been a witness, one would be hard put to it to say what the spirit casting Jesus out into the wilderness looked like. An ancient writer such as Mark did not have an elaborate conceptual or verbal apparatus for describing subjective or interior processes; he told stories instead.

*The spirit casts Jesus out*: Today, we would say Jesus felt alienated from his world. It all seemed wrong to him.

*Into the wilderness*: Mark is describing Jesus as getting away from everything that is taken for granted. Jesus was enabling himself to rethink everything.

*He was in the desert forty days*: This is an allusion to the Hebrews wandering in the Sinai Desert for forty years. It was a liminal state between slavery in the realm of the Pharaoh and a new society yet to be established, implying that the society Jesus knew was also a form of slavery and that he was about to commit himself to a new set of rights and wrongs.

*He was tempted by Satan*: No one is emotionally free of the world one has lived in; there is always the temptation to go back to accepting that world.

*And he was with wild beasts, and messengers cared for him*: This is an allusion, that the later evangelist Matthew would note—“For he will give his angels (messengers) charge of you to guard you in all you ways. On their hands they will bear you up, lest you dash your foot against a stone. You will treat on the lion and the adder…” (Psalm 91:11-13). Jesus was in the process of finding the courage in prayer to confront and challenge the world to which he would return.

So when Jesus re-entered that world, he repeated the message for which John the Baptizer was arrested: “The age has been fulfilled.” “The kingdom of God has drawn near; convert and trust in the good news.” There is some other kingdom, and that is the good news.

*Says Jesus*

See my face.

Touch my skin.

Smell my sweat.

Hear my songs.

Cut through the fogs of separation

into clarity of our oneness,

so, when you grasp the human in me,

you may discover the divine in yourselves.

Tom Keene

January 25, 2018

**70. Second Sunday in Lent (B)**

**Third Reading** (Mark 9:2-10)

This is the earliest version of the Transfiguration narrative; Matthew and Luke based their versions on this one. It is often said that Mark took some post-  
Easter tradition and placed it before the narrative of the passion and crucifixion in order to introduce some hope, in order to prepare the reader for the awful realities that were to follow. His readers—in Rome after the traumatic experience of the macabre persecution of Christians by Emperor Nero—were indeed in need of hope in the face of trauma.

The Transfiguration narrative has Jesus and four chosen disciples going up a mountain; Jesus is transformed into a glorious image, in which he converses with Moses and Elijah. Peter, who plays the part of the well-meaning but un-insightful student in Mark’s gospel, says how wonderful it all is. Then God the Father speaks from a dark cloud, and Jesus is seen as an ordinary earthling.

The point of this strange scene is the need for disciples of Jesus to have a double vision. What disciples see in this world is traumatizing, but what they see in the tradition of law (Moses), prophecy (Elijah), and enlightened engagement with these (Jesus conversing) is exhilarating.

But why not talk about that? The narrative has Jesus instructing the four disciples to keep quiet about it until after the Resurrection. Scholars have referred to this as the “messianic secret.” It is true enough that the early Christians had an in-group secret, but there may be more to it. An adage has it that someone who has insight does not speak, and that someone who speaks does not have insight. The wisdom of communicative silence derives from experience, not formulae. One needs recognize the limits of verbal teaching, god-talk, formulaic orthodoxy, and similarly the limits of unexamined trauma.

*Poem: Matthew and Luke connect their Transfiguration account to the story of Jesus healing a possessed boy after his disciples failed to do so. The poem, We See At Last, considers the contrast between the two stories.*

*We See At Last*

(Peter muses: Luke 9: 28-43)

On ascending,

We sit in a circle.

We see ourselves brilliant,

a gazing into sun without going blind.

Elijah, Moses, Jesus, John, James, me.

Hard to tell us apart,

Blurring, bleeding into one corona,

where notions of each other

make sense no more.

On descending,

we find the man,

screaming blather,

flailing futility,

begging to burst his prison.

Our common gut

seized by a loathing,

a panic to flee, to cast out.

Then, as in a sudden dawn,

he’s struck with calm.

We see at last,

from heady highs

to feet-in-the-dirt hurt,

the Healing Wholeness.

**71. Third Sunday in Lent (B)**

**Third Reading** (Johannine Gospel 2:13-25)

[Instead of this reading, some masses may use those from Cycle A, which coordinate with the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults program.]

“And it was near the Passover of the Judeans.” The Christian community for which the Johannine gospel was written used a different religious calendar from that used by the Judean officials who were in charge of the Temple in Jerusalem. Thus in order to set the scene, the gospel specifies that the *Judeans’* Passover was near. Many translations render the Greek term “Jews” rather than “Judeans,” thus obscuring the meaning of the text.

There was a great deal of business going on in Jerusalem, with the buying and selling of oxen, sheep, and doves. The mention of oxen suggests secular as well as ritual-related commerce. We can compare this with our Christmas season. In addition, in the Temple precincts money changers were at work so that the purchases of animals to be used liturgically could be made without using impure imperial coinage.

Jesus targeted the money changers, overturning their tables, and he ordered dove-sellers out of the Temple area: “…do not make my Father’s house an emporium.” Why not? The problem seems to be that of mixed motives. There is worship, and there is money-making; and these are two separate, if not opposed, activities.

Then the Judeans—the authorities over Judea—said to him, “What sign have you to show us, since you do such things?” In other words, “Who do you think you are?” When Jesus answered this question about himself, he responded, “Destroy this sanctuary and I will raise it in three days.” Why did he say, “Destroy?” Obviously, he was under threat. The gospel is making a case that those who later accused Jesus of threatening the Temple were deliberately misquoting him. He “was saying that about the shrine of his body.”

The irony of it all is that the very stratagem for keeping worship from pollution was itself a source of pollution. For sure, this was, and is, not unique to Judea.

*Radicals*

In circles,

from center to circumference,

from circumference to center.

Roots,

as in radishes reaching

up into air,

down into dirt.

As in touches that heal

receivers and givers.

As in dreams,

from here to deeps,

to heights and back again.

As in journeys

of shamans and heroes

down to depths of dread,

returning with treasures

for us their people.

As in echoes

of our inner Buddha, Moses,

Jesus, Mohammed, Gandhi, King,

resonating, sounding themselves

in our deeds.

Tom Keene

March 19, 2016

**72. Fourth Sunday in Lent (B)**

**Third Reading** (Johannine Gospel 3:14-21)

[At some masses, the readings from year A might be used instead, as part of an RCIA program.]

“And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, in this way must the son of humanity be lifted up so that everyone who believes in him would have eternal life.” This allusion to a narrative about Moses and the Israelites in the desert (Numbers 21:9) appears in the *Johannine Gospel* in the discourse between Jesus and Nicodemus. It is not clear whether it actually was a part of the discourse as passed down through tradition to the time of the composition of the gospel, or a theological comment in a side bar responding to the inability of Nicodemus to understand Jesus when Jesus said one must be born again. Either way, the allusion is meant to address the problem of people not seeing and not understanding.

In the Moses narrative, the people had become impatient: “Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness?” Soon some of them die from snake bite: “We have sinned, for we have spoken against the Lord and against you; pray to the Lord, that he take away the serpents from us.” The Lord tells Moses to make a fiery serpent and set it on a pole, “and every one who is bitten, when he sees it, shall live.”

“And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, in this way must the son of humanity be lifted up so that everyone who believes in him….” The symbolism refers obviously to the crucifixion. The point, however, is to see and understand. Jesus refers to himself as the son of humanity. However “high” a Christology the *Johannine Gospel* may have, it is necessary to see the son of humanity, not the eternal Word, when the crucifixion is perpetrated.

When innocent children and educators are murdered after gun manufacturers have used their political influence to keep the gun market open and uncontrolled, one must see and realize that children of humanity have been torn away from everyday life. When erstwhile travelers seeking peaceful work are captured at a border and sent back to a “homeland” so hostile to them that they had been moved to leave it in the first place, it is the children of humanity who have been repelled as unwanted at a border; that is the time when those who would repel them need to understand that it is the son of humanity whom they are turning away. When a condemned person on death row pleads for mercy, in order to understand one must see the son of humanity lifted up. The sacrifice at Calvary was not about appeasing an angry deity but bringing an angry humanity to the point of seeing, understanding, and being converted.

*Burn*

*“I want burning,* burning*...lovers who burn....”*

Rumi from *Moses and the Shepherd*

When Moses wondered at the burning bush

might he have asked:

What is it that burns without consuming?

It is love, of course:

A secret fire hiding in every soul,

waiting, building for the moment

it may burst and spread without consuming,

but declaring to all our pharaohs:

Let my people go.

Tom Keene

July 4, 2013

**73. Fifth Sunday in Lent (B)**

**Third Reading** (Johannine Gospel 12:20-33)

[At some masses the readings from year A might be used instead, to accommodate RCIA programs.]

When read from beginning to end, this passage lacks continuity and can seem to be quite difficult to understand. In the context of the *Johannine Gospel*, it follows the scene in which Jesus makes a triumphal entry into Jerusalem seated on the colt of a donkey. People are excited by his raising Lazarus from the dead, so that his entry draws a considerable crowd. There are Greeks in the crowd; the writer probably had Greek-speaking proselytes in mind. They approach Phillip, one of the disciples, who has a Greek name and who is from Galilee, a territory that has a mixed population. Phillip talks to Andrew, and the two approach Jesus.

Jesus, however, has something else on his mind; he does not seem to be taken up in the enthusiasm of the moment. “The hour has come for the son of humanity to be glorified.” At this point the narrative is broken off with a double “Amen” statement This can be set aside, literally, as a side bar; we would put it into a footnote in our modern practice. With it put aside, what Jesus says fits the scene: “The hour has come for the son of humanity to be glorified. Now is my soul troubled. And what should I say? Father, save me from this hour? But for this I came to this hour. Father, glorify your name.” Jesus sees as his life purpose not to lead a parade but to act in a way that would occasion the potentates of his world putting him to shame and death. The very course of action that leads people to strike up a parade leads others to target him.

The double Amen saying, about a grain of wheat falling to the earth and in a sense having to die, can be understood as a mediation on the scene.

The narrative continues with a voice from heaven that some in the crowd mistake for thunder. Jesus clarifies for the crowd, “This voice did not come for me but for you. Now is the judgment of the world, now the ruler of this world will be cast out. And when I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw all to myself.” Jesus was bent upon drawing people into a condemnation by the rulers of this world.

*Eons*

It hides among high cliffs

over the Rio Grande,

along a thin trail,

a cave-turned-grotto.

In red ochre paint,

rock walls

manifest figures

of antelope, bison, deer,

of bows and spears,

of the shaman,

arms stretched out

radiating earth’s dark-light powers.

Nourished by seeping rain,

green vines,

bearing blossoms,

the grotto draws flights of bees

to suck nectar,

proliferate pollen.

The work of ancients and earth,

it is enough to bring

a born Catholic to kneel,

to reflect,

in the bee-hum silence,

on doors to mysteries,

links to eons past,

connections that bleed

into memory

for eons ahead.

Tom Keene

March 25, 2009

**74. Palm Sunday (B)**

**Third Reading** (Mark 11:1-10; 14:1-15:47)

There are actually two gospel readings for Palm Sunday, both from the *Gospel of Mark*. The first is read at the beginning of mass, before the entry into the church for the main liturgy (Mark 11:1-10). It contains allusions to the “minor” prophetic book *Zechariah*. Historically, Jesus may have re-enacted the prophecy to indicate the peaceful nature of his messiahship:

Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion!

Shout aloud, O daughter of Jerusalem.

Lo, your king comes to you;

Triumphant and victorious is he,

humble and riding on an ass,

on a colt the foal of an ass.

I will cut off the chariot from Ephraim

And the war horse from Jerusalem;

and the battle bow shall be cut off,

And he shall command peace to the nations;

His dominion shall be from sea to sea,

and from the River to the ends of the earth. (Zechariah 9:9-10)

The context of the passage has themes of war and conquest, creating a curious juxtaposition with the celebration of peace. The juxtaposition also characterizes Zechariah 14, which speaks of the Mount of Olives (14:4), which Mark’s passage also mentions. We can only take this as an exposition of mixed emotions on the part of Mark and Zechariah both—troubled anxiety and peaceful acceptance at the prospect of binging divine peace to a troubled and troubling world, with the knowledge that the world would turn against the humble king riding a donkey colt.

Jesus seems to have had two followings—his band of Galileans and another group based in Jerusalem. Denominations evidently existed from the beginning of the Christian movement. The Jerusalem band pre-arranged an “upper room” which the evangelist associates with the Christian Eucharistic meal. The meal, described along with the crucifixion in the main gospel reading, has the familiar discourse of “this is my body” and “this is my blood,” prefiguring the drama to come, wherein the Messiah is both present and absented, imparting life and departing from life. Judas cannot endure the loss of what is valuable and who is valued, and joins the world of the apparent winners. Peter, a stand-in for “everyman” in the narrative, finds himself caught up in the cross currents.

There is no simple flight from the world in this religious expression; the Messiah goes right into Jerusalem. Nor is there an accommodation to the ways of the world. Like a conscience, the Messiah neither stays clear nor forces compliance.

*Reflecting on Agony in a Moment of Peace*

To stand affirmed and at one

at the center of person,

to begin where we are,

so the future flows out

from the presence of now.

            With Adam

            we walk

            in the garden

Then, inundated by busyness

and the glittering sequence of things,

our eyes glance away from the heart

and our hearing turns out

            in our Eden

            erupted by

            Adam made many.

The opening and shutting of vision,

the cupping and muffling of ears,

the remembering and forgetting.

            Piquant and bland

            is the fruit

of the tree.

In our thrusting out and shrinking back

we brave out our fears.

Our cowardice dies in the living of it,

our courage lives in its daily dying.

            From Eden’s nourishing womb,

            we climb with Calvary’s tree,

            ill content with peace we’ve known,

            risking it all for an Easter dawn.

Tom Keene 1969

**75. Easter Sunday (B)**

**Third Reading**

The celebrants of the Easter masses may opt for any of three gospel readings:

*Mark 16:1-7 (vigil service)*

Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome come with spices to make the burial of Jesus proper. They are surprised to see the large stone that had blocked entry into the tomb moved aside, and they see within “a young man sitting to the right wearing white clothing.” Mark uses images to make associations and contrasts in his gospel. In this case, the contrast is with a bystander at the time of the arrest of Jesus at Gethsemane. A youth heard the arrest party and come out at night from a house, still lightly clad, to see what the commotion was all about: “And there was a youth who was following along with him, wearing a linen tunic over his naked body, and they (the arresting party) seized him; but leaving the linen tunic he fled naked” (Mark 14:51-52). The young man at Gethsemane, a mere witness, flees in terror, leaving the gendarmes holding only a tunic. The young man at the tomb is not a silent witness but says not to fear, and a point is made about him being dressed in white.

The baptismal imagery is evident. At the Easter Vigil those to be baptized enter the pool wearing garments (usually gray) that, after the baptism, they replace with white garments for the remainder of the celebration. However, merely seeing Mark’s symbolizing the ritual symbols in a literary manner does not bring us all the way to the message. The youth at Gethsemane flees in terror from the powers of this world. The youth of Easter morning sits calmly in a scary tomb and tells the frightened women not to be afraid at all but to deliver the news to the disciples that they should go to Galilee, where Jesus will be waiting for them.

The *Gospel of Mark* was most likely written in Rome at a time when the macabre persecution of Christians by Emperor Nero was still a vivid memory. The Christians actually met in underground graves, the catacombs. Nero murdered many, but others, gathered as a church, outlived him.

*Johannine Gospel 20:1-9 (option for Sunday morning services)*

“We do not know where they put him.” Different gospels tell the story from their unique perspectives. The *Johannine Gospel* adds a recollection by the Beloved Disciple, a youngster at the time of the event, running ahead of Peter; the two were reacting to Mary Magdalene’s description of the body of Jesus being gone. The non-canonical *Gospel of Peter* tells the story from the perspective of Mary Magdalene: Fearing the Judean authorities, she and some other women had gone to the tomb in the dark of the early morning to mourn and prepare the body in the customary manner. On the way they wondered who could move the great stone at the entrance of the tomb. The implication to be drawn from the problem of the stone is that a prankster in the dead of the night could not be expected to have moved it and absconded with the corpse.

God, it turns out, is the ultimate prankster, leaving humans to wonder where Jesus could be contained. People firmly convinced of the adequacy of everyday human knowledge doubt the reports of the empty tomb, but perhaps doubt should be directed instead to the adequacy of any effort to contain Jesus. Joseph of Arimathea undoubtedly meant well, as would later devotees with their ornate tabernacles.

*Luke 24:13-35 (meant for Sunday evening services)*

On the way to Emmaus: “…some women among us astounded us. Being at the tomb early in the morning, and not finding his body, they came speaking also about seeing a vision of messengers who said he was alive.” Hope does not end but begins with an Easter experience. It may lack direction, even as our footsteps lead to a definite but unimportant destination; but then hope provides its own direction when everyday plans can be put on hold. Hope lives when the one they tried to kill is nevertheless alive.

Resorts to power are frequently intended to hide facts, stifle initiatives, dampen prospects, kill the spirit. The Easter experience, in contrast, is the ultimate “nevertheless” in the face of resorts to power. In its aftermath the conversation is to go on, until those who have entered into it want to continue into the evening breaking of bread.

*Easter Sunday Poetry Readings*

In the upper room of a used-book store

words on Big Chief paper,

songs in a grandmother's throat,

strums on a carpenter's guitar

occasion Easter's announcement

that the Poet continues to rise and write

at three a.m. in the carpenter's bed,

in recall of innocent love,

in prayers of the pure of heart.

Tom Keene

April 19, 1987

**76. Second Sunday in the Easter Season (Mercy Sunday) (B)**

**Third Reading** (John 20:19-31)

The disciples were gathered behind locked doors out of fear of the Judean authorities. Most translations say it was out of fear of “the Jews,” which misses the purpose of the sentence, which is to set the scene in time and place. The disciples were in hiding because the local authorities had just arrested their leader and turned him over to the tyrannical imperial government to be whipped bloody and tied to a cross beam to bleed to death as a trouble-maker.

Jesus appears: “You have peace” (the meaning of what translates literally “peace for you”). Then he shows the wounds in his hands, where the soldiers drove nails to keep Jesus from helping himself by sliding his arms for better leverage, and the wound in his side, made when a soldier mutilated his corps. Wherein is this peace?—“Peace for you. As the father sent me, I also am sending you.” Then comes a conferral of the Holy Spirit, who becomes the soul or life principle of the Church.

A curious passage follows, with which we are all familiar: “Whatever sins you might forgive are forgiven them, whatever you might hold have been held.” That which is to be forgiven or held has already been forgiven or held; the disciples would simply join in what is already an accomplished fact.

It is into this situation that “doubting Thomas” comes. In one sense, happy or blessed are they who have not seen and do not doubt, but in another sense there is virtue in seeing wounds and not avoiding the ugly sight.

*Things in Silence*

Some things:  
  rare sunsets,  
  dreams that affirm us,  
  moments when hearts of friends embrace,  
cannot be said,

yet they seek out a silence  
where we sit in the glow,  
let them be and become.

Tom Keene  
April 8, 2016

**77. Third Sunday in the Easter Season (B)**

**Third Reading** (Luke 24:35-48)

The reading picks up the narrative of Jesus appearing to two disciples on their way to Emmaus; after he disappears during the breaking of the bread, they go back to Jerusalem to report to the disciples what had occurred. The disciples in Jerusalem are described as “the eleven and those gathered with them.” Jesus appears again, and they were afraid because they thought he was a ghost. Jesus sets about proving his physicality, that he was no ghost.

Somehow it seems that many Christians believe, at least in practice, that Jesus went away and became a ghost, despite the testimony of the gospels and the doctrine of the *First Letter of John* that anyone who does not love his brother or sister who can be seen cannot love God who cannot be seen (1 John 4:20). A ghost, at least in imagination, can be seen, but not fed or touched. Ghosts seem to be very much like some prayers, don’t they? There are words, but nothing happens in the physical world.

The Easter narratives are tantamount to a critique of religion, at least religion of a kind. The disciples do not pray that Jesus come; he comes anyway. He does not limit himself to the spiritual or ghostly realm, where spirituality of a kind would contain him. Unlike an imagined ghost, he does not appear where he is not present, but is present rather than being an appearance. Whenever religion would be the endeavor of a puppeteer pulling the strings of a deity, Jesus would cancel the show and ask for bread.

*Sanctuary: An Easter Meditation*

News item, San Antonio, Texas, April 8, 1985

A hundred cheering Sanctuary supporters at the Greyhound bus station

welcomed convicted refugee worker Jack Elder

as he arrived to begin a 150-day sentence at a half-way house.

The well-wishers walked Elder to nearby St. Mary's Catholic Church,

where pastor Bill Davis led a thanksgiving prayer service

and hosted a breakfast for Elder and his supporters.

Epiphany, Somewhere in the memory of the Sanctuary community,

April 8, 1985

As the curved universe enfolds into itself,

eventually this event forecasts,

indeed, prophesies,

the inevitable turning under,

the incessant subversion.

Laurita says it in her own way,

"Listen to me, people!"

Her tossing braid,

long, dark, silver-stranded,

is a clue to the revving of internal motors.

"Now that the city elections are over

we need to talk to some people

about making San Antonio a sanctuary.

And then we want to make some changes at the White House."

Yes, Laurita,

America as sanctuary.

Imagine America:

not as oppressor of the poor,

not as number one arms seller,

not as great grain merchant

holding hungry bellies hostage,

but the home of hearts

whole enough

not to fear our freedom,

nor to turn away the stranger,

so recently executed,

of whom Father Bill spoke,

in retelling the story of Emmaus.

Tom Keene

April 8, 1985

**78. Fourth Sunday in the Easter Season (B)**

**Third Reading** (Johannine Gospel 10:11-18)

The gospel reading consists of the Parable of the Good Shepherd. It is situated within the miracle narrative of the man born blind. In that narrative, “some from the Pharisees” refuse to see the obvious implications of the cure of the man’s blindness. That leads to a section comparing good and bad religious leadership. The Parable of the Good Shepherd compares the genuine shepherd’s care for the sheep and the flight of the hireling when a wolf approaches.

The parable relies on an underlying analysis of motives. The shepherd is interested in the sheep while the hireling is principally interested in pay. Shepherding, even by genuine shepherds, may in the long run aim at compensation through the sale of wool, but that long run interest entails a concern with the well-being of the sheep while the interest of the hireling is short term and does not really involve a concern for the well-being of the sheep.

It is difficult to escape mixed motives in our modern money economy. One way of doing so is to cultivate quality workmanship. Another is interest in the personal well-being of the people we affect with our work, an aesthetic interest in an art we pursue, or an intellectual interest in some area of knowledge. Very often these intertwine with each other as much as they intertwine with an interest in compensation.

The customary prayer recited prior to proclaiming the gospel is, “May the Lord be in my mind, on my lips, and in my heart.” The last part of that prayer is the most difficult.

*Roosters We*

*(For advocates of justice and peace.)*

We fill our lungs with morning air,

and in throaty cry let it out

to call up the sun,

wake our hens and brood of chicks

to hunt and peck, peck and hunt:

a lineage of doing

that comes down

over horizons of time

to light the dark.

Tom Keene

August 18, 2017

**79. Fifth Sunday in the Easter Season (B)**

**Third Reading** (John 15:1-8)

The *Johannine Gospel* presents more than one version of a farewell discourse by Jesus. The reading for this Sunday is the beginning of one of the versions. It consists of the familiar similitude of the vine and the branches. It should be noted that while there is only one vine, there are nevertheless multiple branches. It is not only unity that is important, but plurality as well. “Unity without uniformity” as a phrase captures part of the message, but a plurality of “branches” depicts separateness as well, separateness without separation or distantiation. The “trunk” that keeps the separate branches from being separated off is Jesus himself, not some doctrine or organizational structure.

The very idea of a human son of the transcendent God implies that no human connection can exhaust the possible avenues toward divinity. There are always more ways than one’s own way. This implication highlights the value of faithfulness and loyalty to the way by which one has come to trust in God (adherence to the true vine), but also of interest in, appreciation of, even fascination with the ways through which others come to such a trust. Exploration of the separate others stimulates and enriches an exploration and understanding of one’s own faith experience and the ways in which it can grow.

*Unity?*

*The Father and I are One (John 10:30)*

Is it really all one anyway?

That up and down

are somehow the same?

Also, right and left,

crazy and sane,

evil and good?

That in the end,

and even now,

the dualities dissolve back

to Unity?

Will murderers and their victims

each understand self and other

enough to embrace?

Will war makers and peacemakers

come to terms as illusions

of otherness terminate,

and the truths of being One begin?

Is Adonai echad, the Lord our God is One,

our first, last and ultimate prayer?

            Some Great Spirit within us

            that leaks truth,

            arouses love,

            inspires courage,

            that connects our separations,

completes our accord with

            all that was, is now,

            and will become?

Some Creator of all

            abiding in all creation?

            Some One Source

            from which we come,

to Whom we all return?

Tom Keene     January 19, 2008

**80. Sixth Sunday in the Easter Season (B)**

**Third Reading** (Johannine Gospel 15:7-17)

Last week’s reading presented the similitude of the vine and the branches. The gospel reading for this Sunday is a continuation of that discourse, and it can hardly be understood without relating it back to the image of the vine and branches: “If you remain on me and my words remain in you, ask for whatever you wish and for you it will come to be.” In the teaching of the Johannine school that created the fourth gospel, petitionary prayer is not a matter of using God to get one’s own way but of fashioning one’s own wishes with the words emanating in Revelation, in a spirit of *agape*, a unifying but not uniforming love.

It is the presence of passages of this kind in the fourth gospel that leads to our associating it with the author of the letters of John, and to our referring to it as the *Gospel of John* or *Johannine Gospel*. For example: “This is my command, that you love one another as I have loved you.”

There is a tendency to reduce faith, or trust in God, to obedience or observance of commands and regulations. This gospel makes a point of quelling that kind of impulse and going beyond it: “I no longer call you slaves because slaves do not know what their master is doing; but I called you friends because everything I heard from my Father I made known to you.” The disciple is not a slave, a mere instrument of a master, but one who has been empowered by an imparted insight and who is expected to develop that insight further and, of course, use it.

*Universe at Play*

Evolving  
in its own good time,  
then, now, yet to be,

letting us savor,  
one by one, each  
tiny fraction of its all,

the whole of it  
exciting its parts,

messing around  
-trial and error-  
a game, blind man’s buff,

feeling its way to finesse  
  galaxies that dance,  
  horizons that blush,

ourselves  
  scribbling poems,  
  raising cathedrals,  
    
nursing babies.

Tom Keene

November 2, 2015

**81. Solemnity of the Ascension (B)**

**Third Reading** (Mark 16:15-20)

The original *Gospel of Mark* concluded with Easter: The tomb no longer contains the body of Jesus, and a young man in white clothing announces that Jesus the Nazorean who had been crucified has been raised. Appearance legends were added to the gospel early on, and the reading for today is taken from one of them. The eleven disciples did not believe Mary Magdalene about Jesus appearing, or the two walking into the countryside; so Jesus appears to them directly. He tells them to go preach the good news “to every creature.”

“One who believes and is baptized will be saved, but one who is not believing will be condemned.” Does salvation really depend on intellectual assent to a report? Faith in New Testament Greek is closer to “trust” in English than “believe,” and “salvation” refers to rescue from disaster. The saying is not about punishment for not assenting to a report; it is about people—evidently in the manner of the eleven—predisposed or not to mistrust good people. Living in such mistrust is a disaster from which one needs to be saved.

Jesus’ discourse goes on: “But these signs will accompany those believing: they will cast out demons in my name, speak new languages, lift up snakes by hand, and drinking something deadly it will not harm them; they will lay hands on the sick and they will be well.” This comes out of a world that was characterized by magical thought. It did not seem so extraordinary or magical to the ancients, but it does to us. Few people believe in spirit possession and exorcism today, and that has nothing to do with a mistrustful predisposition. Similarly few seem intent upon handling snakes today; the few who are so intent insist upon the King James Version translation, “serpent.” Such insistence upon going back to premodern, nonscientific worldviews has nothing to do with accepting the appearance of the risen Christ in the world.

*What We Are*

Material is what we are,  
immersed in a universe of stuff,  
each thing in its own moment  
momentous:  
   each flower,  
   every single baby,  
   and its cry for tit,  
   every tart taste,  
   each erotic twinge,  
   every jazz beat,  
   each aesthetic lust.

Yet each bit of stuff tells  
of some awe-filled all,  
some ultimate other:  
   the more beyond,  
   the more that we become  
   when we know  
  what we are.

Tom Keene

September 21, 2004

**82. Trinity Sunday (B)**

**Third Reading** (Matthew 28:16-20)

In the post Easter appearances as narrated in the *Gospel of Matthew*, Jesus gives instructions that the disciples were to meet him at a mountain site in Galilee. The eleven core disciples did so. And at the mountain Jesus had two things to tell them—that all authority had been given to him, and that therefore they were to make disciples among all the gentiles, baptize them with the Trinitarian formula, and then teach them his commands. He concluded by promising to be with them up to the end of the age.

The “therefore” after the recognition of the authority of Jesus the Messiah is interesting. The authority of the humble Jesus was superior to that of states and empires, and therefore people should be baptized into his teachings. But Jesus did not reveal anything about authority and government; and his method of instruction was to formulate parables that left people to draw their own conclusions. This is where the Trinitarian formula comes in. God the father, as revealed in the Hebrew Scriptures and Jewish culture in general, was the creator. The will of the creator is reflected in creation. Humans, having the power of reason, can recognize the divine will by observing creation. What Jesus, the human son, revealed was a reiteration of what could be observed in creation. The dynamism of recognizing and reckoning is the work of the Spirit.

*Behold*

This source,

life coming from life,

knowing from being known.

This source, showing itself

in shapes of trees, in sounds of songs,

in darkest silence.

This source’s airy presence,

in faintest breeze, in hurricane force,

in what we breathe.

Tom Keene

February 24, 2018

**83. Body and Blood of Christ (Corpus Christi) (B)**

**Third Reading** (Mark 14:12-16, 22-26)

The gospel reading includes the Eucharistic Institution narrative from the *Gospel of Mark*—hardly a surprising choice for a celebration of the Body and Blood of Christ. But do not let that absence of surprise obscure the unordinary aspect of it all.

First, Jesus has secret followers in Jerusalem, and he needs to tell his Galilean disciples how to make contact with them through a secret sign. Secrecy implies danger. Mark’s Christian community in Rome knew of such danger; they had gone through a period of persecution and were still officially illegal. They continued to maintain a communal secrecy. It was a survival stratagem for members of one part of the Christian network not to know the members of another part, except through a few select leaders. The Jesus movement had known a similar situation in Palestine, and the tradition about that resonated with Mark’s associates in Rome.

Second, the secret sign involved crossing gender expectations. The famous Dominican biblical scholar Marie-Joseph Lagrange (1855-1938) observed long ago that women carried earthen water jugs while male water carriers used large leather bottles. Evidently the early followers of Jesus made light of violating gender expectations. The disciples followed the man carrying the water jug to a house, where the household head had a large upper room ready where the disciples could prepare the Passover meal.

Third, Jesus adds the famous statement of his real presence in the bread and wine blessings, which Mark does not even try to explain.

Fourth, “…after singing the hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives,” rather than continue the celebration as would be expected. Knowing of the plot of Judas and the Jerusalem authorities, Jesus did not want his secret Jerusalem followers to be further endangered by his presence. So he and his disciples leave the house.

The hymn traditional for the Passover consisted of Psalms 115-118, found in modern bibles. Psalm 116 includes this passage:

I kept my faith, even when I said,

“I am greatly afflicted”;

I said in my consternation,

“Humans are all a vain hope.”

What shall I render to the Lord

for all His bounty to me?

I will lift up the cup of salvation

And call on the name of the Lord,

I will pay my vows to the Lord

In the presence of all His people.

Precious in the sight of the Lord

Is the death of his saints.

*Memo to water*

Mostly water,  
these bodies of ours are,  
so the chemists say.  
As is our earth,  
geographers say.  
It’s the life blood of life,  
biologists say.

So when, immersed in thirst,  
we feel how you flood mouth, gullet, and gut,  
and how you become us and we become you,  
what are you trying to tell us?

Tom Keene  
January 4, 2014

**84. Second Sunday in Ordinary Time (B)**

**Third Reading** (John 1:35-42)

This Sunday’s reading is one where we find a passage from the *Johannine Gospel* rather than the *Gospel of Mark*, since the latter is rather short. The *Johannine Gospel* frequently features as a type a person named in the legends about Jesus. The featured individual here is Andrew, one of two disciples of John the Baptizer who follow Jesus after the Baptizer points Jesus out as God’s lamb. The narrative points to Andrew by not even giving a name for the disciple who was with him.

The Baptizer’s words, “Look! The Lamb of God!” hearken back to the time of the Israelites’ exodus from Egypt. Moses had told the elders to slay a Passover lamb, the sprinkled blood of which would be a sign for the angels of death to spare their households (Exodus 12:21-23). Andrew and the unnamed disciple were seekers for the household of Jesus; Andrew, however, does not stop at joining the household of Jesus but goes to get his brother Simon to join too.

A second named individual who becomes a type is Simon. What type Simon comes to represent is not fleshed out in this part of the narrative. The passage provides only a clue by telling us that Jesus gives Simon the nickname *Kephas*, which the evangelist translates not as *rock* (*petra*) but *Rocky* (*Petros*). A possible implication of the name is that this Simon Johnson needed to be worked on, hewn.

We tend to think of an evangelist as a single person, but the *Johannine Gospel*, called that because of its association with the letters of John, appears to be the work of a team, a school of Christians who collected narratives and worked them together over several decades. Their typological strategy invites us to find ourselves in the quest of Andrew and in the continuous learning and self-revising of Rocky.

*Body of Christ*

(At breakfast with fellow activists)

We dare to embody you in our communion

over tacos and coffee, amid laughter at ourselves,

our talk about matters that matter.

Embody you in our recall:

of your presence then,

                your healing touches,

                your startling stories,

                your embracing glances

                that seized us to the core.

                of your presence now,

                in our hungers for justice,

                in our grief over cruelty,

                in our pleasure at each of our

                faltering forward steps,

                of your lasting presence

                as the arc of our becoming

                bends toward the all we can together be.

Tom Keene

August 12, 2016

**85. Third Sunday in Ordinary Time (B)**

**Third Reading** (Mark 1:14-20)

“The kingdom of God has drawn near; convert and trust in the good news.” Here we go again! John the Baptizer had preached out in the wilderness, and the Herodian tetrarch, Antipas, put an end to that by having the Baptizer arrested. Now Jesus comes onto the scene stirring things up again. Mark calls Antipas a “king” in order to highlight what the problem was with Jesus’ teaching: “The kingdom of God has drawn near.” Moreover, the new prophet began to recruit operatives—Simon and Andrew, and Zebedee’s sons James and John.

Today we think of monarchs as historical heads of nation states. They stood at the head of governments, and those governments were responsible for the common interests of the people and had fiscal regimes that were separate from the personal wealth of the monarchs. This was not the case before the early modern period; ancient and medieval kings were simply strongmen who captured a population, or they were half-willing underlings of stronger men who were also called “kings” in antiquity but labeled “emperors” by modern historians. The people were not citizens in the sense of modern citizenship but subjected people; they paid tribute rather than today’s kind of tax.

Domination by self-serving strongmen who usurp power and garner wealth for their own purposes rather than for the common good is inherently unjust. That they crack down on those who agitate for other interests is a natural and essential aspect of their rule. Agitation for other interests, even spiritual interests, is a natural response that is inherent in the condition of subjugation. The Jesus movement was such a response. Is today’s Christianity? Do churches agitate against self-serving seizures of power and national wealth?

 Poem

Friends,

As Larry was leaving this morning, he shared the thought of America blessing God. That connected with our discussion about Orlando.

Blessings,

Tom

*Orlando, et Cetera*

*(Violence is as American as cherry pie.)*

H. Rap Brown

The bullet riddled bodies of Orlando, Sandy Hook

and other atrocities whose names we forget,

the iceberg tip of our bent to destroy.

So let us name just some of our eradications:

            Hundreds of Indian villages. Centuries of slavery.

            Our military and CIA’s crushing of people’s self determination,

            Iran in 1953, Guatemala in 1954, Dominican Republic

and Indonesia in 1965, Chile in 1973, Nicaragua and

El Salvador in the 1980s up to Honduras in 2009.

We can name them to others and get the blank stare,

the refusal to hear, to think, to consider and wonder

if our silent indifference means consent.

Still we name them, yearning for a day when

America can bless God.

Tom Keene

June 17, 2016

**86. Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time (B)**

**Third Reading** (Mark 1:21-28)

Jesus enters the synagogue in the modest town of Capernaum and starts teaching. “And they were astounded at his teaching, for he was teaching them as one having authority and not as the scribes had.” Then someone with an “unclean spirit” interrupts: “What do you have to do with us, Nazarene Jesus? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are holy one of God.” Then Jesus casts the unclean spirit out.

At one level, we can read this as Jesus starting out with questionable credibility, and seizing upon the ravings of the man possessed by an unclear spirit as an opportunity to demonstrate his authoritative power. He would show that his spiritual power was greater than that of the town demoniac.

Let’s look at the legend more closely, as Mark wrote it. The people were “astounded” because he taught as someone “having authority.” Does teaching need authorization? In our time, education is a formally organized endeavor; teachers need to be credentialed in the sense of having appropriate degrees and licenses. There are good reasons for such credentialing since modern life demands technical specializations in the classroom. However, nothing in Mark’s narrative suggests Jesus went to the synagogue to impart specialized knowledge requiring the kind of expertise that the scribes had.

Teaching is the reciprocal of learning as left is to right and up to down. The learning experience involves an appreciation of the fact that there is something of value that one does not already know, and that furthermore one knows enough to recognize it when a teacher reveals it. The teacher astonishes the one who would learn by revealing the fact that one who would learn had the ability to know something all along but had been misled by the trappings of inessentials that disguised what was essential. Thus teachers do not throw out factual particles that serve as dust in the eye but rather array facts in a way to reveal questions. One who would learn needs first to grasp the structure of a problem or question, and then generate answers on the basis of cognitive powers already in place. Such does not require authorization. And when learning erupts, it occasions a certain wonder; it astounds.

Then comes the interruption by the “unclean spirit”: “What do you have to do with us, Nazarene Jesus? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, holy one of God.” The native of Capernaum was not disposed to accept teaching from someone from elsewhere, in this case Nazareth. Notice that consciousness of self, in this case a member of the community of Capernaum, stands in the way of learning. “Have you come to destroy us?” Yes, a teacher comes to dissolve the “us” as a solidary unity more interested in preserving its own solidarity than recognizes the good that can be found in the world of foreigners. A teacher needs to induce people to think for themselves; otherwise recognition of what one does not know may never come about. “I know who you are….” That is the problem—what “I” already think is “knowledge.”

So much that passes for religion has the form of some in-group fixation that forestalls the formation of any questioning spirit. Finding a “holy one of God” threatens the group-think that accommodates authorized inessential knowledge.

*Give Me a Teacher*

Give me a teacher who gives a damn,

needs to know more than my name,

strains for the song I have not sung,

follows me in my ennui

to find my fishing hole.

Give me a teacher who gives a damn,

seduces, surprises,

spades the soil of me,

fertilizes feelings for what is fair,

with anger at what is not,

hope for solutions,

appetite for application.

Give me a teacher who gives a damn,

who tenders truth and trust

more than rules and roles,

favors sticky freedoms

over cool controls,

who risks career and cares

to take a stand for students,

is not unknown to laugh.

I can build you a future in what I am.

when you give me a teacher who gives a damn.

Tom Keene

July 1986

**87. Fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time (B)**

**Third Reading** (Mark 1:29-39)

Jesus and his disciples had left the synagogue of Capernaum, where Jesus had preached “with authority” and “cast out an unclean spirit” from a man who had interrupted him. They enter the home of Peter and Andrew, and Jesus cures Peter’s mother-in-law of a fever. The town gathers outside the home, bringing all kinds of “demon possessed” people and he cures them. Jesus makes his escape from Capernaum before sunrise, and when the disciples find him in the wilderness he says he wants to go elsewhere to preach. He did in fact preach throughout Galilee, but he had to keep on casting out demons too.

Jesus wants to peach, and we know from all four gospels that his message is largely ethical. However, the market for ethical preaching was limited; the people had the idea that evil spirits caused their various problems and they wanted Jesus to expel such spirits. Not too many people today believe in evil spirits, but they continue to see the Jesus tradition as an opportunity to make themselves feel good. They have their agenda, and they would have Jesus attend to it.

*Consecration*

Able to afford its shrinking summer shade,

the old man sat on the window ledge

of the corner store,

watching traffic,

greeting through his thirst,

customers coming and going.

One,

in anonymous celebration

of fortune's occasion,

tore from a six-pack

a cold can of care

for him to share.

Before popping its top

the old man held the beer up

in both hands cupped,

raised his eyes as if to say:

through this,

with this,

and in this

I drink to You:

the ever present question,

the never ending answer.

Behind the veil of earth’s noon-light,

galaxies hummed to the strum of stars.

Tom Keene

June 25, 1988

**88. Sunday in Ordinary Time (B)**

**Third Reading** (Mark 1:40-45)

“And a leper comes to him asking for help, kneeling, and saying to him, ‘If you would wish, you will be able to make me clean!’” This is a difficult passage because of varying readings in the next sentence in the ancient manuscripts. But when we carefully read the very first sentence, a difficulty already appears: “If you wish….” The leper is doubting Jesus’ intentions from the outset. In fact, the leper himself appears to be a difficult person, perhaps made that way by the social isolation resulting from leprosy in ancient times.

The *New American Bible*, which the U.S. Catholic Church uses in the liturgy, reads the next sentence as follows: “Moved with pity, he stretched out his hand, touched him, and said to him, ‘I do will it. Be made clean.’” Most published Bibles translate similarly. But then the next verse doesn’t make sense if one stays with that translation; Jesus is said to “warn sternly,” but the Greek has him expressing displeasure, not simply being stern.

The alternate ancient reading does not have a showing of compassion but anger. It is a principle of text criticism that an ancient copyist would change a text to remove a difficulty but not to introduce one. Choosing the variant that described Jesus as having compassion violates that principle, and the editorial committee responsible for the critical Greek edition of the New Testament that stands behind modern Bibles expressed their qualms about the matter in their textual commentary.

The early 20th century scholar Kirsopp Lake solved the problem by noting the ambiguous nature of the pronouns in the passage. Following Lake’s reading, one would translate the passage this way: “‘If you would wish you will be able to make me clean.’ And being angry and stretching forth his hand he grasped Jesus, and Jesus says to him, ‘I wish it, be made clean’; and straightway the leprosy left him and he was made clean. And troubled by him, Jesus straightway sent him away….”

The easier text that was selected for the published Bibles provides good homiletical material about reaching out to stigmatized people. The more difficult text selected by Lake not only has Jesus willingly engaging with a stigmatized person but doing so even when the individual proves to be difficult and troublesome. And troublesome he proved to be. After Jesus had cured him and told him to follow the standard procedure for being declared “clean” (showing oneself to the priests as prescribed in the Law) and not to tell anyone, the cured man “began to proclaim it a great deal and publicize the report, so that Jesus was no longer able to enter a city openly….” Jesus might have been unable to enter cities openly because crowds of people wanted additional cures—a pattern found elsewhere in the *Gospel of Mark*—but it might also have been because he himself had become unclean by having made contact with a stigmatized leper.

*We Farmworkers*

We are the ones who connect the seeds to you,

attending them through to harvest:

           Cane cutters,

fruit pickers,

planters,

weed pullers,

packers.

Picture us:

           Over and over bending of backs,

our gallons of sweat,

our callusing of hands,

our faces ridden with exhaustion,

our eyes hungry for rest.

How without us cannot be:

            Your cities,

            hospitals,

            schools,

            sewers,

            highways.

Imagine how, with every breakfast bite,

you might grasp the worth of the work we do

and resolve to pay us what our work is worth.

Tom Keene

December 12, 2017

Feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe

**89. Seventh Sunday in Ordinary Time (B)**

**Third Reading** (Mark 2:1-12)

“Which is it easier to say to the paralytic, ‘Your sins are forgiven’ or ‘Arise and pick up your stretcher and walk’?”

At one level, this is a straightforward legend with a Christological point: Since Jesus can cure a paralytic he must be divine. But Mark, despite his rough Greek, is a gifted craftsman. We know little about him, but evidently he was Peter’s translator in Rome, likely a member of an immigrant family. He had Peter’s stories, thought them through over some years, and created the gospel *genre* with the stories to inspire Christians who remembered the gruesome persecution under Nero and whose faith was still technically illegal. For sure, it was not easy to say, “Your sins are forgiven”; and it is still not.

An inspirational work such as a gospel is not needed for doing easy things. How often, however, do we hear preaching about easy deeds: Show up at church, be generous with funds that would otherwise be frittered away on trifles, condemn evils one is not likely to perform anyway.

Perhaps one might ask, Just who is that paralytic anyway? We are already followers of Jesus, or at least we try to be. We already recite a creed that acknowledges him to be divine. The paralytic and those with him apparently concurred in all this, since they went at some lengths to reach Jesus, digging through a roof. The point, or at least one point among several, is to rise up, pick up the wherewithal with which we accommodate our weakness, and carry.

*Who Are We?*

Are we these masks we wear  
in order to belong, to woo a mate,  
to pass the castle gatekeepers  
to get the jobs that feed our kids?

Are we the I, this self,  
the incommunicable entity  
of this naked person that returns   
our stand still stare into the mirror  
that wears no mask,  
that is more than a what,  
that dares to be a who  
with a will to become?

And are we more?  
Are we the soil that grounds   
this who that we are,  
some companion who goes where we go,  
who waits there for us to arrive,  
some Soul-Self that calls our who  
to be and become?

To become what?

Some Beyond  
that is all within us,  
that is all outside us,  
some Root predating   
this universe’s big bang,  
its ever expanding contraction,  
some Wellspring to which we all return,  
where every yin, every yang  
dissolves into the one Tao,  
one finality for all beginnings,  
one beginning for all that's final?

Tom Keene

February 7, 2008

**90. Eighth Sunday in Ordinary Time (B)**

**Eighth Sunday in Ordinary Time** (Mark 2:18-22)

“Why do the disciples of John and the disciples of the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not fast?” Why are there married priests in the Eastern rites of the Roman Catholic Church but not in the Latin Rite? Why do some women religious wear veils and some d not? This kind of questioning leads to separating what is essential from what is not. The issue is not simply what is important but what the nature of disciple ship is. There would have been something in authentic about a disciple of John the Baptist or a disciple of the Pharisees not fasting. By implication there would have been something inauthentic about a disciple in the Jesus movement of first century Palestine fasting. Fasting could be a part of discipleship in later Christianity, but the personal ministry of Jesus was about breaking from thoughtless ritual, not adding new rituals.

“No one sews a patch from new cloth onto an old garment; otherwise, the added matrial lifts off it, the new from the old, and the tear becomes worse.” This saying and the one about new wine in old wineskins have been interpreted to argue that the Christian movement should abandon Jewish ethnic practices. That was probably an intended inference in the first century, but there is a principle behind it that applies also in the twenty-first—separating the essential from the inessential. To engage in the busy activity of religion is hardly what it is all about.

*Body*

Thank you, Body  
for feeling another’s touch,  
hearing music, laughter,  
tasting sweet and sour,  
smelling coffee perking,

for the peace of sleeping,  
awareness of waking.

Thank you for working.  
What would I do without you?

Tom Keene

September 13, 2015

**91. Ninth Sunday in Ordinary Time (B)**

**Third Reading** (Mark 2:23-3:6)

“And it happened he was going along through corn fields on the Sabbath, and his disciples, plucking ears of corn, began to make a path.” Mark sets the scene in terms of travel, or more specifically, making a way for Jesus. Jesus’ critics deliberately misinterpret the disciples’ activity, accusing them of doing farm work in order to have food for a meal.

In a few short verses, Mark confronts us with the issues he wants to address. There is the deliberate misinterpretation of activity. One thinks of the action of football players kneeling during the national anthem in the course of their 2016 and 2017 seasons; their port was clearly that the rights that the anthem represents were being denied to African Americans. Some politicians, who had shown no interest in guaranteeing those rights, accused the athletes of “disrespecting the flag”—the flag heretofore had been extraneous to the situation. Is it not the case that deliberate misinterpretation is a form of dishonesty?

Mark has Jesus replying to his critics on their own terms. The national narrative said King David himself ate what, ritually speaking, he should not have, even giving the loaves to offering to the warriors accompanying him. Then Mark returns to reality and to the real issue: The disciples were making a way for the person whom they took as their authority and teacher, and they were doing that on the Sabbath. “The Sabbath exists for humanity, and not humanity for the Sabbath. So the human son is a lord of the Sabbath.” The issue was not the actions of the disciples, but the fact that it was for Jesus for whom they were making a way.

Mark heightens the issue in the very next scene. Jesus enters a synagogue, and someone with a paralyzed hand asks to be cured. So Jesus asks those present, including his critics, “Is it permitted to do a good dee don the Sabbat or an evil one, to save a life or to kill?” The critics keep silent. So Jesus cures the hand. His critics set about conspiring, on the Sabbath, to kill.

*Funnel*

You funnel,  
channeling  
our births  
into jaws of danger,  
arms of bliss,

into our body/mind  
entertainers of taste, touch,  
creators of story and song,

immersing us in  
drops of time  
that we grasp  
the tide of your Presence.

Tom Keene  
January 28, 2016

**92. Tenth Sunday in Ordinary Time (B)**

**Third Reading** (Mark3:20-35)

Mark presents a scene in which Jesus goes to his hometown, and his own people deem him mad. Then scribes from Jerusalem arrive and suggest he had cast out evil spirits through the power of a demon named Beelzebul, the commander of evil spirits. Rather than engage the accusations directly, Jesus tells a parable that would lead one to wonder whether the charge lodged by the Jerusalemite scribes were actually self-contradictory, having an evil empire so divided against itself. The accusation by Jesus’ own people was similar to that made by the visiting scribes since people in antiquity thought that madness was caused by demons. The point to all this comes in a saying of Jesus to the effect that all can be forgiven except blasphemy against the Holy Spirit—a curious statement indeed.

It is difficult for us to translate the ancients’ talk of demons and possession into our own thought categories, and the fact that the psychology of our own time—more or less the equivalent of the ancients’ theory of spiritual forces—demands considerable faith. So allow me a little latitude.

I have long observed that generous people tend to think well of others, attributing generally good motives to people whose actions call for some explanation. Conversely, selfish and self-serving people tend to think ill of others and to attribute malicious motives to them, even when it comes to straightforward activity that can be readily understood without some conspiracy theory. Those ready to speak ill of a manifestly good motive and state of mind will never accept forgiveness because they automatically hold it suspect. One need not think of an Inspector God examining cases that a divine Person would or would not forgive; the problem lies with those who cannot accept forgiveness.

*Holy Blasphemer*

He calls the Ineffable “Daddy,”

welcoming touch of a bleeding woman.

He gets tipsy with ruffians,

palsy with sex-workers,

makes instant healings seem normal.

He provokes those in power to do their worst,

daring to rise again in us his people.

Tom Keene

February 6, 2018

**93. Eleventh Sunday in Ordinary Time (B)**

**Third Reading** (Mark 4:26-34)

“And he spoke the word to them with many such parables, as they were able to hear….” The nature of Jesus’ parables places responsibility for delivering the point upon the hearer. It is similar to an experienced jurist reading a decision and, because of a knowledge of the history of precedents and familiarity with their application, sees many ramifications that most other people would not see. An expert in electronics will likewise see much more in a circuit board than would others. A musicologist hears much more to appreciate in the performance of a symphony than does the untrained ear. Indeed, a mature person will have more difficulty being bored with everyday life than will a child. In that light, we can understand how a parable works.

“This is what the kingdom of God is like: Someone would throw seed on the ground and would sleep and rise night and day, and the seed would sprout and lengthen in a way one does not understand.” Here we have a parable about parables, pertaining not to an individual but to a “kingdom.” We do not know how the propensity to hear the word about the kingdom fruitfully develops, how the sensitivity to moral reality emerges in the public. Individuals and groups who had not responded before suddenly do so. We ourselves do not understand how our own discoveries, and also our own blindnesses, come about. But they are there in our very selves. “Like a grain of mustard, which is smaller than all the seeds on the earth when one sows it….”

## *Flickers*

A trust evoking touch,  
a glimpse that awes,  
a feel for something more,

leaving us stuck in wonder,  
demanding we remember,  
preserve this moment,

yet wanting, needing to share.  
But who can get this  
that words cannot capture.

So we heft the weight of it,  
ponder how we do not know,  
yet in not knowing,

we know what we do not know.

Tom Keene  
June 23, 2016

**94. Twelfth Sunday in Ordinary Time (B)**

**Third Reading** (Mark 4:35-41)

There are social activists who are critical of Christianity, dismissing it as a “pie in the sky” philosophy that encourages passivity rather than activism by compensating for injustice and suffering in this life with the promise of an eternal reward in another life. Insofar as some Christians, dare one say many, see the faith in transactional terms, those critics have a point. The real problem is containing and restraining faith within the confines of a transaction or exchange: “I am doing what you want, God; so you please do what I want.” The “prosperity gospel” often preached on television even brings the reward—God doing what I want—down from the sky and into the worldly market place.

Mark’s image of Jesus sleeping on a cushion in the stern of a boat during a great storm counters any transactional view of Christian faith. First, it takes us beyond any this-worldly reward; the image alludes to the death and resurrection of Jesus—going over to the other side, sleeping. Second, those in the boat with Jesus do nothing in particular but exclaim in terror, “Teacher, isn’t it a concern to you that we are perishing?” The response by Jesus will be gratuitous.

The narrative also alludes to the very creation of the world: “And a great wind storm developed, and the waves crashed against the boat.” “And the wind of God was moving over the face of the waters” (Genesis 1:2b). Life is to be understood in a context that is greater than those of immediate events. And the implication is not that one should be passive: “Why are you timid? Have you no faith?”

The sensibilities fashioned by the contours of the larger realities are to engender an active response. This is to come with a confidence that one experiences as an inner calm in the face of any storm: “Quiet! Be still!” And the wind abates.

*In Moments of Soul*

Join me, Body:  
 Skin, Nerves, Gut, Blood, Bones.

With me, share these meanings, of us.  
Let these energies flow  
into the stuff of our Universe:  
 every living animal, plant, item,  
 every planet, sun, galaxy,

that all our voices burst  
into choruses of songs.

Tom Keene  
March 19, 2016

**95. Thirteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time (B)**

**Third Reading** (Mark 5:21-43)

The Lectionary provides for the option of skipping the middle section of this Sunday’s reading, which is unfortunate. The reading is the narrative of Jesus setting out with Jairus, who had asked him to heal a daughter who was sick at home. On the way a woman suffering from an issue of blood touched Jesus’ cloak in the hope of being healed. She was. This is the section that some would skip.

Mark sometimes makes his point through indirection, juxtaposing different narratives so that the juxtaposition says something more than each story would say taken alone. Here he accomplishes his purpose by having one story interrupt the other. That they are to be read together is made evident by some parallels—the woman had suffered for twelve years, the daughter of Jairus was twelve years old; the disciples mock Jesus (“You see the crowd pressing around you, and you say, ‘Who touched me?’”), and the mourners at the home of Jairus laughed at him (“The child did not die but is sleeping.” And they were laughing at him).

The passage is commonly understood to be a figure of the New Covenant replacing the Old. I disagree: The issue of blood afflicts the woman; the girl has no blood-related problem. The Old Covenant did not come about with bleeding; Moses was not crucified. The New Covenant came about with the crucifixion of Jesus. Moreover, the narrative associates the synagogue and its official, Jairus, with the girl, who is raised up, not with the woman.

It helps to consider for whom Mark was writing—Roman Christians soon after the year 70. The Roman Christians had suffered a gruesome persecution under Nero, and many of them had been killed by the State. Problems broke out throughout the Empire, but Nero was too occupied with political intrigue and lavish living to rise to the occasion; he chose instead to take his own life. The Roman church, wounded for sure, survived Nero, and emerged anew, lively like a youngster.

Try as it might to eliminate and obliterate anything Christian, misused power does not outlive the force of life that the Creator breathed into humanity.

*America on Parade*

Come watch our parades.

See our soldiers

marching all in step, marching,

horizon to horizon: united.

America on parade.

We had no desire to make war on you, the children,

but your president did a bad thing.

So, we had to do what we did.

The aerial incendiaries we dropped in the desert made fire storms

to suck the air from your soldier-fathers' lungs

and crisp their intestines. When we found, in the bunkers,

their blackened, oozing corpses we bulldozed it all

and said a Christian prayer over the rubble.

But come, behold our machines roll on in the march,

lift your head, thrill to the fly-overs,

listen to their roar splitting the sky.

We could not trust your president with that oil,

not as we have trusted Texaco and Exxon.

So, we had to guide

those missiles into the shelters

where your mothers and sisters hid.

Come wave with us our flags, wear our yellow ribbons,

let martial music rouse your hearts, stir your blood.

Do not harden your faces against our pride in being America.

Your president was our friend for many years

and we managed to help his soldiers kill the children of Iran,

whose Ayatollah-leader was a bad man.

Are you following this? Do you understand?

But now your president turned bad and we had to kill you.

But do we really care to know you, your neighbors and playmates,

and do we want you present at our parades? How could you,

so far away, so different, share the joy of our goodness and might?

Soon you, and more children than any of you could count,

will die with cholera and dehydration,

because clean water and sewers are gone,

food and medicine blockaded.

These things are sad, but not so real to us

as the bombers and missiles we pay for,

loyally and freely, year after year, every April fifteenth.

More real than you they are.

More real than the homes and college

we could give our children with the money instead.

One thing only is more real, more important to us:

that you know, that the world know, that our consciences know,

that we killed you in a good cause, for freedom and democracy,

truth and justice, hot dogs and pizza, and our way,

our way of life, of life, of life.

 Tom Keene

June 12, 1991

**96. Fourteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time (B)**

**Third Reading (**Mark 6.1-6)

“Is this not the builder, the son of Mary and brother of James, Joses, Jude, and Simon?” And, “Are not his sisters here among us?” The problem was not what Jesus was saying or how he was saying it, but that he was nobody important.

A county judge in Texas, open-minded and moderate, did not match the image of the typical Texas politician. Experts in economics had told him that pay levels in town were too low for people to have a decent standard of living. They even told him retail business could not grow unless the minimum wage became a living wage. Interest groups had their facts. Such claims were more such facts.

He stepped out his private door into the hall of the county executive building. The afternoon sun streaming through the window at the end of the hall made a silhouette of the janitor who was emptying waste baskets into a big barrel on a cart. “How ya doin’, Sam?”

“All right, your honor. Anything you need?”

“Yes, as a matter of fact. How much do you get paid?”

After an awkward pause, “Minimum wage.”

“Is it enough?”

“I get by, with my weekend job at the parking lot and the wife’s waitress work.

This month is a little tight, adding my son to the car insurance.”

“Yes,” said the judge, “It adds up.”

Back in the office, the judge had no more facts than before, but he saw them differently. Arguments for and against a “living wage policy” for county employees became arguments for and against the living people who were working for those wages. He decided to persuade the county commissioners to adopt a living wage policy.

Faith is not a matter of facts and arguments, though it may well deal with such. We do not see first and then have faith but have faith first and then begin to see. Unfortunately, faith is optional. Sometimes evidence may even be unavoidable, but understanding the evidence is not. After all, Sam the janitor is busy in the hallway five afternoons a week.

“Is this not the builder, the son of Mary and brother of James, Joses, Jude, and Simon?” And, “Are not his sisters here among us?” So we know, factually, who he is, where he is from, how he is doing.

Poem

Here is the poem about Rick Crocker, the guy whose wife divorced him when he became a garbage man. (She had other reasons too, but this is the one he gave and it was probably the straw that broke the camel’s back.) Rick really had wanted to become a garbage man since he was a kid. He saw it as an honorable and macho thing. He had just got the job a couple months before when we were having a beer at Los Padrinos (on West Ave.?). He was telling me about how much he enjoyed and what he enjoyed about the work and the guys he worked with. He was particularly proud of having won the hard earned respect the other garbage men gave him. Finally he said, “You got to write a poem about it.” I said okay and about a week later I woke up, my muse had turned itself on, and the poem wrote itself.

I put the poem in a fancy folder for Rick and he showed it off to his fellow workers. Then he stopped when he found out most of them could not read. He said, “I was so embarrassed.”

## *Garbage man*

(for Rick Crocker)

Crazy white boy  
wild ass redneck  
pitchin' garbage cans aroun'  
workin' like us, black an brown.

Hundred houses,  
four, five cans each,  
forty, fifty pounds a can,  
call'n you: pussy? or man?

Hundred times four  
times fifty pounds:  
twenty thousand pounds a day,  
tempts you to say, ain't no way.

Like most of us,  
for breakfast at  
any ice house we get near,  
chug-a-lugs a quart of beer.

He can take it,  
he got huevos.  
It don't matter that he's white.  
He can work with us real tight.

He's a brother.  
He's got soul.  
He believes in me and you.  
Ain't ashamed of what we do.

Garbage hitman.  
Hauling shit-man.  
Grass, booze, head like a feather.  
We bust our ass together.

The last gringo like him  
was five years ago,  
so drunk crazy he lay down on a railroad track.  
Train ran over him.  
Never saw him again.

November 4, 1981

**97. Fifteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time (B)**

**Third Reading** (Mark 6.7-13)

“Bring nothing on the road but a single staff—no bread, no leather pouch, no coins in the belt, but wearing sandals and not wearing two tunics.”

These seem to be odd instructions, but we need to think about them in their historical setting. A single staff was for walking; someone who did not have a horse or wagon would use a staff. A bundle of staffs was the fasces, the symbol of the ancient Roman imperialism; in our era it is the symbol of fascist authoritarian governance. Disciples of Jesus are not to elicit awe and fear from those whom they visit.

Bread was something one might offer strangers to create the appearance of a following or to form a personal claque. The expression “bread and circuses” has come down to us from antiquity with that implication. The mission of the disciples was to have nothing to do with self-advancement through attracting groupies.

And the disciples were not to carry pouches. The concern is not what might be in pouches, but that one might put something into them. The objection is to the pouches themselves. The disciples were not to gain from visiting the towns.

No coins! In our world, where anything is to be obtained with money, it is hard to imagine traveling without some. However, simple people in antiquity worked for shares in a harvest, grew their own fruits and vegetables, caught their own fish, and slaughtered their own fowl. Money was something special, and the disciples were not to be flaunting special items.

Wear sandals! One was to be prepared to travel more. The disciples were not to make the locals become religious dependents but to enable them to generate their own resources of faith, so that the disciples could go on to the next town.

There were two kinds of tunic—a simple inner tunic and a decorous outer one. Working men and women wore the plain mono-colored inner tunic, usually one that did not go below the knees. Important people wore ankle-length outer tunics as well, with decorated hems that identified the city where they were citizens, and, if of noble rank, further décor. The disciples were to make no claims to privilege or prerogative implicit by the way they attired themselves.

The point of all this was to maintain control over evil spirits—the tempting spirit of power and authority, of self-advancement, avarice, ingratiation, privilege.

No doubt the mechanics of the disciples’ missionary internship would differ today—chevrons and epaulettes, for example, rather than fasces; on-line followings rather than claques; and hired lobbyists rather than pouches. Somehow, however, the demons remain the same.

*Our Lady of the Streets*

*(Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God) Luke 6:20)*

Down graffiti graced streets, “Hey Zeus. Hey Zeus,”

she calls her fatherless son.

She scans the gang scrawlings for signs of a truce.

Hungry for tomorrow,

she picks through yesterday’s garbage.

She finds a rose and puts it in the night deposit.

As street cleaners hose down a people’s blood,

she clutches the crucifix on the rosary round her neck.

Dry weeds in sidewalk cracks anticipate her tears.

“Hey Zeus. Hey Zeus.”

Her cries echo down concrete canyons.

Her son tarries in the state pen, but she forgets,

and sees him in shadows and vanishing faces.

Hope is the alley cat she feeds, for certain as sunrise

her boy will come and take her to McDonald’s.

They will invite her pals from the street

and her friends she has yet to meet.

They will toast each other and all with cold Coca Cola.

Tom Keene September 20, 1995

**98. Sixteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time (B)**

**Third Reading** (Mark 6:30-34)

“And disembarking he saw a great crowd, and he felt sorry for them because they were like sheep having no shepherd, and he began to teach them many things.” The stress is not on what Jesus was teaching the crowd or how he was doing it, but *why*. He felt sorry for them; he saw a need. They were like sheep having no shepherd; they were like sheep that were unable to find their own way to places where they could thrive.

Mark will go on to a highly symbolic miracle narrative, that of the multiplication of the loaves of bread and the fishes. But first he makes it clear that it was the poor distribution of consciousness that drew Jesus’ attention. So Jesus began to *teach* the crowd many things. Here it was not to his selected insiders or to a dinner of dignitaries that he spoke, but a crowd of ordinary people, who were curious enough to hike around the lake to see and hear him but who were not distinguished by anything special enough to have been remembered and written down by the evangelist.

Ordinary people tend to be pragmatic in many respects. In contrast it is usually those who have the leisure to indoctrinate themselves who follow elaborate ideologies. We can understand why some who are privileged have prejudices against the non-privileged; they sense a need to make their privilege seem merited and reasonable, and they can use their leisure to elaborate ideologies to serve such a purpose. But why are some who are non-privileged and ordinary have prejudices against one another? And in our democratic era, why do some non-privileged join political movements that favor those who need no further favors, and usually at the expense of the non-privileged themselves?

It may be said of our time that masses of the many seek to be counted among the number of the few—the arithmetically impossible “wannabe” phenomenon. But that was not the case in first century Galilee. What one was born as, one would remain, and everyone knew it. There were only the received formulae of everyday life, conventions, traditions. And when some new problem arose—and one always does—these ordinary people were like sheep without a shepherd. Are we any better off? Does our world suffer from a poor distribution of consciousness?

*San Antonio Dreaming*

Hey, San Antonio, I got a dream.

In San Anto everyone wants to work got a job.

And it pays good, man.

You can feed the kids and even take them to Disneyland

with the uncles, aunts and cousins,

even put something aside in case the kids go to college.

The jobs ain’t no hamburger flippin crap either.

These jobs mean something,

like helping people out in close by hospitals,

helping kids in schools and on playgrounds,

teaching how to do hula hoops and free throws,

and how to make tortillas like Nani used to make,

soft and smooth, made with love.

In San Anto, all the barrios got their own parks,

and they always clean.

Gang kids keep’em that way.

That’s how they show off their pride,

how they get respect.

And every park has a boxing ring

and a wrestling mat on a stage.

That’s where the gangs duke it out,

under the Marquis of Queensbury rules,

with all the people from the ‘hood there

watching to make sure its a fair fight.

Any man or boy hit any woman or girl,

he got to fight all her brothers, uncles and cousins,

there in the park one by one

in front of the whole neighborhood.

In San Anto, we don’t put up with that shit,

a man hitting a woman.

What kind of a man is that?

In San Anto, don’t nobody get sick,

‘cause everybody got their shots and they eat good.

None of that junk food.

And if they do get sick,

they get the best hospital care money can buy,

but its free for everybody

‘cause you ain’t got health, you ain’t got nothing.

In San Anto, we ain’t got time to be sick.

We get our people back to work,

back to school, back home,

where they can do some good.

In San Anto, our TV don’t do none of that Hollywood crap.

All the barrios got their own production studios,

and we put on our own sit-coms,

written by our own people.

Who’d have guessed we had that kind of talent,

until we tried it?

And guess what.

No commercials.

We know what we need.

Don’t need no uptown lady in a fancy dress

telling us what we want.

Who needs that crap anyway?

Once a year San Antonio does its own Emmy awards,

all the barrios putting up their best against all the others.

Seems every neighborhood gets a San Antonio Emmy for something.

And everybody feels good.

‘Cause we did it,

not some cat in Hollywood.

In San Anto, we got clean water and clean government.

‘Cause we keep the fat cats with money

from building their shit over our aquifer.

And we keep their money out of city and county elections.

Anybody want to run for office,

he, she don’t need money.

Just get on the neighborhood TV and say your piece.

Don’t cost nothing.

Same with radio.

Hey, who owns the air waves anyway?

In San Anto every barrio got its own poets,

painters, dancers, music makers.

The barrio poets write poems

for baptisms and funerals,

weddings, even divorces.

And they get paid good:

hundred bucks a shot.

And paintings.

We got murals up and down every block.

Can’t go nowhere without neighborhood pride

hitting you in the eye

with Virgins of Guadalupe and neighborhood folks,

all heroes with their own immortality.

Every barrio got ten, twenty bands,

rock, conjunto, country western,

old folks dance bands, young folks rappers.

Street dances every Friday and Saturday

somewhere in the ‘hood.

Free. Except to chip in for the bands.

We want them paid good.

‘Cause they do our souls good.

In San Anto, ain’t got none of that violence crap,

drive-bys and all that shit.

People got a gripe with anybody else,

we got mediators, negotiators, trouble shooters, peacemakers everywhere.

No need to go to guns

when you got all that help to make things come out fair for everyone.

And schools. San Antonio got the best schools anywhere.

We put our best people teaching first, second, third grades.

Get those kids excited about learning.

Once we get them turned on,

ain’t no one can stop them thinking and learning.

We got libraries everywhere.

Can’t keep the kids out of them.

They lined up five, six deep waiting to get at the computers.

We getting more computers soon

so the lines be down to one or two.

In San Anto, we take care of kids and old folks.

Kids are our future and old folks our past.

We don’t want nothing bad to happen to them.

They’re what makes our hanging in worth it all.

San Antonio is good living, man.

Know how we did it?

We stopped asking the big dudes.

They never listened anyway.

We just went out and did it.

Yeah. It wasn’t that hard

once we made up our minds,

once we stopped following and swallowing

what the fat cats said.

They wanted to jump in and help us with all their expertise.

We didn’t need their shit.

We just went ahead and did it.

And we ain’t going back.

That’s my dream.

Anyway.

Tom Keene

**99. Seventeenth Sunday in Ordinary Time (B)**

**Third Reading** (Johannine Gospel 6:1-15)

The reading is the traditional narrative of the multiplication of the loaves and fishes, as given in the *Johannine Gospel*. The narrative has obvious Eucharistic symbolic weight, but the evangelist wanted to connect it with the symbolic weight of the Exodus as well, noting, “Now it was near the Passover, the feast of the Jews.” Jesus’ disciples point out how difficult feeding the crowd would be. Jesus’ response in the Johannine version hints at the imagery of shepherds leading sheep to pasture: “Now there was much grass in the place.” When the crowd had eaten, it wanted to establish a kingdom; so Jesus “withdrew again to the mountain….”

…Withdrew to the mountain: Moses did that too. When the crowd set up a golden calf, he broke up the terms of the Covenant written in stone, destroyed the golden idol, and withdrew to the mountain. And what is the new idol, the new gold calf re-incarnate that sent Jesus back up the mountain? The crowd wanted to seize him and make a kingdom.

It was not too far back in history that the Catholic Church was a kingdom, with the pope a monarch over Papal States. Norms about marriage, for example, were a matter of legal decree. Providence has changed matters; the idol has been destroyed and replaced by conscience.

That leaves us with the responsibility of cultivating a well-formed conscience rather than relying on laws. No longer are virtues to be denatured by replacing them with acts of legal observance. It seems that also in antiquity, Jesus wanted faith, hope, and charity to increase rather than to himself compel conformance.

This is a greater civilizational challenge than may first appear. Training for obedience, analogous to military regimen, is simply not up to that challenge. The cultivation of conscience requires a clear-headed and questioning populous, an un-silent majority whose strength lies in being unmanageable. Moreover, organized civilization, always spiritually agitated, needs make itself more so.

## *Words that Matter*

Words we have cherished  
(truth-freedom-beauty-God)  
seem now abstract,  
filleted from life’s tenderloin,  
leaving a hunger  
for more, newer voices  
that flow from what we know  
yet don’t know we know,  
words we can squeeze,  
gulp their juices,  
leaving aside pulps, rinds  
then ferret out fresher  
nouns, verbs,  
brisk enough  
to wrap themselves around  
the what that we do,  
the who that we are,  
the what that is done to us,  
hefty enough  
to lift our inner meanings,  
lay them on plates  
of friends and strangers  
whose savvy seems to matter.

Tom Keene  
August 25, 2011

**100. Eighteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time (B)**

**Third Reading** (Johannine Gospel 6:24-35)

“Our ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness….” The crowd wanted Jesus to make bread in a miraculous way once more. The last time he had done that, they wanted to set him up as a king.

“Would you like some bread, sir?” The young waiter threw the question out as an afterthought.

“Sure.” I was between meetings and had stopped at a large sandwich shop in a mall for a quick lunch. The waiter brought a round wooden platter with warm bread and a small bowl of olive oil in the center to keep me occupied before the kitchen delivered my order.

How many thousands of years of accumulated experience brought me some bread and oil? And how many hands worked on this loaf, this platter, this bowl, this oil, these spices in the oil? Who planted the wheat and harvested it? Who pressed the olives? Who worked the lathe to shape the bowl? What were the aspirations of the “geek” who worked out the credit card system I would use to pay the tab? And what contributions to everyday life have the fellow diners at their tables, a sundry lot indeed, made—the young ladies across from me in their light blue team T-shirts? The silent old man with his cane and the three talkative ladies with him? The young couple in their stylishly torn Saturday array?

The background music suddenly blares out of control. The chatter stops. Then everyone laughs in amusement, knowing that somewhere some unseen clerk bumped against an overly-elaborate sound system and was frantically turning one or more knobs counter-clockwise.

Somebody in a gated community is making a great deal of money from all this, proud of an accomplished business career. That sense of accomplishment fences off people who work fields, operate olive presses, bake bread, take orders for turkey breast sandwiches.

“Amen. Amen I say to you, Moses did not give you bread from heaven….” No human alone gave me the platter of warm bread with the little bowl of oil. Without the thousands of years’ experience, the farmer, and even the diners who comprised a market for the unknown entrepreneur to exploit, I would have never had it to enjoy. This is all a prefiguring: “… but my Father will give you genuine bread from heaven. Indeed, the bread of God is that coming down from heaven and giving life to the world.”

*Thank You…*

hens, for these eggs, your lives,

pigs, for this bacon, your lives,

cows, for this butter, your lives,

wheat, for this bread, your lives,

beans, for this coffee, your lives.

May this relish ripple

through the lives of all,

the waves of energy enlivening us,

the particular particles

of atoms and molecules,

galaxies and dust of stars,

whence we arise

to celebrate these

tastes in our mouths,

tang in our noses,

feel in our bellies,

this body-delight in our souls.

Tom Keene

July 11, 2015

**101. Sunday in Ordinary Time (B)**

**Third Reading** (Johannine Gospel 6.41-51)

*This passage resumes a narrative that the Evangelist used to lead up to some discourse material. That material does not appear to have begun as a unified essay but as a juxtaposition of sayings. Then a final editor inserted another saying, introduced by “Amen. Amen….” Commentators generally observe that the final editor preserved the Evangelist’s wording carefully, even when doing so broke the flow of the Gospel.*

They were murmuring about this Jesus. How could he have been from heaven? They knew his family, and that family was nearby, down on earth, not in a distant heaven somewhere.

What a wonder of religious psychology! We cannot imprison God in a concept, but we can exclude God, keep God up in heaven and not down among people whose families we know. Commendably, we want to be honest in our philosophy and admit that we have hardly any insight into the divine, but we manage to be dishonest when it comes to our natural sociability and exclude the divine from our inconvenient neighbors. But “all shall be taught by God”; we can learn something of the divine from all. “Not that anyone has seen the Father; only the one who is from God has seen the Father.” So our inconvenient neighbors will not be telling us about God in so many words, try as they might; but belief in God does not pertain to what can be captured in words.

“I am the bread of life. Your ancestors ate the manna in the desert and died. This bread is what is coming down from heaven, so that anyone who would eat of it would not also die.” Jesus did not live to manufacture bread but promote life, even when we know the family.

Some who promote life seem satisfied to prevent murder, or more explicitly, abortion. But that is only a beginning, since life does not end at birth. Eternal life encompasses more than simply not being murdered. There is much to be included in what “shall be taught by God.” The challenge is to replicate God’s own affection, the affection on the part of the One who created all.

*Letting Eucharist Happen*

Tonight, the weekly gathering

of agitator-activists

falls on Holy Thursday.

Apollo,

with no resort to apostolic consecration,

or communal approbation,

just instant inspiration,

breaks bread into pieces,

spreads them out on a plate,

pours into a goblet

blood-red wine,

passes them around.

In silent thanks some politely decline.

One says, “I don’t do

blood of Christ stuff.”

Another dips bread into wine

saying, “Happy resurrection.”

Tom Keene

March 25, 2005

**102. Twentieth Sunday in Ordinary Time (B)**

**Third Reading** (Johannine Gospel 6.51-58)

*This passage largely repeats the reading for the 19th Sunday of Ordinary Time. The editor of the final version of the Johannine Gospel appears to have had two versions of the same discourse in hand and did not want to exclude either one of them. Both versions were composed by juxtaposing Jesus sayings that had been received in the tradition of the evangelist’s community.*

“I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats from this bread, that one will live forever; but the bread that I will give is also my flesh for the life of the world.” The early Christians remembered Jesus daring people to understand him literally, cannibalistically. It is one of the ironies of history that there are Christian biblical literalists today—people who claim the Bible is true word for word, calling it “verbal inerrancy.” But the biblical literalists would adopt the mode of understanding that the Evangelist presents as a misunderstanding on the part of Jesus’ critics.

Yes, there is a sense in which Jesus is bread, but “living bread.” There is a literal sense in which bread dropped downward in the way manna dropped down at night in the Exodus legend, but we are not to understand Jesus as a skydiver. And we are not to understand that merely partaking of the Eucharist and the other sacraments brings eternal life; that too would be to misunderstand through “verbal inerrancy.”

To misconstrue what is supreme is to misconstrue supremely. To take Jesus in a cannibalistic sense is in fact to adopt the stance of his critics. Jesus was not taken up with the externalities of religion, and his discourses were not about externals. What Catholic tradition terms “real presence” has everything to do with things divine—imperative, providential, merciful, wise, just—wrapped up together in the here and now, and nothing to do with holding verbalization to be adequate for capturing the greatness of God.

The *Letter to the Colossians* (1.15) refers to Jesus as the image of the invisible God. It was the genius of the Jewish tradition to resist stopping at the image, since to do so would be idolatrous. By daring his critics to understand his real presence cannibalistically, Jesus was holding faithfully to that very Jewish genius. For those who would have Jesus be really present, it would be absurd to stop at the image. Rather, it is necessary to bring what is imperative, providential, merciful, wise, and just into the here and now.

*The Man Misunderstood*

“Don’t *cling* to me,”

I am said to have said

to Mary, my friend.

I had to go.

Unless I did,

you wouldn’t get

the spirit of it all.

You wouldn’t get

the whole point of my life,

or of yours.

So surrender forever

the notion you can own me.

It is enough to remember me

with wine and bread,

where you can taste

the blood-spurting, fleshy

meanings of me.

And please don’t reduce me to doctrine

or trivialize me with comfy feelings.

If you want God’s kingdom,

dump your images of kings.

If you want God’s peace,

let go the hope that war will bring it.

If mythologize me you must,

let the myths *be* myths,

doors to the Unknown.

Don’t bury my meanings

in tombs of words taken literally.

If you would explain me with words,

let them be lyrics to music.

So don’t cling.

If you want to meet me, feed the hungry,

free the prisoners, touch your enemies with love.

Such are the real presences

where universal compassion abides,

and I wait for you.

Tom Keene      February 26, 2008

**103. Twenty-first Sunday in Ordinary Time (B)**

**Third Reading** (Johannine Gospel 6.60-69)

*This section, which follows an inserted discourse, appears to resume the narrative in the Johannine Gospel from verses 6.48-50: “I am the bread of life. Your ancestors ate the manna in the desert and died. This bread is what is coming down from heaven, so that anyone who would eat of it would not also die.”*

Anyone? Life without death? “This statement is hard; who can listen to it?” Jesus was speaking of spiritual life, but even many of his disciples were listening for physical life. Faith, which would move one to listen for words of spiritual life, comes from God, and not everyone listens for those kinds of word. So many disciples left Jesus and no longer traveled with him.

“Do you wish to go too?” Simon Peter says he would not leave: “You have words of eternal life.”

It is not a matter of a wiser investment. Peter’s insight is not that those who left hoped for bread for its physical benefits while he was astute enough to hope for spiritual benefit. He does not mention the benefit at all; he wants to stay with Jesus because his *words* were spiritually alive. It was not that they were words *about* spiritual rewards in heaven but that the words themselves were “words of eternal life.” In one sense, those who listen for words of spiritual life will certainly die, but Peter grasped the reality that the words were not means to some reward but were themselves intrinsically valuable.

Faith is as much about doubt as about assurance. First it would have us doubt the sufficiency of earthly rewards. Then it would have us doubt the value of reward as such. What faith leads us to is the discourse of eternal life. To be genuinely eternal, such life cannot be absent in the present and only promised for the future.

The image is that of bread, which has value when consumed and when shared. When stored up for a distant future, it only becomes stale. The image is about life, activity. We can be vivacious, we can be the occasion for others to be vivacious. It is easy to persuade ourselves not to deny ourselves too much, but it is a hard saying when it comes to persuading ourselves not to deny others too much.

*Thoughts at Christmas; Thoughts at Eucharist*

            According to the story, a certain rabbi decided to spend his last full day with friends, food and drink, as they had done together so many times. At the high point of their celebration, he held out a piece of bread, a cup of wine, and told them: Take. This is my body. This is my blood. With that, he gave them to eat and drink.

            Can we give over to our imaginings how he might have elaborated on what he meant by that? Might it go like this?

                        I give myself to you in **all** ways. So take these simple ways:

                        This bread, this wine, so everyday-common to our gatherings

                        to typify **all** those ways.

                        These common things, and we commoners, who consume them,

                        are, indeed, holy, whole and healing as are all things and all who

                        gather in love like this.

                        When you remember me, do this. Do this for me, for yourselves,

                        and for the healing of the entire human family. These things,

                        these happenings heal because we do them in love.

                        We celebrate and play with this bread and wine, with our bodies

                        and our blood, with our words and our meanings, with our presence

                        and our transcendence.

                        With all this, we invite into our seeming separations an all-pervading

                        Oneness, a holy, healing wholeness that is a more which we ourselves

                        are, a more that is becoming us.

                        As we do these particular things, let’s not get stuck in them. Let’s

                        go for their meanings: love, courage, truth -- meanings that nourish

                        our work for a world of justice that there may be peace among us.

                        Let this nourishment be found in all we do. That nourishment is here

and now in our sisters and brothers. Especially, let us find it among those most in need: the homeless; prisoners, the cold and hungry. Food, when prepared with love, feeds body and soul as one. That is the kind of deed that makes holy, that makes sacrament.

*Thoughts at Eucharist*

            According to the story, a certain rabbi decided to spend his last full day with friends, food and drink, as they had done together so many times. At the high point of their celebration, he held out a piece of bread, a cup of wine, and told them: Take. This is my body. This is my blood. With that, he gave them to eat and drink.

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                        and for the healing of the entire human family.

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                        go for their meanings: love, courage, truth - meanings that nourish

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Let this nourishment be found in all we do. That nourishment is here and now in our sisters and brothers. Especially, let us find it among those most in need: the homeless; prisoners, the cold and hungry.

                        Food, when prepared with love, feeds body and soul as one.

                        That is the kind of deed that makes holy, that makes sacrament.

Tom Keene

**104. Twenty-second Sunday in Ordinary Time (B)**

**Third Reading** (Mark 7.1-8, 14-15, 21-23)

*The reading is the familiar narrative of Pharisees and scribes criticizing Jesus’ disciples for eating loaves with defiled hands. The Church editors delete Jesus’ criticism of his critics, that they had traditions that undermined their own disciples’ divinely-mandated duty toward parents. The liturgical editors include Jesus making a pronouncement: “There is nothing outside a person that going into one can make one impure. However, that going out of a person is what defiles a person.” Then they delete Jesus’s disciples not understanding the pronouncement, but go straight to the explanation: “…for out from the heart of people come evil discourses, acts of fornication and of theft, of murder, of adultery, of greed, of knavery, deceit, licentiousness, curses, defamation, contempt, senselessness. All these evil things come from within and defile the person.” The Church editors simplified the story-line, but the Sunday parishioner is deprived of the point about human traditions and Christians’ propensity to miss the point.*

Gene was an insightful though laconic old scholar, gruff in his mannerisms but attentive to ethical maters and careful to pay attention respectfully to everyone. He doubted the sufficiency of toleration and charity and argued for the priority of justice. I knew him as someone often present at the professional association meetings I attended. By chance I came across a slim volume in a used book store, Gene’s autobiography. The promo line said he was a Holocaust survivor; I hadn’t known that about him.

Gene’s home town was in present-day Ukraine, but national borders kept shifting. The vicissitudes of geopolitics put the city in no less than three nations during his childhood. Jews were actually in the majority in the city, but because his father believed in modern education and sent Gene to a school conducted in spoken Hebrew, hence “contaminating” the sacred language with modern uses, most of the neighbors were suspicious of Gene and his immediate family.

At one point a contingent of Hungarian soldiers arrived to establish a new national governance. The mayor assembled a brass band and a host of dignitaries to welcome their new rulers. The mayor gave his welcoming speech in Czech, one of the languages of their past rulers. The puzzled general didn’t understand. The mayor repeated his speech in German, the hegemonic language of central Europe. The general still did not understand. The mayor then repeated his remarks in French, the language of diplomacy. The general grumbled something. Someone interpreted: “He said that these ignorant people don’t even understand Hungarian.” The band played, and the dignitaries shook the general’s hand.

When, eventually, the Nazis came, most of the people were arrested and taken away. The better part of Gene’s family and childhood friends disappeared; only imprecise rumors suggested what became of them. Gene and his father were sent to a work site as slave labor. Then they were force-marched toward another concentration camp. They succeeded, separately, in escaping en route, and at the end of the war were allowed to return to their home town, albeit through the good offices of different displaced persons agencies. They reunited, but Gene’s father wanted to stay and spent much of the rest of his life living under Communism. Gene was allowed to go to America on the pretext of having distant relatives in St. Louis, but the relatives actually wanted little to do with him. He supported himself as a Torah educator for a small-town synagogue that did not have a real rabbi. He also discovered university opportunities and earned a doctorate. Thus began a second life for him.

Why was the mayor who spoke three European languages as well as Yiddish considered ignorant? Why were Gene and his classmates in the Hebrew-speaking school disapproved of by other Jews? Why were the family and neighbors taken off to unknown fates by the Nazis? Why were Gene and his father reduced to slave labor and force-marched around Germany? Is all this “ancient history”? Why are mothers and children detained at international borders? Why does a Florida gun store owner, backed by a Confederate Battle Flag, declare his store a “Muslim free zone”? Why does a “white” policeman in a cruiser tailgate an African American woman, and when she moves over to make way for him pull her over “for not signaling a lane change,” and then provoke her so that he could arrest her? We later learned the whole experience added to other problems led her to hang herself. Questions need not be limited to what appears in the press. One can ask questions about behavior observed in everyday life.

“Why do your disciples not follow the traditions of the elders, but eat bread with defiled hands?”

And he answered, “Setting aside the commandments of God, you seize upon human traditions.” All too human, and not unique to Pharisees and scribes.

*A Man for Others*

We reduced him to our ideas of a god,

just as we did with other heroes who dared

dance with danger to bring back bounty to share.

He left us no inked memoirs of his own,

leaving us only his life for us to shape and warp

to fit our yearnings.

Still, his stark presence haunts us,

Lingers with vague tastes of:

            how he let himself touch and be touched

            in electromagnetic linkings of flesh and gut,

            how he scattered stories and healings to crowds

            to make of them what they will,

            how he hung out with friends and strangers

            at food-laden tables presenting himself as

                        a crushed grape

                        rising in wine for sipping,

                        a ground up grain

                        baking in bread for chewing.

All in one shortened life

that in the tides of time and meaning

throbs to flesh itself again in us.

Tom Keene

December 6, 2015

**105. Twenty-third Sunday in Ordinary Time (B)**

**Third Reading (Mark 7.31-37)**

When does child-like simplicity of heart verge upon the childish and infantile? It is child-like to be open to rich and poor alike; making distinctions is something learned on the way to adulthood. To be childish is to be self-centered, not allowing others to matter. I used to walk to work in a small Ohio town, and a little girl of four or five would wait for me in the morning on the porch of a frame house, and run out and excitedly squeal my name and embrace me at the knees until her mother called her back. The child was child-like in being so welcoming to a “man in the street,” but childish in allowing her every impulse to overrule the requirement of someone having to go to work. There was enough of the former to make one smile.

At the frontier of pagan territory, with its “I do for you and you do for me” religion, they brought Jesus a deaf and speech-impaired man, “and they demanded of him that he lay his hands on him.” There was no sympathy for the deaf and speech-impaired man; he was not given a chance to speak in his impaired way. They just wanted a good magic show. Jesus was willing to do an act of mercy, but he took the man away from the crowd so as to avoid making a spectacle. He looked to heaven and sighed; there was too little child-likeness to lead him to smile, and too much childishness. He ordered that no one be told of the cure, but the show had to go on: “as much as he ordered them, the more excessively they proclaimed it.”

The deaf man began to hear, but the crowd did not begin to listen. The speechless man began to speak, but the chatter of the crowd was superficial. “He makes the deaf hear,” but do the hearing listen? He makes “the speechless speak,” but do those who chatter inspire meaning?

How much prayer is childish rather than child-like? How much of it is intended to bring God around to satisfying our own impulses rather than embracing the Divine where Divinity is to be found? And oh, the show that must go on…. Sigh! So much of the religious programming in the electronic media is infantile! It is about “me” and “my salvation.”

*Kid in a Restaurant*

Eight months at the most,

The kid let his body express, celebrate

its being,

Squeals of surprise,

Looking to grasp

What catches his eyes.

Attending him,

The couple lets him be.

Someone says to them,

“That is one happy kid.”

(Smiles and laughter)

“We should all be that happy.”(Smiles and laughter)

“And spread it around as he does.”

(Smiles and laughter)

Tom Keene

July 31, 2015

**106. Twenty-fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time (B)**

**Third Reading** (Mark 8.27-35)

Jesus forbad the disciples from telling anyone that he was the Anointed One, the Messiah. But when he began to teach them that the human son had to suffer much and be rejected by the ethnic leaders, the higher clergy, and those who wrote out official documents (elders, high priests, and scribes), and be executed and rise after three days, Peter tried to forbid Jesus from teaching such things.

God talk! Jesus was forbidding his followers from provoking people with Christian God talk. He did not want it to be his followers’ religious talk that would provoke persecution. Biblical scholars refer to this feature of the *Gospel of Mark* the “Messianic Secret.” No, they were to provoke the ethnic leaders, the power-seeking clergy, and official functionaries more directly, and the reaction, occasionally even a judicial killing, would follow. But mysteriously, after they were oppressed they would rise on the third day—as Hosea put it centuries beforehand “After two days he will revive us; on the third day he will raise us up, that we may live before him. Let us know, let us press on to know the Lord” (Hosea 6.2-3a).

What would directly provoke oppression from ethnic leaders, from power-seeking clergy, and official functionaries? There always seems to be an out group. Demagogues warn us about political correctness; they say we must have out groups! When one rationale for rejecting a class of people loses its force, another one replaces it. Bible-believing Christians, we are told, reject transgendered people. “Why? Where in the Bible is that mentioned?” Why ask? The point of demagoguery is to pull oneself up by tearing others down. But Jesus would have us associate ourselves with whomever the demagogues would stigmatize. “Seal that border! Build that wall!” The demagogues would make people illegal. “Where in the Bible does it say we should seal borders rather than welcome sojourners?” Why ask? The point is to make people illegal so that state functionaries can document their illegality.

Catholic tradition does not limit itself to the Bible. It notes that we humans have a native, God-given power to see much of the will of the Creator in the ways creation flourishes. Peter knew what Jesus was teaching was true enough; otherwise he would have left when Jesus told the crowd to take up the cross. Peter had more insight than one would think; he knew how awful the truth was, and his emotions led him to protest it. Don’t we all have the temptation to avoid displeasing the ethnic leaders, power-seeking clergy, and the state functionaries who would stigmatize us, and are we not all tempted to hide behind God talk?

## *Good Friday Prayer to the God of Nations*

We thank you Lord,

that we are not like other nations:

            hungry for enough food,

            thirsty for drinkable water,

            sick for lack of medicine,

            drowning in international debt.

We thank you for preserving us

as the apple of your divine eye.

We thank you for Caiaphas, your high priest,

who said:

            "Better that one man die for the people,

            than that a whole nation perish."

Yes, Lord.

Better that those hundreds on death row die than our nation perish.

Better that three thousand Chileans die than our nation perish.

Better that fifty thousand Nicaraguans die than our nation perish.

Better that eighty thousand Salvadorans die than our nation perish.

Better that two hundred thousand Guatemalans die than our nation perish.

Better that seven hundred thousand Cambodians die than our nation perish.

Better that half a million Iraqis die than our nation perish.

Better that two million Vietnamese die than our nation perish.

Better that four million Native Americans die than our nation perish.

We thank you for having them die for our sins.

We thank you that on the Day of Resurrection,

we shall receive their thanks

for us being instruments of their sacrifice.

And you shall glorify us as a nation of priests,

and receive us into your kingdom

prepared for us since the foundation of the world.

Tom Keene

Good Friday, April 2, 1999

**107. Twenty-fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time (B)**

**Third Reading** (Mark 9.30-37)

“‘The human son will be turned over to the hands of people, and they will kill him, and having been killed he will rise after three days.’ But they did not understand….” What is there not to understand? At a simple verbal level, the teaching is straightforward. But it takes some time and consideration for the implications to “sink in” and become the basis for everyday action. That the teaching had not yet really done that was evident when the twelve proceeded to discuss which of them was the greatest.

“‘If anyone wishes to be first, that one will be the last of all and servant of all.’” Mark goes on to say Jesus took a *paidion* and stood him in their midst. *Paidion* can be translated either as a *child* or a *slave child*. Given the context, “servant of all,” the meaning is *slave child*. Imagine the scene in a slave-holding society. Imagine telling Jefferson Davis: “Whoever receives one of such slave children in my name receives me, and whoever receives is not receiving me but the One who sent me.”

The late Otto Maduro was a philosopher, social scientist, and media personage in Venezuela. He had been a Catholic reformer, then a Marxian thinker, and eventually a non-marxian independently thinking liberation theologian. I played a minor role in arranging a temporary academic appointment for him in the United States, and his combined innate brilliance and charm earned him a permanent stay. A year before he died he was the president of the American Academy of Religion, and he made a point of visiting those of us who were his old friends.

Thirty years before he made his last visit to me, almost a decade into his American stay, I persuaded the Toronto School of Theology to invite him as a guest speaker. He charmed everyone, and after his presentation the graduate theology students and the professors migrated into a lounge to hobnob over evening wine and cheese with him. After a while, no Otto. We were looking around but did not see him. He had found the cleanup crew, consisting mostly of Salvadoran refugees, and he blended into them, chatting in Spanish. He was no longer visible to us. Suddenly, his stentorian voice: “Let’s go. We are keeping these people from their homes and suppers!”

*Madonna*

Amid a buzz of crowd,  
a flit of a glance  
lands on the mother and child,  
at repose with each other,  
a growing of two out of one.

A picture,  
it strikes,  
as sun breaks through cloud,  
making in mind  
a refuge of sorts,

where,  
if only for this moment,  
cold and rain  
hold themselves at bay.

Here we are,  
beholding  
a rainbow of meanings,

each  
a field of flowers,  
hosting seeds of hope.

Tom Keene  
February 3, 2016

**108. Twenty-sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time (B)**

**Third Reading** (Mark 9.38-43, 45, 47-48)

*The passage follows the narrative of Jesus responding to the disciples’ discussion of who was the greatest; he had put a slave boy before them and said, “If anyone wishes to be first, that one will be the last of all and servant of all.” The passage read for the 26th Sunday in Ordinary Time continues the discussion of being a servant of all. John says, “Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name….” “Do not forbid him….” What comes next is often obscured by translations. The liturgical editors leave out verses 44 and 46—correctly since the two verses do not appear in the earliest manuscripts. A close reading of the Greek of verse 42 reads, “And whoever would cause difficulties for one of the least of those who believe in me, it is rather better if a large millstone were put around his neck and cast into the sea.” It goes on to speak of one’s hand, foot, and eye causing one to “stumble,” the same verb stem translated as “cause difficulties for.” That stem is the noun,* skandalon*, stumbling block. Someone placing a small stumbling block deserves a large mill block around the neck.*

I drove out to a picnic held in a public park as a going-away party for my friend and department chair, David. I barely knew some of the people there, and most I did not know at all. A young lady was telling me about her forthcoming trip to Egypt to convert the unsaved. Her parents were visibly uncomfortable with the zealotry of their daughter, but they were not going to stand in her way. One could almost hear the gospel injunction, “Do not forbid….” “Who are these unsaved people in Egypt,” I asked, assuming I would hear some stereotypical prejudices about Muslims. “They think they are Christians, but they are virtually pagans called *Copts*,” she replied. I asked with some astonishment, “Haven’t they been followers of Jesus since time of the apostles?” Her answer was well-practiced: “They have to be born again like ordinary American Christians.”

I could not help but think of Saad, a gentleman whose acquaintance I had made decades beforehand, more a revolutionary than a religious person. He bore scars on his body from his participation in the Algerian Revolution against France. At the time of the picnic, he was actually in Egypt, in prison for exposing electoral fraud that kept the strongman president, Hosni Mubarak, in power. He would be exonerated of any crime twice by the highest Egyptian court before being released to leave the country, but that had not happened yet. At the university where I worked a Muslim colleague knew him and spoke highly of him, and a Coptic man who worshiped in the same parish as I, along with his wife and young son, also knew him and spoke of him as the only high-profile person in Egypt who spoke out in favor of the rights of the Coptic Christians.

When is religion an occasion of sin and irreligion an occasion of virtue?

*Borders*

Does the universe see borders?

Do we from spacecraft

or even the moon?

Borders are lines imagined

by powers that be,

that stonewall

any status quo

that serves them,

who tell us how walls

for keeping out

and keeping in

are good for everyone,

that the life of one soldier

on our side

is worth more

than any child-woman-man

on the other.

But over walls

music flies.

Under fences

poems slither.

Could not crowds who grasp

how the whole world belongs

to all of us,

who sing it together,

put us in a space called love,

love that leads to exploration,

exploring that erases borders?

Tom Keene

January 21, 2008

**109. Twenty-seventh Sunday in Ordinary Time (B)**

**Third Reading** (Mark 10.2-16)

“Then what God has joined together, let a human not separate.” Law is too blunt an instrument for matters of intimacy. Consequently, Jesus was not satisfied with what the Law specified; it merely provided a procedure for divorce. Rather, he turned to the motive behind the divorce procedure: “…let a human not separate.” The third person imperative is rare in English; its use varies from stating wishes to giving orders, from “May the weather be good” to “The meeting will come to order.” The ambiguity is true of the Greek as well as the English translation. Ironically, some in history have sought to turn the internal motive into an external law and have governments prohibit divorce and remarriage.

The elite families of Rome and its Empire, who comprised the establishment in Mark’s day, made political alliances through marriage. As political alliances changed, divorces followed. Children were legally the property of their fathers; so when divorces occurred children were separated from their mothers and put into the care of their paternal aunts. The divorced woman returned to her father’s family. Among the non-elite, women were simply turned out after a divorce, without the children; frequently, prostitution was the fate awaiting them. It is understandable that Jesus would draw a person’s attention to the spouse rather than to the self: “Whoever puts his wife away and marries another, commits adultery against her, and if she putting away her husband should marry another, she commits adultery.” The tense structure of the verbs here is interesting; it is not *Whoever has put a spouse away and later marries another*, but again a matter of motive. The motive for divorcing should not include both putting away and marrying another.

I once had a middle-aged woman in an upper division class. Let’s call her Sylvia. After a divorce she was left with a truck but little else. She attended the university on scholarship; during the regular semesters she lived in the women’s dormitory, but in the summers she lived in the truck, parking it at public camp sites. Her disposition was remarkably pleasant and upbeat, especially when she talked about her son, who was also attending the university. She simply exuded happiness, irrespective of what befell her. One day a routine memo from the department head reached my mail box. It had a check-off with the department members’ names; we were to read the memo and pass it on to the next named professor. It asked us to recommend someone for a paid internship with housing, in an archaeological project at a Depression-era Civilian Conservation Corps site. I did not pass the memo on but took it the department head. He agreed, it would be perfect for Sylvia. She wouldn’t have to live in the truck for most of the summer. Sylvia went to the CCC site with several students whom other departments recommended. She took over informal leadership of the students, and the work they all did was so impressive that the project director sent them to the Department of the Interior in Washington to give their report there. And, oh yes, she met a man at the CCC site. She said she was going to marry him. The last time I saw her, she was driving her truck, literally into the sunset.

Poem

*For Officer Brian Encina,*

*Citizen Sandra Bland*

*and our system*

(Tom Keene’s poem responds to the recent arrest of Sandra Bland in Waller County, Texas, by Officer Brian Encina, and Ms. Bland’s apparent suicide three days later in the county jail. Ms. Bland had been ticketed for changing lanes without signaling.)

*What Could Have Been*

If this anger at her

and all she images,

if fear for my ego-invested badge,

this uniform, my being what I am,

had just let her go with a ticket,

respectfully given,

case closed.

If this death was by me

and not another…

having given in to despair

letting go the fragile threads of hope

for another sunrise, another day

and said yes to life, to myself.

If our system, this culture,

immersing us in arrogance and despair

could just stop it.

Tom Keene    August 14, 2015

**110. Twenty-eighth Sunday in Ordinary Time (B)**

**Third Reading** (Mark 10.17-27)

“But after becoming sad at the saying he left annoyed, for he was in possession of much property.”

My father used to tell this story: After working his way through college as a Ferris Wheel operator, he had found work with General Electric in Connecticut. He was living in and commuting from a walk-up apartment on the wrong side of the tracks since his father died, in otherwise prosperous Westchester County, New York, with his brother, sister, and mother. It was the mid-1930s, during the Great Depression, and anyone who had gainful employment at all was lucky.

A childhood friend worked as a chauffeur for one of the rich men of Westchester County. One weekend the friend came to him and said his boss waned to meet him. “Me? What for?” His friend didn’t know. So he dressed up in his Sunday best and went with his friend to a mansion up on a hill. What was it all about? His friend’s boss wanted to know whether he could get a General Electric radio at a discount. “No, I can’t do that.” “All right. Good to meet you. Have a nice weekend.”

*Possibilities*

Dandelion buds unfolding

into breeze drifting seeds,

the Bach quartet kick starting

eclipsed electric memories

the secret passion holding

promises yet to be imagined,

stories of who we were, are now,

laced with the liquor of hunches,

for possibilities.

Tom Keene

May 22, 2016

**111. Twenty-ninth Sunday in Ordinary Time (B)**

**Third Reading** (Mark 10.35-45)

“Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask.” The lectionary gives an option to leave this part of Mark’s chapter out and to focus only on, “You know that those supposed to govern the nations lord it over them….” However, Mark places these together in the discourse about serving all. Perhaps there is an underlying unity in what Mark has joined together.

Prayer can be infantile and self-centered: “…do for us whatever we ask.” Jesus recognizes an order of creation that cannot be readjusted without opposing the divine will that was expressed in creation in the first place: “…to sit at my right or the other honored side is not for me to grant, but for those for whom it was prepared.” Prayers will not have objective results simply because they have been said. Rather, the wisdom of the ages suggests that prayer should change the one who prays, not what is prayed for. And the biographical experience of prayer is often marked by less speaking over time and more listening. Prayer would not be an exertion of the self that would force the hand of an unwilling or inattentive deity.

The passage is also about governance. The narrative of James and John, sons of Zebedee, wanting to sit on the right and the left in glory is a comment on the ambitions of Titus and Domitian in Rome, the ambitious sons of the elderly Emperor Vespasian. The two imperial sons really wanted the emperor to get quickly out of their way! “You know that those supposed to govern the nations lord it over them and their great ones exercise authority over them. But it is not such among you; rather whoever would wish to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever would wish to be first among you must be a slave of all….” Christian governance would change the one governing, not bend those governed over to the wants of the governor. Governing, then, becomes serving, meeting the needs of all, providing for the common good.

It may well be that bad prayers, self-centered prayers, have an affinity with bad, self-centered governance and further such governance, while true prayer has an affinity with serving the common good and furthering that common good.

*Attending*

He found times when

Word came:

   “Put down your notes,

   your purposes,

   your things.”

   “See the clouds,

   leaves on trees,

   trash on streets.

   Watch who passes by,

   the ones on crutches too.

   Let their quiet power

   speak to your blood.”

   “Hear me,” said Word.

   “See and taste me,

   touch the air

   caressing you

   that also is me.”

He did.

Word would point him

to a bistro, a park,

or in his house to a corner

where the window showed him

what he’d failed to note before.

Sometimes Word would sing,

softly, enticing,

yet not of Itself.

(Would that be too much?)

Instead, Word sang to him

of old folks faces,

children running,

a shot of whiskey at his fingers,

people talking and silences.

He listened.

Tom Keene, March 5, 1983

**112. Thirtieth Sunday in Ordinary Time (B)**

**Third Reading** (Mark 10.46-52)

Did Jesus really cure the blindness of the beggar Bartimaeus? Apart from reading a gospel, and for some people even while reading a gospel, the common sense approach is to be skeptical about such claims. In contrast to that, in science it is just as much an error to reject a hypothesis that is actually true as to accept one that is actually false. Scientific procedure calls for keeping an open mind, while everyday experience recommends skepticism. How does this everyday preferential option for skepticism come about?

It was early May 1970 and I was trying to teach Louisiana history to eighth graders in the Ninth Ward in New Orleans. The kids were beside themselves. They saw on television the night before that National Guardsmen in Ohio, who had occupied the campus of Kent State University after an anti-war demonstration, had shot young people at the school. “How could American soldiers shoot kids like us?” As attractive a topic as the outlandish scandals that comprised Louisiana history was, they couldn’t put their young minds to it that day. I had to let them talk it through. They felt betrayed. They felt that an important trust had been broken. I think skepticism is born from such experiences.

Now the narrative in the Gospel of Mark is not about ophthamology but trust. “Son of David, Jesus, have mercy on me.” The crowd couldn’t keep Bartimaeus quiet. He was beside himself and couldn’t deal with the prospect of business-as-usual going on for another moment. “Son of David, have mercy on me.” “Call him,” said Jesus.

Bartimaeus had already risked angering the crowd. Now he throws off his warm wool beggar’s cloak. Blind, he could not be sure he would ever grasp it again. But he throws it off and ventures out into the dark roadway. Believing is seeing. What could we see if we trust that Jesus would make us able to see? And what false trusts must we throw off like Bartimaeus’s warm wool beggar’s cloak?

*Women: Some, Many and All*

Some

celebrate their bodies,

making of them works of art,

enhancing lips with color,

eyes with shadow,

dressing in skirts

that dance with their walk,

fleshy personas whose grace pervades,

a wholeness evoking appreciation.

Many

without time or means for art,

only survive for children, family

against aches of hunger,

spears of fear,

dare to do whatever makes sense

in the face of despair,

a wholeness evoking admiration.

All

carry within a strength,

a call to live out the becomings

of the Great Mother,

the mother of each one, every thing,

inviting a wisdom-courage

that turns the doings of daily living

into acts of love,

a wholeness evoking awe.

Tom Keene

September 2, 2015

**113. Thirty-first Sunday in Ordinary Time (B)**

**Third Reading** (Mark 12:28-35)

This is the famous passage where Jesus identifies the greatest commandment. The introduction, however, is often passed over. It reads: “And approaching, one of the scribes, hearing them in disputation and seeing that he (Jesus) answered them well, asked him….” Two groups, one consisting of Pharisees and Herodians and the other of Sadducees, had been trying to ambush Jesus with two lines of questions. This scribe, however, happened to come upon the scene and sought wisdom from someone who was answering well. Jesus later observed, “You are not far from the kingdom of God.” Mark as a writer liked to juxtapose narratives. Here he is juxtaposing one about those who want to win arguments and one about someone who seeks insight.

And then there is the insight itself. Jesus was asked about the most important commandment, and his answer indicates that for the most important imperative one had to go beyond any commandment. Commandments are obeyed, not loved the way God and neighbor are loved. “Listen, Israel, the Lord our God is one….” The core of the Law is God, not propensities toward authoritarianism or conventionality that may reside in the psyche of the individual. You “…shall love the Lord your God from your whole heart and from your whole soul and from your whole intellect and from your whole strength.” God is centermost in what moves one, what one lives for, what one is attentive to, and what one strives for. This is a critique of allowing legal details move one, living for what is petty, making oneself religiously respectable while being intellectually numb, and trying to be holy internally without acting externally. “This is the second You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” While the first commandment would involve one’s whole self, the second requires that it not be *for* oneself.

Jesus took his answer right out of Hebrew tradition. A genuine rather than superficial appreciation of tradition can be revolutionary. Tradition is rooted in the past, but it is not equivalent to the past. It is necessary to search for the essence of what engendered various traditions in the first place. What moved that which is good in history is what traditions are genuinely about. Thus the basic imperative is what is greatest, not the various commandments that both give form to but threaten to contain and restrain that basic imperative. As in the case of most first steps, reaching into the depths with tradition is necessary, but it is also necessary to grow out from such roots.

*Yes*

*There are three prayers:  
            Lord, I’m a bow. Bend me lest I rot.  
            Lord, I’m a bow. Bend me, but not too much lest I break.  
            Lord, I’m a bow. Bend me. So what if I break.  
Nikos Kazantzakis*

Yes,  
to the belly  
yearning in hunger,  
finding a full pantry.

Yes,  
to the aches of old age,  
to the abyss of lonely.

Yes,  
to the clear discovery,  
to the blur of doubt.

Yes,  
to the filling up,  
to the pouring out.

Each a hint, clue, taste  
of what is and can be,  
of possible improbables,  
of improbable possibles.

Each a snapshot  
of the movie reel’s spin  
of our stories,  
some left  
on memory’s cutting room floor,  
some worth keeping.

Yet,  
each a meaning  
waiting our grasp.

Tom Keene

December 31, 2015

**114. Thirty-second Sunday in Ordinary Time (B)**

**Third Reading** (Mark 12.38-44)

The lectionary has the option of using only verses 41-44, which describe Jesus watching first the wealthy and then a poor widow bringing money to the Temple treasury. The teaching that the small offering of the poor widow was actually greater than the nominally larger offerings of the rich was not unique to Jesus or Christianity. What is unique to Christian tradition is the context in which Mark places it. Thus verses 38-40, which lead up to the narrative, are important and should not be left out. Jesus is criticizing the established religion: “Beware of the scribes, wishing to walk around in robes and wanting salutations in the market and the chief places in the synagogues and the first seats at banquets; swallowing up the houses of widows and on a pretext praying at length, these will receive the greater condemnation.” There is a background assumption missing here; in Jesus’ day everyone would know that the Temple and the entire religious establishment were supported by rents that the poor who worked the land had to pay. In antiquity, the rich made themselves famous by funding showy religious works, giving out of their abundance, but the poor paid rent out of their want.

One cannot help thinking of the religious establishment today. Megachurches located strategically nearby upscale residential areas and media networks that are linked to a variety of denominations provide feel-good religion to the comfortable and solicit donations. They often use wedge “social” issues to separate the uninformed as well as those unwilling to be informed, and they ignore, except to vilify, politicians who oppose moneyed interests. Many people of modest means are drawn into yea-saying in this context of Christian-colored paganism, simply because the mass of the many are under the illusion that by doing so they will be counted among the number of the few.

But there is more: “…on a pretext praying at length….” It is a pernicious superstition that God wants or needs lots of prayers. Prayer always, for sure, but not necessarily prayers out of verbosity.

Weavings

A nod to the passing stranger,

the piece of trash picked up,

the name remembered and used to greet,

a sudden smile for the vacant stare,

a lost dog taken home.

Each a weaving of loose ends.

Tom Keene

October 24, 2015

**115. Thirty-third Sunday in Ordinary Time (B)**

**Third Reading** (Mark 13.24-32)

The reading is Mark’s eschatological discourse: “But in those days after that affliction, the sun will darken….” “And then the human son coming in clouds will appear…” Such imagery suggests cataclysmic change, but there is also an indication of continuity with the natural order of things: “But learn from the illustration of the fig tree: When its branch was already tender and would produce leaves, you know that the summer is near.” The ephemeral and the permanent merge: “Amen I say to you, this nation may not pass away until all these things come about. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my word will not pass away.”

Much that we routinely accept as “real” depends on the way we look at it. A color, such as green, is not “out there” where we think we see it, but in our central nervous system when it responds to light waves tickling the ends of the optic nerves. Similarly such social phenomena as power and prestige occur in the beholding; they are not really attributes of the people beheld. Powerful and prestigious people do not differ from the powerless and the “nobodies” in essence, but rather in the resources they have at their disposal. This is what makes reversals possible, wherein the powerful become weak and the weak powerful, the prestigious come to be forgotten and the unknown gain prestige.

Mark uses the imagery of physical change as a prelude: “…the sun will darken, and the moon not give its glow, and the stars will be falling from heaven….” He has Jesus associate with the powerless and the nobodies, prior to the great reversal that will follow from the crucifixion: “And then the human son coming in clouds will appear with much power and glory.”

Because the power and glory that we think we can identify in this world is so precariously dependent on being beheld, it is only with an utter deficit of wisdom that we could crave it. When the inevitable happens—and the archeological ruins of empires teach us that it does happen inevitably—we humans experience shock. Stock market collapses have occasioned suicides. The proceedings of the Nixon impeachment committee brought forth tears from the president’s partisans in Congress. What was unwisely taken to be firm did not and will not pass away without such things coming about.

But we cannot be too sure about our own grasp on wisdom: “…no one knows about that day or the hour….”

*Dyings*

*Transformations?*

Seeds dying to themselves to rise alive?

Candlelight snuffed to be moonlight,

waiting in three-day dark to birth light renewed?

            Beginnings that end to begin again,

            essences crossing over, exploring

            new ways to grow.

Tom Keene

October 30, 2015

**116. Feast of Christ the King (B)**

**Third Reading** (John 18.33-37)

“You? Are you the King of the Jews?” Pilate was expecting a much more formidable personage. “Are you saying this on your own or did others tell you about me?” Jesus was not going to answer Pilate’s question on the Roman official’s grounds because his realm was not established on such grounds. The interrogation proceeds to substantiate Pilate’s first impression that Jesus posed no military threat to the Empire. As Jesus put it, “You are saying that I am a king. I was born and came into the world for this: to witness to truth.” Truth! Maybe Jesus was a threat after all!

For colonial masters to justify their own society’s theft from the subject society, there is a need for an official lie. For a political entity to oppress through violence, it must make its functionaries blind to the destruction they wreak and deaf to the cries of those whom they have bereaved. For a society characterized by poverty when its poor produce the wealth its elite enjoy, a fantasy of deserving rich and worthless poor must be propagated. Someone who would witness to truth threatens such comfortable falsehoods.

Economic and political fancies—social superstitions—did not disappear with the Roman Empire and its thugs, nor even with the passing of overt colonialism. There are still ideologies of racism and classism, and these serve to perpetuate the illusion inside gated communities that the highly prosperous one per cent accumulates its wealth quite apart from the labor of the supposedly inferior, undereducated, and incompetent lower classes that happen to work in their businesses and comprise their customer base. Truth is a threat to such a convenient world view.

Truth is a cognitive reflection of God’s creation in the first instance, and exposure of the human corruptions and misdepictions of that creation in the second instance. Fanciful ideologies are not neutral alternatives to truth but have consequences that benefit some people at the expense of others. Cases of racism, sexism, and the like are obvious, but there is another ideology that faces few questions today—the one that holds “management” should be rewarded with great fortunes, hundreds of times greater than the compensation accorded typical workers. It has not been demonstrated that such management is particularly productive. And the problem is not limited to corporations; it can be found in athletics, universities, charities, and even churches. There are millionaire team coaches who make their fortunes off players’ brain injuries. There are entirely dysfunctional millionaire university officials and scandalously wealthy “charity” executives. And, oh yes, there are bishops who build castles.

“You are saying that I am a king.” Don’t count on it in the case of Jesus, in the all too normal meaning of “king.’

*Litany for the Fourth of July*

Oh America, happy birthday. Happy remembering how we declared our independence from the world's most powerful rule.

Happy remembering how we proclaimed our freedom from the very idea of empire, when we declared, "all humans are equal," when we pronounced that governments get their powers from the consent of the governed, when we deemed it our right and duty to overthrow any rulers who impose on us empire and the ideas of empire.

Today, on this your birthday, we declare again our independence from empire and from the notions of empire;

from the notion that the need to control requires that some dominate others, we declare our independence,

from the belief that the rulers may use us to achieve their goals, we declare our independence,

from the prejudice that nature equips men better than women to dominate, and some races and classes to dominate, we declare our independence,

from the assumption that imperial ends justify the use of any means, we declare our independence,

from the dogma that violence is redemptive, that violence is the only language enemies understand, we declare our independence.

from the doctrine that those with weapons, technology, wealth and the largest markets are the ones who deserve to survive, we declare our independence,

from the idolatry that money is the most important value, we declare our independence,

from the supposition that the production of material goods is more important than the production of healthy and normal people, the preservation of neighborhoods and the building of community, we declare our independence,

from the conviction that property is sacred, and property ownership is an absolute right, we declare our independence,

from the inference that in organizations or nations great size is proof of power and value, we declare our independence,

from the opinion that institutions are more important than people, we declare our independence,

from the pomposity that there is no higher value or being or power than the state, that if there is a God, God is the protector and patron of the state, we declare our independence.

Happy birthday America and here is to the day when you will enjoy independence from your own empire.

\* Adapted from *The Powers that* Be by Walter Wink. Tom Keene, July 4, 1994

**Year C**

**117. First Sunday of Advent (C)**

**Third Reading** (Luke 21.25-28 and 34-36)

The gospel reading from Luke consists of two passages that Luke based on the earlier gospel written by Mark. In fact, the Markan passage was the reading for last Sunday. Luke changes the wording: “And there will be signs in the sun, moon, and stars, and on the earth distress of nations and anxiety over the sound and surging of the sea, when people faint out of fear and anticipation of the things coming in the world….” Luke emphasizes that these are signs that we should explore for meaning: “And when these things begin to come about, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is near.”

Of course, it is perfectly possible to experience the disasters that turn our worlds upside down, without seeking or finding any meaning in them. It is perfectly possible to never learn, to never rise above the humdrum: “…take heed lest your hearts be weighed down with carousing, drunkenness, and worries of daily life, and that day come upon you suddenly like a trap….” What turns the world upside down and should disturb us is coming; it has an advent. But this gospel calls for a coming of those whom Jesus addresses to a consciousness. Consciousness too has an advent.

Our Conundrum

This hunger here,

for this All that is You,

this You that is All:

            One being

            beyond being.

This This-ness,

such Such-ness,

defying every gambit,

giving us to wonder

what shape Formlessness takes.

If no utterance Is utter,

if nothing can express the All that is This,

then make of me that nothing.

Let it be as if this page were blank:

self and other no longer, no thing,

yet what?

Tom Keene

Dec 7, 2013

**118. Second Sunday of Advent (C)**

**Third Reading** (Luke 3.1-6)

“Now in the fifteenth year of the reign of Caesar Tiberius…”: Was Luke simply being a historian? He went on in this and other passages to mention Pontius Pilate, the tetrarch Herod (Antipas), the tetrarch Philip, the tetrarch Lysanias, and the high priests Annas and Caiphas. The references should not be dismissed so readily. Rather, Luke is setting the scene for the mission of the prophetic figure, John the Baptist. He uses the words of Isaiah 40: “Prepare the way of the Lord, Make His paths straight.” Prophets speak truth to power, questioning the ways of the holders of power. Caesar Tiberius was governing in a way that obstructed truth. Pilate and the tetrarchs, serving Tiberius as a god, were making the straightforward presence of the divine into something requiring circuitous inquiry. The very Jerusalem priesthood too was an obstacle.

The wording from Isaiah is undoubtedly metaphorical; it is not about engineering roads. In fact, the Caesars, their underlings, and their allies were accomplished at highway construction. But the more effectively they implemented the authoritarian ways of the world, the more they troubled the coming of the Lord. Caesar claimed not only to be a civil authority, but also a deity. The priesthood was not only about prayer, but governance as well. Luke and the Baptist were not advocating the separation of religion and government, but they were making way for the ways of the Lord in both kinds of authority and responsibility. They would unsettle what had beforehand been settled and settle upon what beforehand had not been so much as imagined.

In one sense, Luke was in fact being a historian—not merely chronicling but giving voice to what was of historical significance.

Incidentally, are there not rulers today who are better at road building than clearing the way for truth?

## *All Directions Come to Circles*

Up and away,  
here and down,  
wings and roots,  
from center to circumference,  
and eternal returns.

Out to the sailing star,  
into earth’s boiling core,  
planet and sun,  
from beginning to end,  
and eternal returns.

Seeds and birds,  
burrows and roots,  
air and dirt,  
from depths to heights,  
and eternal returns.

Man and seed.  
Woman and womb.  
Two in one,  
from difference to same,  
and eternal returns.

Light and dark,  
cold and hot,  
sound and silence,  
from life to death, from death to life,  
and eternal returns.

Tom Keene

**119. Third Sunday of Advent (C)**

**Third Reading (Luke 3.10-18)**

Share…Do not collect more than what has been commanded…Do not extort…. At first, this sounds easy enough, but as with prophets in general one needs to think twice about what John the Baptist says. If you have two garments, share with someone not having one; in effect, no one should do without! The problem is as much with a life situation that allows someone a surplus as with one that leaves anyone without. “Do not collect more than what has been commanded….” How many jobs involve taking a commission or profit of some kind, a “take” beyond the value of a good or service given? Or how many jobs create products that are trivial and put no genuine value into the world? “Do not extort anything or black mail anyone, and be satisfied with your pay.” Job-related power is not to be abused—a directive evidently aimed at authorities of various kinds. I think of some of the things academic deans tried to coerce me to do in the course of my decades in academia! Yes, John the Baptist was a prophet, not a mere performer of baptisms.

“Teacher, what should we do?” They went out to the prophet for instruction. One must admire inquisitive, honest seekers. And when going out into the wilderness where the prophet responds to questions, we must bring our doubts with us. If we or someone else had no surplus amidst others’ want, we would not really respond to the prophetic statement about sharing. If we or anyone else did not benefit from an inherently flawed economy, the prophetic word would never seem to strike home. If we or someone else did not abuse power, we would dismiss the prophecy as a sign of a personality problem. In fact, the prophecy is not limited to the utterances of prophets but resides as a potential within us in the first place and leads us out into the wilderness for consideration, confirmation, and clarification.

*Beware the Poets and the Prophets*

Prophetic spies,

they see light before dawn,

dark before dusk.

Treacherous informers,

they tell tales of phoenix rising,

of wisdom claimed at beauty beheld.

Rude arousers,

they blast scales from our eyes,

coax us from our infirmary beds,

erase denials of who we are,

affirm the truths we fear.

Hence,

let us banish them from our republic

lest the blind see,

the deaf hear,

the cripples dance,

the possessed be freed,

and the services of our dominion

be required no longer.

Tom Keene

**120. Fourth Sunday of Advent(C)**

**Third Reading** (Luke 1:39-45)

*…Elizabeth was filled with the holy spirit, and she cried out loudly and said, “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. Why does it happen to me that the mother of my Lord should come to me? For behold as the sound of your greeting occurred in my ears, the child in my womb leapt with joy.”*

In the same way that Mary Magdalene and other women were the first to say to the apostles at Easter that Jesus was risen, so Mary and Elizabeth were the first to say that Jesus, still hidden, was coming to life. And filled with the as yet unrecognized Holy Spirit, Elizabeth asks why the mother of the Lord should come to her, the mother of the last prophet of the Old Covenant? Yet to be carried to term, that prophet was already rejoicing.

Zechariah, an official priest of the Old Covenant, was not to sire the Lord incarnate nor even be able to speak in testimony at all. But the unofficial Elizabeth, filled with the Holy Spirit, could and did speak. And Mary was going to Elizabeth as Jesus would go to John at the Jordan.

The very structure of Luke’s Gospel calls into question whether the ways under the law were the ways chosen by God for the future. Few followers of Jesus today maintain that the Hebrew ritual life need be observed, but what about the hereditary priesthood? That too has been dropped, following the theology of the Letter to the Hebrews. And what about the male priesthood? Indeed, even the Greek term for *priest* is never used in the New Testament for a Christian minister; some extra-scriptural translator decided to render the term for *elder* or presbyter with the word *priest* for everyday discourse. The problem is not a semantic one; we can adjust to that. The problem is the failure to follow Luke in breaking with all the ways of the Old Covenant.

*Children in the Storm*

Side by side we scooch our bodies down,  
huddle along the wall farthest from the porch's edge,  
and face from our barely covered cave  
the caterwauling coming down,  
bare knees hugged and drawn to chins  
in ear-filled awe and wide-eyed watching:  
sky-shot water-sheets slapping tin roofs,  
gushing down rain gutters,  
making new rivers of gravel walks.

I wonder at the angry Sky-Man who makes all this,  
of whom we sing, I think, in brave derision:

"It's raining, it's pouring,  
the Old Man is snoring,  
he jumped in bed and bumped his head,  
and couldn't get up in the morning."

Is it in wrothy punctuation or promise of punishment  
that he pronounces his opinion in hurled thunderclap  
and with cussing concussion rattles our bodies,  
quivers the linings of the void in our bellies?

Warned,  
we sit in silent wonder  
at a world alive.

Tom Keene

**121. Holy Family: Sunday within Christmas Octave (C)**

**Third Reading** (Luke 2:41-52)

We do not know whether Luke had genuine legends from Jesus’ family or, much in the manner of other writers of biographies in antiquity, he was simply composing narratives to portend events to be related later. The fact that in the narratives Mary and Joseph never seem to learn not to be surprised and never seem to comprehend what is happening lends support to the theory that Luke had simply composed the narratives as separate pieces. So what was being portended by the narrative of the twelve-year-old Jesus staying behind in the Temple precincts without telling Joseph and Mary, leaving them to walk back toward Nazareth a whole day not knowing he was not in the travelling party? The reference to their finding him after three days indicates that the narrative is really about post-Resurrection ministry.

Those who would minister must listen intently to their teachers and question them. There should be something of the inquisitive child in one who would minister. The fact that one would leave behind family and acquaintances may also be significant. But then Jesus goes back to the family home in Nazareth, no doubt changing it as he himself had changed.

*Ocean*

What is this chasm you uncover in me  
that hungers for the formless fullness of you?

  Who are these Ishmaels in me  
    of Genesis - thrown to the wilderness,  
  of Melville - drawn to the sea,  
  never content with your works:  
  not silhouettes of pelicans patrolling at dawn,  
   nor whitecaps aglow with setting sun,  
  but questing for some primordial matrix  
  and thirsty to slake my amnesia with amniotic brine,  
  yet tickled to feel beneath my feet  
  the slipping sand you wash away?

Cast into tides, lost and connected,  
I sway in your dance with the moon.  
In your silence I wait   
for your soundless word  
to echo up the abyss between us.

Tom Keene

**122. Baptism of the Lord: Sunday after Epiphany (C)**

**Third Reading** (Luke 3:15-16, 21-22)

*In collecting the traditions about John the Baptizer, Luke interrupts the narrative of John baptizing in the Jordan and baptizing Jesus, with a reference to Herod the tyrannical tetrarch imprisoning John. The lectionary deletes this in order to maintain the continuity of the baptism narrative.*

John the Baptist had an impact on people, as we all do. He was keenly aware of it, however, and made that impact his life mission. “(B)ut one stronger than I is coming, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to loosen….” If John is given pause by the thought of his own limitations and unworthiness, how could it be different for us? That is the personal side of baptism, of membership among those called out to assemble (*ekklesia*). But there is another side to it; Luke later speaks of that other side as a second baptism, one in the spirit. “…(H)e will baptize you with holy spirit and fire…”—wording that anticipates the Pentecost narrative in Luke’s *Acts of the Apostles*.

Jesus saw what John and we do not see: “the holy spirit coming down in a body, like a dove upon him….” But we and the Baptizer can hear the Father speak, if we would listen: “…there was a voice from heaven: I delighted in you.”

With baptism, that is, with membership in Jesus’ following, comes hearing, and perhaps an erstwhile quest for understanding. But there would be for us a second baptism-like experience of seeing, a recognition of things to do, imperatives that do not derive from the personal side of baptism but rather inhabit an arena to which we are called outside ourselves—notwithstanding how we feel about ourselves. We affect others, whether we will it or not. We have an impact, whether we like it or not. What is important is whether the voice in heaven can say, “I delighted in you,” not whether we say we delighted in hearing it.

*Becoming*

You are living us.

We are living you.

When we were dust,

you were us,

generating stars.

When we were plankton,

you were our thoughts.

Now, as then,

One,

still becoming,

becoming still.

Tom Keene

April 30, 2015

Comments on the Poem

By Tom Keene and Friends

Consider the connections between becoming and intimacy. Intimacy can be seen as a process of becoming closer, shrinking the gaps between what separates us (like our egos) and what unites us to one another, to all creation and to the Source from which we come and to which we return. The Jesus story holds some examples:

  Eucharist. Jesus is saying, Be as intimate with me and one another as food and drink is intimate with our bodies, with our process of living. When you remember me do it with this intimacy.

  Gethsemane: Jesus says to his friends, Keep me company with your conscious presence, your intimacy.

  Pentecost: God's Spirit takes the forms of fire and wind. These, in turn, take all forms and are yet beyond all forms as does God's presence. Fire as the fire of the life giving sun poured out on Mother Earth. Earth generated wind and air giving the stuff of breath. How intimate can we get?

**123. First Sunday of Lent (C)**

**Third Reading** (Luke 4.1-14)

*The Gospel of Mark had said that after John the Baptist baptized Jesus in the Jordan, Jesus went out alone into the desert for forty days. Luke inserts at that point a narrative that may have been a story about temptation that a source, which Matthew also used, had applied to Jesus.*

“If you are the son of God,” says the devil, “tell this stone to become bread.” Jesus had been fasting, and there would be nothing particularly wrong in ending the fast with bread. Temptation may begin with innocuous things. Jesus does not condemn bread in rebuffing the devil, but he points to what is more than, and apart from, bread: “The human shall not live on bread alone.” That which is more than bread, and apart from it, would lead one to provide bread for others, not oneself.

Then the devil showed Jesus “…in an instant all the kingdoms of the inhabited world.” It was “in an instant,” not a survey of what was actually in the kingdoms. The people in the kingdoms didn’t count in the panorama that the devil presents. “I will give you,” says the devil, “all this authority and all their glory, because it has been given to me….” Unlike bread, which is innocuous in itself and can even be good, authority and glory are described as possessions of the evil one. They become intrinsically evil when the people in the kingdoms do not receive consideration. Jesus rebuffs him again: “You shall worship the Lord your God, and you shall worship him alone.” When it is a matter of God or Caesar, priority goes to God.

Then the devil led Jesus to the Temple. That is a remarkable situation—the devil leading someone to the Temple. The devil leads Jesus to the very House of God. On its highest place, the devil says, “If you are the son of God, cast yourself down from here; for it is written: ‘He shall command his messengers concerning you, to protect you.’” In the manner of a hate-filled or self-serving clergy person, the devil quotes scripture. The climax of temptation occurs in religion itself. The temptation itself consists of using religion magically—i.e., as an instrument for doing good for oneself.

The focal issue is whom one serves.

*Ash Wednesday Meditation*

Your body, in my arms,  
nestles to mine:  
 groin to groin, legs entwined  
 your brow by my lips,  
 your breast pressed to my chest.

Swept away by sleep,  
attentions you lavished on me   
drift into dreams.

Waking, I contemplate  
 (ashes to ashes  
 dust to dust)  
the conditional continuing  
of our mingling breath.

Only this I ask of Death:  
 that when he finds us,  
 he find us like this,  
 to wrench us together  
 apart from here.

I wonder  
 (ashes to ashes  
 dust to dust)  
if lovers endure beyond death,  
if the dead dream indeed.

In a hope,   
as tender as scents of spring,  
yet sure as winter-seeds  
that dream of Easter eruptions,  
I continue to hold you.

Tom Keene

**124. Second Sunday of Lent (C)**

**Third Reading** (Luke 9.28-36)

The narrative has long mystified commentators: Jesus had advised his followers of his impending arrest and undignified execution, and then, taking a few of the followers up a mountain, is transformed before them in a glorious vision. Moses and Elijah appear too, but when Peter suggests something of a shrine for all three, Luke indicates editorially that Peter didn’t know what he was talking about. Then a voice—clearly a theophany—says, “This is my chosen son; he is the one to heed.”

Luke helps us out by giving us an interpretive key; he says that Moses and Elijah were talking with Jesus “…about his exodus, which he was about to bring to an end in Jerusalem.” God had spoken to Moses in ancient times during the Exodus of the Israelites out of Egypt, giving the Law in a tremendous theophany of thunder claps and lightning. God had spoken in a quieter, more intimate way to Elijah, after the prophet had traveled forty days and forty nights after his exodus from the court of Ahab and Jezebel. Peter wanted to capture and hold onto the thunder claps that came with Moses and the mystical intimacy that came to Elijah, but he did not know what he was talking about. Jesus all alone—as when he was executed in the manner of a slave—was the one to heed. No thunderous glory, no prayerful repose—these were mere packaging.

*We See*

*(Peter muses on Luke’s good news. Luke 9:28-43)*

On ascending,

we sit in a circle.

We see ourselves brilliant,

a gazing into sun without going blind.

Elijah, Moses, Jesus, John, James, me.

Hard to tell us apart,

blurring, bleeding into one corona,

where notions of each other

make sense no more.

On descending,

we find the boy,

screaming blather,

flailing futility,

begging to burst his prison.

Our common gut

seized by a loathing,

a panic to flee, to cast out.

Then, as in a sudden dawn,

he’s struck with calm.

We see at last,

from heady highs

to feet-in-the-dirt hurt,

the Healing Wholeness.

Adonai Echad.

Tom Keene

January 30, 2016

**125. Third Sunday of Lent (C)**

Some parishes may switch to Year A for this Sunday.

**Third Reading** (Luke 13.1-9)

Jesus was a Galilean on his way to Jerusalem. “And some near him at the time were informing him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate mingled with their sacrifices.” Jerusalem was a dangerous place for a Galilean teacher, especially one whom some people were calling a Messiah, someone anointed for a mission. “Do you think those Galileans had become sinners more than other Galileans…?” Jesus was focused on what would be right, not on avoiding what might displease an authority: “No, I tell you, but unless you reform you will all be killed.”

“Or those eighteen in Siloam on whom the tower fell and killed….” The ancients knew very well how to construct all manner of buildings. Modern architects still marvel over the engineering involved in the construction of the Herodian Temple in Jerusalem. Yet, some incompetent built a tower that fell on eighteen hapless people. Had the builders cheated on the quality of the stone? Was the incompetence in question moral incompetence? “Do you think,” Jesus asked in regard to the eighteen, “they had become more guilty than all the people dwelling in Jerusalem?” Someone, perhaps many, in Jerusalem let that tower stay as it was.

Then Jesus tells a parable about a patient gardener waiting for a fig tree to begin bearing fruit.

*Lives and Stories*

with beginnings, middles, endings,

each with necessary failures,

surprise victories,

problems, one after another,

one danger averted

and on to another,

loves found and lost,

laughter amid tears,

masks tried and discarded,

wounds revealed,

hurts healed,

brilliant resurgences.

The last peak conquered,

a winding down,

scattered episodes fall into place

as notes in songs,

rhythms in poems,

touches in loving,

choreographed

into a completion

that dances.

Lives: the stuff of stories.

Story: a truth that frees,

a series of moments ending

in a silence that says it all.

Tom Keene   May 18, 2014

**126. Fourth Sunday of Lent (C)**

Some parishes may switch to Year A for this Sunday.

**Third Reading** (Luke 15.1-3, 11-32)

The Parable of the Prodigal Son (also called the Parable of the Compassionate Father) appears only in the Gospel of Luke. Luke uses it as the climax of three stories about rejoicing over the return of what was lost—following the story of the lost sheep and that of the woman’s lost coin. At one level of meaning, Luke has Jesus telling the Pharisees and scribes, albeit by indirection, to rejoice at the moral conversion of the tax farmers, who had worked for the Romans, and sinners, or even to rejoice at the conversion of pagans to the Jesus movement. And that is an important lesson—to respect the various routes by which people come to know the compassionate God. But there is more.

Luke writes of the prodigal son, “and coming to an understanding of himself…” (a close rendering of Luke’s Greek). It happens that when we do not understand ourselves that we wander off with what we have been given and waste it on a worthless life of self-indulgence. The point is not about financial want alone but a frittering away of the cultural heritage received from the past. Just think how much more prepared to cope with the world an adult of modest means is, compared to a wealthy child. How often do famous celebrities, lacking in cultivation in so many ways and too rich in their youth for their own good, fail to cope with life’s challenges? It is not that age alone makes the difference; I have seen havoc and anxiety created for young people by older individuals whose way in the world had been too untroubled and ready-made for them in the course of their own youth. Such often have no compassion for others. Troubled and priceless is the path to self-understanding!

Now hearing the reason for the bagpipe and song, the older brother did not want to go in. He had observed every rule of right behavior, and no festival had ever been arranged on that account. Relax, son, you still have the sort of wealth your little brother wasted. But “...it was necessary to celebrate and rejoice, because this your brother was dead and came to life, and was lost and is found.”

## *Kites and Poems*

Bound to strings and words  
they strain for range.  
Cut the string, the kite falls.  
Stop the words, the poem stays a ghost.

But bound:  
see them soar, dip, dive,  
wind scooping,   
testing the tension,  
riding it.

Be wind to my kite  
that we be poem:  
bound, yet free.

Tom Keene   
June 22, 1999

**127. Fifth Sunday of Lent (C)**

Some parishes may switch to Year A for this Sunday.

**Third Reading** (Johannine Gospel 8.1-11)

The passage commonly called “The Woman Caught in Adultery” was a free-floating piece of tradition that the ancients inserted in various places in their manuscripts of the gospels. Modern publishers place it in the Johannine Gospel at the eighth chapter. It was and is too precious a narrative to lose. What it says about judgmental Christians is obvious. But what was the writing in the dirt routine? Let’s put that into context.

The scribes and Pharisees were trying to trap Jesus. All the people in Judea were caught between a formalized, even fossilized, Law that mandated death penalties now and then on the one hand, and a less formal but more certain Roman imperial sway that reserved execution to the Romans. The Romans did not want anyone else to look too much like a government. If Jesus did not condemn the woman to death, he would be depicted as weak. If he did condemn her to death, he would be depicted as a revolutionary against Rome. So he engaged in some pretend.

The bureaucratic Roman judges had to commit their judgments and sentences to writing and then read them out loud. Jesus acted out the part of a Roman judge. But he read out a judgment pertaining as much to the accusers as the accused: “Let he who is without sin….” What sin on their part was at issue? The Law said that an adulterous *couple* had to be prosecuted (Leviticus 24.10 and Deuteronomy 22.22-24), but the accusers had done only half their job, if they saw it as their job to impose the letter of the Law in a fundamentalist manner. In applying the Law to women alone, they were perpetuating an evil. Is that why the accusers left, beginning with the eldest? I doubt it. The reason was that they did not want to upset the Romans and appear themselves to be revolutionaries. Jesus pretended to play the part of a Roman judge again and started writing; there was no telling what he might say what sentence would be in store for *them*.

But what is this narrative to leave us to think about the Law and other parts of the Bible? Jesus did not accept it all, word for word. He hardly left his disciples in a position to hide behind scriptural mandates. Indeed, a text is no substitute for a heart.

## *The Angel at El Milagrito*

Weekdays the angel sleeps under the old winding goat path   
now paved over and named after the Virgin   
who charmed divinity into flesh.

But on Sunday mornings between masses at Our Lady of Sorrows   
she skates down the sidewalk to El Milagrito Cafe   
where, for tips, the mariachis play  
under the searching gaze of St. Emiliano Zapata,   
the dead certainty of Blessed Pancho Villa.

She hangs her skates on a fireplug, and barefoot, slips in the door.   
Amid the cafe's coffee aromas and steam from bowls of menudo,   
she takes to dancing across shoulders of customers,   
pausing to whisper in ears her messages of caution   
and sudden consolation.

The man in the black hat engrossed in earphones,   
newspaper and food does not hear.   
But others, whose eyes sometimes lose their focus, might.   
Maybe the bus boy with a ring in his ear,   
the child peering through the hole he bit in his tortilla.   
One hears. From the poster on the wall,   
the accordion squeezing coyote   
plays contrapuntal conjunto to the mariachis' melodies,   
evoking from the angel's feet a polka beat.

When the mariachis rest, the angel dances out the door,   
retrieves her skates and scoots back to church,   
where, like the parabolic sower,  
she will broadcast her seeds before she goes back to sleep   
under St. Mary's tarred street.

Tom Keene

November 7, 1993

**128. Palm Sunday (C)**

**Third Reading**

Palm Sunday has two gospel readings from the *Gospel of Luke*; the first, read at the beginning of Mass, describes the triumphal entry into Jerusalem. The second is a full Passion account.

Luke took the triumphal entry from the *Gospel of Mark*, where it is a parody of the Romans’ triumphal parade after the conquest of Jerusalem, with Jewish slaves and Temple treasures in tow as testimony to the Empire’s glory. Unlike Mark, Luke was not writing for people who had seen the Romans’ victory parade. He nevertheless captures the irony of the narrative by having Jesus comment about the cheering disciples, “…if they were silent, the rocks will cry out.” Why rocks? In the continuation of the narrative, which is not read in this Sunday’s mass, Jesus predicts and even justifies the doom that will come upon the Temple, saying, in the words of the Prophet Hagai (2.15), that not a stone of the Temple will be left upon stone. The rock structure would be thoroughly dismantled, yet still cry out.

The Passion reading begins with the meal of a new covenant: “I greatly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer….This is my body, which is given for you; do this in my memory….” The elements of a sacrificial ritual are there, but the new covenant transcends received religion. It is a *new* covenant. The Temple priests do not know how to deal with a new covenant; they want to kill it but fear the covenant people and the imperial outsider. The Roman governor does not know how to deal with it: “I find no cause against this person.” Herod Antipater does not know how to deal with a new covenant: Throw something gorgeous on him and send him back to Pilate! But the crowd had an idea of how to deal with the matter: Release Barabbas, who really hated the outsiders, and kill the man who would not stoop to hatred.

And the disciples? They did not know how to deal with the new covenant either. Judas Iscariot trafficked with the received religion. Peter drew a sword. The new covenant transcended both the ways of the old religion and the ways of Caesar. This should leave one unsettled.

*Remembering the Rabbi*

            According to the story, a certain rabbi decided to spend his last full day with friends, food and drink, as they had done together so many times. At the high point of their celebration, he held out a piece of bread, a cup of wine, and told them: Take. This is my body. This is my blood. With that, he gave them to eat and drink.

            Can we give over to our imaginings how he might have elaborated on what he meant by that? Might it go like this?

*I give myself to you in* ***all*** *ways. So take these simple ways:*

*This bread, this wine, so everyday-common to our gatherings*

*to typify* ***all*** *those ways.*

*These common things, and we commoners, who consume them,*

*are, indeed, holy, whole and healing as are all things and all who*

*gather in love like this.*

*When you remember me, do this. Do this for me, for yourselves,*

*and for the healing of the entire human family. These things,*

*these happenings heal because we do them in love.*

*We celebrate and play with this bread and wine, with our bodies*

*and our blood, with our words and our meanings, with our presence*

*and our transcendence.*

*With all this, we invite into our seeming separations an all-pervading*

*Oneness, a holy, healing wholeness that is a more which we ourselves*

*are, a more that is becoming us.*

*As we do these particular things, let’s not get stuck in them. Let’s*

*go for their meanings: love, courage, truth - meanings that nourish*

*our work for a world of justice that there may be peace among us.*

*Let this nourishment be found in all we do.*

*This nourishment is here*

*and now in our sisters and brothers.*

*Especially, let us find it among those most in need:*

*the homeless; prisoners, the cold and hungry.*

*Food, when prepared with love, feeds body and soul as one.*

*That is the kind of deed that makes holy,that makes sacrament.*

Tom Keene

December 2012

**129. Easter Sunday (C)**

**Third Reading** (Luke 24.1-12; John 20.1-9)

Those who attend the beautiful Easter Vigil mass might also witness the Baptism of new Christians, the Confirmation of Christians newly affiliating with the Roman Catholic Church, and the first reception of the Eucharist by the new Christians and new Catholics. The gospel reading for the Vigil is Luke 24.1-12. Those who attend the Easter Sunday morning mass will hear John 20.1-9.

Luke notably created an architectural structure in his *Gospel* as well as in his *Acts of the Apostles*. The architecture of his *Gospel* includes a parallel between the Transfiguration (Luke 9.2-8) and the testimony about the Resurrection (Luke 24.1-12). In the Transfiguration, Jesus is transformed in appearance before Peter, John, and James, and two men (Elijah and Moses) were talking with Jesus. In the testimony about the Resurrection, Mary Magdalene, Joanna, and Mary the mother of James find two men before them. “Why are you seeking the living among the dead?” “(T)he son of humanity had to be handed over to the hands of sinful humans, crucified, and on the third day be raised.” Why was all this necessary? It was not for the benefit of Jesus but for that of us, mere humans, who often cannot begin to fathom the attraction of God to us without fathoming first the hatred humans could direct toward one another. Such is the role conversion plays in the realization of full humanity.

The *Johannine Gospel* does not structure the testimony about the Resurrection as an architectural parallel to the Transfiguration. Rather, the Johannine tradition was built upon the early memories of a child, “the disciple whom Jesus loved,” and involves Simon Peter and Mary Magdalene. The narrative reaches its point when it notes that they came to believe, “for they did not yet know the scripture that says he must rise from the dead.” It is possible to recite the words of scripture without *knowing* them. Similarly, it helps to experience Jesus as *absent* before we can really know him as *present*. As with Luke’s gospel, the Johannine Gospel points to the role of conversion. Such a conversion is not an *experience* of converting, a “born again” *experience*, but an experience of Jesus absent and a recognition of the reality of Jesus being born again, of being present again. We are part of the narrative, but that narrative is not about us and our experience; it transcends us.

*Abraham's Song*

Did that schlepping Aramean

trumpet in lavish excess

when he sowed his seed

between the thighs of Sarah,

her servants' and his?

Did the death camp smokestacks

sigh in frustration,

knowing they worked in vain,

that around the same earth

that received

their fulsome spewing of bone ash,

under the same sky

that inhaled the stench of burning bodies,

everywhere Abraham's offspring

begot and delivered,

fresh from amniotic flush,

new beings,

so nations yet to be known

would bless themselves by his name?

Tom Keene

March 23, 1988

**130. Second Sunday of Easter (C)**

**Third Reading** (Johannine Gospel 19.19-31)

“Doubting Thomas”—How many homilies have criticized doubt! Thomas wanted to *see* Jesus, even touch him, and he not only wanted to touch him, but to touch the *wounded* Jesus. Is that really something one should criticize?

The Johannine tradition itself does not seem to be so critical of relying on actually seeing for oneself. After a soldier stabbed the side of Jesus’ corpse on the cross, that gospel says, “And he who watched has given witness, and his testimony is true, and he knows what he is saying is true, so that you too may believe” (John 19.35).

Thomas saw, so that whoever would hear his testimony would believe. Moreover, he wanted to verify the wounds. It was not merely a matter of an intellectual assent, but also having empathy for suffering. Thomas was refusing to merely believe; he wanted to be moved.

While living in Toronto, I made the acquaintance of an Estonian immigrant to Canada. In his youth he harbored hate and anger toward the Soviet Russians, who had deprived his homeland of its liberty. He joined a resistance group, aided by the Nazi Germans who had invaded the Soviet Union. But then he saw a convent of Catholic sisters caring for wounded combatants from both sides of the conflict. They touched the wounds, and touched his heart. He converted to Catholicism and eventually became a Catholic priest and scripture scholar.

Intellectual assent stands in contrast to skepticism, but it actually depends on skepticism because the process of overcoming the questions and objections posed from a skeptical standpoint results in really knowing about what one assents to. Faith, which encompasses more than intellectual assent, stands in contrast to doubt. Faith depends on doubt; indeed faith consists as much of doubt as it consists of assent. It is a disposition based on seeing and being moved, not on a facile yeah-saying.

So doubt, Thomas, and be believing. Come and go when others hide behind locked doors, and then seek to know.

*Epitaph*

When this flesh, so mine,  
containing me,  
drains of me,  
sinks into soil,  
lays in clay,  
empty of days and sense,

smell for me  
the worm turned earth,  
touch and taste the warm loam,  
gaze on green hills,  
join my mourners’ laughter  
and leave a memory  
for me to find.

Tom Keene

**131. Third Sunday of Easter (C)**

**Third Reading** (Johannine Gospel 21.1-19)

This is the allegory of Peter going fishing, which weaves several themes together. One theme is the call of Peter. A second is the catch of fish where they were not expected. A third turns on the contrasting images of Peter clothing himself and his having to be clothed by others. A fourth is the three-fold question, “Do you love *me*?” A fifth is the series of commands: Feed, tend, feed. The Lectionary provides the option of not reading verses 15-19, which would eliminate the third, fourth, and fifth themes.

A fragment of the non-canonical *Gospel of Peter* contains what seems to be an introductory narrative to the tradition that we have in the fourth gospel reading: “Now it was the final day of the Unleavened Bread; and many went out returning to their home since the feast was over. But we twelve disciples of the Lord were weeping and sorrowful; and each one, sorrowful because of what had come to pass, departed to his home. But I, Simon Peter, and my brother Andrew, having taken our nets, went off to sea. And there was with us Levi Alphaeus, whom the Lord….” Peter tries to escape the sorrow by turning to work, and even to how things were before Jesus called him: “I am going to fish.” But Jesus wanted him changed and unable to go back to how his world used to be: “Simon son of John, do you love *me* more than these things?”

Once Peter is changed, his world could not be what it once had been. The fish were no longer to be found where they used to be found. Try the other side, Peter! As we know from the *Acts of the Apostles*, Peter will end up with a far different church from the one he first knew.

Peter grabbed his cloak and put it on before plunging into the water to go ashore. The evangelist adds an “Amen. Amen I say to you” saying, indicating that events will garb him in the cloak of martyrdom. Peter should not try to set the agenda, but to rise to the challenges that history will raise.

“Then that disciple whom Jesus loved says to Peter, ‘It is the Lord!’” Did Peter plunge into the water to run ashore and embrace Jesus? No, he turned to retrieve the net full of one hundred fifty-three large fish. “Simon son of John, do you love *me* more than these things?” “Simon son of John, do you love *me*” “Simon son of John, do you love *me*?” This is catching Peer’s attention. This is setting priorities. Where the heart is, the treasure will be.

And how does one love the Lord? “Feed my lambs.” “Tend my sheep.” “Feed my sheep.” How can one love even the Jesus one can see, and hate a neighbor one cannot see?

*No Mark for Cain*

**After we have**

*stoned the adulterers,*

*beheaded the rebels,*

*burned the heretics,*

*drowned the witches,*

*hanged the horse thieves,*

*put the killers to the needle,*

*we take time to thank our god.*

We thank you, god

for being a god in our own image,

a god who is Number One,

a kick butt kind of god

of power and might.

We thank you for being not

some pitiful god of pity, absolution and peace.

Who could forgive a forgiving god?

Some bleeding heart god,

creating out of love and loving creation?

Give us you: a destroyer god.

We hunger for a god like you,

a god who wants sacrifice, not mercy.

A god who *accepts* Abraham’s offered son,

a Moloch who understands that we understand,

who knows we know what we are doing,

when we sacrifice the innocent and the guilty.

Make us, O god, instruments of your retribution.

Demand of us killing for killing,

murder for murder.

Give us a god we can fear,

that fear may secure us,

bind us together.

We want a god who underwrites

the righteous good in ourselves,

expels the expendables.

We long to serve a god of vengeance,

who puts no mark of forbearance on Cain

and the murdering sons of Cain.

Death to Cain.

Long live vengeance.

Long live our god.

Tom Keene

June 2, 1998

Introductory remarks before reading this again:

In doing workshops on the death penalty I find many of our brothers and sisters who support death penalty are conserving something they believe in.

Some supporters are preserving a belief in a god of punishment and revenge. They point to the Bible as a source for their belief and there is plenty there to support them.

This poem is in the voice of the many who hold this belief. The poem contains several Biblical references:

 The mark of Cain, where the first murderer says to God, “Because of what I did, anyone who finds me will kill me.” God gives Cain a mark to protect him. Imagine, God protecting the murderer.

 Moloch, the god of wealth who demanded child sacrifice in exchange for favors.

 Abraham’s offering to sacrifice his own son believing this is what God wants. But God does not want human sacrifice and the practice of child sacrifice by Abraham and his descendants is no more.

 Then there is the theme announced by the prophets: God wants mercy, not sacrifice.

 Finally, there is Jesus’ prayer to forgive his executioners because they did not know what they were doing.

**132. Fourth Sunday of Easter (C)**

**Third Reading** (Johannine Gospel 10.27-30)

In 200 BCE King Antiochus III of Syria took Judea from King Ptolemy V Epiphanes of Egypt. The new ruler allowed the Jewish people to live according to their own ethnic customs. However, 25 years later his son, Antiochus IV Epiphanes, invaded Judea at the instigation of a Hellenizing faction from Jerusalem and put a stop to the sacrifices that had been offered daily in the Temple in Jerusalem. In 167 he even had a statue of Zeus set up in the Temple and had swine sacrificed to it. A revolt that was begun by Mattathias and led to victory by Judah Maccabeus liberated the Temple in 165. Judah ordered the Temple to be cleansed, a new altar built in place of the polluted one, and new holy vessels made. According to ritual tradition, a light was supposed to be kept burning in the Temple, using undefiled olive oil with the seal of the high priest on its container; but there was only one such bowl of oil to be found, enough for one day only. It would take eight days to collect and press enough olives to make more oil. Judah ordered an eight day feast of songs and sacrifices anyway to celebrate the rededication of the Temple, and the one bowl of acceptable oil miraculously burned for eight days. This gave rise to the annual Jewish celebration of Lights, Hanukkah, and to the Menorah with eight lights.

The Johannine Gospel (10.22ff.) says that Jesus was walking in the Portico of Solomon in the Temple precincts during the feast of Hanukkah. His critics demanded to know whether he claimed to be the Christ (Messiah), i.e. the one dedicated by an anointing with oil. He replies that they would not believe him if he told them such a thing, and that they should observe his works. Then he adds the words that comprise the reading for this Sunday: “My sheep listen to my voice, and I know them, and they follow me, and I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish at all, and no one will seize them from my hand. My Father, Who gave them to me, is greater than all, and no one can seize them from the hand of the Father. I and the Father are one.”

We might take Jesus’ walking in the Temple precincts during Hanukkah as a gratuitous detail in the Fourth Gospel; but more likely, as the sanctified oil lasted to the end of the feast that celebrated the liberation and rededication of the Temple, the Christ or Anointed one was not to come to an end but would show the way to the Final Day. “I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish at all.” There is a stubborn refusal in the little light to die out, a persistence drawn from the conviction and reality that the anointed one and the One by Whom the anointed one is anointed are one. And again, the work of the Father in this life is not to be parted from and distanced from the Father Himself, is not to render the Father a harmless idol in a temple.

## *Celebrating Transcendence*

How do we  
  
celebrate the universal   
in the particular?

the forever, world without end  
in this here, in this now?

the good in the conflicted?  
truth in illusion?

beauty in seeds of becoming?  
unity in duality?

the All-That-Is  
in mere words?

Tom Keene

**133. Fifth Sunday of Easter (C)**

**Third Reading** (Johannine Gospel 13.31-33a, 34-35)

Between the triumphal entry into Jerusalem and the Passion, the Johannine gospel presents a series of Last Supper discourses. The excerpt that is read at mass on the Fifth Sunday of Easter comes after Jesus has washed the disciples’ feet and Judas Iscariot has left. What Jesus says could be puzzling if read in isolation: “Now the son of humanity was glorified, and God was glorified in him and God will glorify him in Himself and will glorify him immediately.” When? Past or future?

Let’s begin with the immediate past. Jesus cited Psalm 41.9: “The one who is feeding on my bread raised his heel to me.” Showing the bottom of one’s foot to someone in the Near East was and is a sign of contempt. Who, feeding on the bread of Jesus, had contempt for him? We know that Jesus knew what Judas Iscariot was up to, and that Jesus dunked a piece of bread and gave it to Judas and said, “Do what you are doing quickly.” “And night began,” says the scripture. The ironic glorification of Jesus occurred when he was held as a contemptable figure in the heart of one who could be close to him.

Then he speaks of the imminent future: “…God will glorify him in Himself and will glorify him immediately.” The Passion, Death, and Resurrection are soon to come. The ironic contempt of public humiliation and forsakenness will be a glorification with God Himself.

“I am giving you a new commandment, that you love one another.” The gospel has been fathoming what this new commandment means.

Recently I asked a teenager who was preparing for Confirmation what the organizers of her confirmation retreat focused on. She replied that it was a series of virtues: Faith, hope, charity—yes, what we used to call the “theological virtues.” And prudence, fortitude, and temperance. What? Were there not four “cardinal virtues”? Were they not prudence, *justice*, fortitude, and temperance? What happened to justice? Why did our erstwhile catechists dispense with justice? Did they not have time for justice?

I ask this in the present context because the new commandment in the Last Supper discourse, a commandment that we recite with equanimity, is saying something about justice. There is a temptation in our time, dominated as it is by economic concerns, to see justice in material terms alone and compartmentalize it, seal it off from the virtuous life in general. The realities of economic justice and injustice are genuine and not to be neglected, but there are other dimensions of justice, such as fairness in the exercise of power and open-heartedness toward others. In justice, one does not find others, any others, contemptible.

Jesus washed the feet of those who were to eat with him. Judas Iscariot took a piece of bread from the hand of Jesus, but walked out into the darkness with it. “The one who is feeding on my bread raised his heel to me.”

*Thoughts at the First Eucharist*

            According to the story, a certain rabbi decided to spend his last full day with friends, food and drink, as they had done together so many times. At the high point of their celebration, he held out a piece of bread, a cup of wine, and told them: Take. This is my body. This is my blood. With that, he gave them to eat and drink.

            Can we give over to our imaginings how he might have elaborated on what he meant by that? Might it go like this?

*I give myself to you in* ***all*** *ways. So take these simple ways:*

*This bread, this wine, so everyday-common to our gatherings*

*to typify* ***all*** *those ways.*

*These common things, and we commoners, who consume them,*

*are, indeed, holy, whole and healing as are all things and all who*

*gather in love like this.*

*When you remember me, do this. Do this for me, for yourselves,*

*and for the healing of the entire human family. These things,*

*these happenings heal because we do them in love.*

*We celebrate and play with this bread and wine, with our bodies*

*and our blood, with our words and our meanings, with our presence*

*and our transcendence.*

*With all this, we invite into our seeming separations an all-pervading*

*Oneness, a wholeness that is a more which we ourselves are,*

*a more we are becoming, that is becoming us.*

*As we do these particular things, let’s not get stuck in them. Let’s*

*go for their meanings: love, courage, truth - meanings that nourish*

*our work for a world of justice that there may be peace among us.*

*Let this nourishment be found in all we do. That nourishment is*

*here and now in our sisters and brothers.*

*Especially, let us find it among most in need:*

*the homeless; prisoners, the cold and hungry.*

*Food when prepared with love, feeds body and soul as one.*

*That is the kind of that makes holy that makes sacrament.*

**134. Seventh Sunday of Easter**

**Third Reading**

*In some locations the readings will be those of the Seventh Sunday of Easter, with the Ascension to be observed on Thursday, while in most the Sunday readings will be those of the Solemnity of the Ascension.*

**Seventh Sunday of Easter** **(C):** Johannine Gospel 17.20-26

In the Sundays after Easter, the Christian narrative often appears in the second reading from the *Acts of the Apostles*, the second volume of Luke’s two-part work, and the third readings consist of excerpts from the *Johannine Gospel*. This excerpt is from one of the versions of Jesus’ last Supper discourse in the *Johannine Gospel*, the famous discourse about Christian unity: “…that all would be one, as You, Father, are in me and I in You….” The passage attempts to put into words what usually goes by necessity unsaid, even in prayer.

We usually think, that is speak to ourselves, of right conduct toward others in “contrary to fact” terms: If I were her, if I were in the place of him, how would I feel if…. This is at the basis of ethics, of *discourse* about what should be done. But discourse is advice, not motivation. Prayer has a mystical element in it wherein one senses a unity with the divine and a oneness along with the divine with humans and with even the physical world. It goes beyond discourse—hence the experience of prayer without words. Translating this element back into discourse could lead to a pantheism, wherein unity would become banalized into equivalency and our mere anthropomorphisms about god become a fundamentalist diminution of the divine. It is better to leave the mystical element mystical and let god be God.

But what does this do to right conduct toward others? The *if* dissolves. I am she, I am he. I am no more equivalent to her or him any more than I am equivalent to God, but, as the passage tries to say it, God is in me and I am in them. This is not ethical discourse but motive.

## *Voyager*

Your visit was enough  
for the moon to fill and ebb,  
giving a grace of wholeness.  
Your parting was a kind sadness.  
Like Shiner, your cat,  
(so lavished with impromptu  
touch and praise)  
we breathed again entire:  
renewed in each splash of red hair  
and laughing toss of your head  
at family jokes.

Indulging a last barrage of hugs,  
you walked into the lag hours of night  
onto the airport tarmac.  
At the door,   
a final wave and smile,  
you entered the slim silver fuselage,  
a birth canal to a new world.  
We watched your duffel bag and back pack  
file up the luggage ramp.

When from the black sky  
engines ceased their whispers,  
we went to our car,  
holding among us the space you left.  
At the tug of a switch,  
headlights reached through predawn mist  
to illumine laces of dew  
on a blossoming shrub.

Liquid diamonds, I thought,  
soon to be vapor and memory.  
Till they return.

Tom Keene

October 1983

**135. Solemnity of the Ascension** **(C):** Luke 24.46-53

The Ascension is the conclusion of the third gospel, the conclusion to the first part of Luke’s two-part work. Before the excerpt that is read at mass, Luke characterizes it in a sentence: “Then he opened their mind to understand the scriptures” (Luke 24.45). So the passage that is read at mass speaks of the meaning of scripture—at the time of Luke’s writing, the Hebrew Bible.

First, “…the Messiah would suffer and rise from the dead on the third day….” Second, this “…will be preached for conversion in his name for the forgiveness of sins in all the nations, beginning from Jerusalem.” Third, “You are witnesses to this.” So he instructed them to stay in Jerusalem until they would be empowered. After that he blessed them, “…stood apart from them and was carried up into heaven.”

The doings of Jesus himself would be impermanent; he would suffer, die, and rise. His activity would not be contained within Jerusalem and all that Jerusalem stood for but would be preached to all the nations, with their sinfulness dismissed. The disciples of the Messiah are witnesses to this impermanence and non-containment. They were to remain in Jerusalem and all that Jerusalem stood for, but their stay would be temporary, since they were to break out of its confines. Their witness will begin in Jerusalem and go out from Jerusalem, but the point of their witnesses would not to be carrying Jerusalem with them, or for that matter any package of traditions. As Jesus stood apart and ascended beyond all that, so would they.

*Umbilici and Unity*

Suppose some madcap magician

rescued from rot and recycled

every single umbilical cord,

tied them end to end,

wrapped them round the race,

buttoned them to our navels,

knitted us a network

to leak to each other

the laughter of our lives

seep sorrow bowel to bowel

and weep with one another's eyes.

Tom Keene

April 15, 2016

**136. Trinity Sunday (C)**

**Third Reading** (Johannine Gospel 16.12-15)

The great minds of antiquity realized that the tales about the many gods were mere personifications of the forces that all people experienced in nature. They saw it as a great intellectual achievement that they could cast the polytheist tales aside and recognize a greater, singular deity. And for sure it was a great achievement. Nevertheless, there was something lacking in their adherence to the insight that deity is singular. They could still be self-centered rather than deity-centered; their goal in life—an untroubled state of mind, which they termed *ataraxia*—was essentially about themselves. Their ethic, which was concerned with the business of right living, was not life per se. Their deity was not great enough to draw them out of their own business. Their commitment reflected an astounding intellectual achievement and was good so far as it went, but it only went so far. It was a pursuit of a leisure class that could co-exist comfortably with empire and slavery.

The Hebrew God, whose name those in the Hebrew tradition would not even pronounce, was implicit in the Hebrews’ sense of respect for greatness. The God of the tradition we now call *Jewish* is a great God for sure. There is only one God, Whose following is one people. The experience of the greatness of God was truly a great civilizational achievement. A people having a genuinely great God had to be a great people, and a great people, comprised of individuals who are treasured by that great God, could not contemplate enslaving one another, exploiting one another, killing one another. A great God of a great people would draw people out from their self-concerns. A great Creator God would be a just God of tender lovingness. But would a genuinely great Creator God create other peoples and destine them to be ungreat? And how could a great God, possessed of a creative intelligence, be self-oblivious and not have a creative Self-Knowledge? The wisdom literature began to suggest that there must be something great about an eternal divine Word.

Early on in their history, the Christians inherited the language of one deity from the Hellenistic intellectuals, and as co-religionists in the Jewish trajectory they sensed the greatness of God and associated the divine Word with Jesus of Nazareth, the human messiah. But this occasioned intellectual problems that they posed in Hellenistic language taken from the civilized world’s culture. How could God be great enough to participate in the religiosity of His people and other peoples, and have Himself as the object of His own religiosity, and yet not be an ultimate egoist? How can He be a Word spoken to Himself and to others, even in the guise of the inspired rabbi from Nazareth, and still be One? The problem was unresolvable within Hellenistic wordcraft, and probably within the framework of any wordcraft.

Creator, Word, Presence—all taken as great, so that the Creator is not the Word or the Presence, the Word is not the Creator or the Presence, the Presence is not the Creator or the Word—all three are One. This cannot be! Or more precisely, this cannot be captured in human discourse, or even be really captured in human religion. We are forced to admit that *number*, though a magnificent human achievement, is a mere intellectual tool. The number one is merely an instance of that tool. It is not up to the task of comprehending a great God. The recognition of ultimate greatness is also a magnificent human achievement, but it is a merely human achievement. It is not sufficient for the task of characterizing the oneness of divinity. The Trinitarian formula, unsatisfying insofar as it is a mere formulation, reminds us not to bring deity and God down to our dimensions.

*Zen of Zero*

*What is the sound of one hand clapping?*

*Zen koan.\**

Neither plus nor minus?

A number that is no number?

An absence ever present?

A silence enabling sound?

A nothing that works?

A no-matter that matters?

The limitless encoded in limit?

The no that means yes?

The empty space of a doorway?

Tom Keene

November 5, 2013

\*Koan: A riddle in the form of a paradox used in Zen Buddhism as an aid to meditation and a means of gaining intuitive knowledge.

**137. Solemnity of the Most Holy Body and Blood of Christ (C)**

**Third Reading** (Luke 9.11b-17)

The reading is Luke’s version of the legend of Jesus multiplying loaves and fishes, which has been preached on for centuries as an allegory for the Eucharist or for the generous sharing of food, the latter premised on the assumption that the people in the crowds were hiding their provisions under their garments. Luke takes over the essential narrative from Mark 6.32-44, the first of two such multiplications in Mark’s gospel. While Mark places the multiplication near the southern shore of the Sea of Galilee and has Jesus send the disciples by boat to Bethsaida afterward, Luke has it occur in Bethsaida, which was on the north shore of the lake. Both describe their setting as a desert place, though Mark has two multiplications—one for Judeans and Galileans and one for gentiles—while Luke narrates only one. A major point that Luke pursues rather consistently is that there is only one Christianity; so he writes of only one multiplication and blessing and places it at the margin between the Jewish and gentile worlds.

Can there ever be a Eucharistic Blessing that is divisible? Luke did not think there could be. Could there be a generous sharing of food that is ethnically exclusive? Again, Luke did not think there could be. It would be to engage in an erroneous literalism to limit the ethical point Luke was making, to limit it to bread and small fish, or to food for that matter.

*Potluck with Jesus*

When he came into our village contentions,

he asked the women to get up a potluck.

Bakers brought breads,

gardeners their goods,

householders their steaming stews.

We toasted and tasted ourselves

with homemade wines.

In his reach,

we felt in one another

his lighter than gravity,

electromagnetic touch,

finding us, binding us,

freeing us.

When he left,

he stayed in our memories

of how we beheld one another then

and how he continues with us now

in our potlucks.

Tom Keene

March 1, 2016

**138. Second Sunday in Ordinary Time (C)**

**Third Reading** (Johannine Gospel 2.1-11)

“They have no wine.” The traditional wedding ceremony was nearing its conclusion on Tuesday after it had begun, according to custom, the previous Wednesday. “My lady, what is that to us? My hour has not yet come.” Mary had expected something memorable from her son, but the festivity was almost over, its conclusion marked by the wine running out.

“Fill the water jars with water.” Visiting Cana, Jesus was a person of authority, evidently known for wisdom and teaching, but not yet for wondrous signs. The slaves filled the six nine-gallon stone jars. “Now ladle some out and bring it to the head waiter.”

“Everyone sets out the good wine first, and when they have drunk freely the rest; you have kept the good wine up to now.”

The evangelist, probably one of several members of a Christian teaching team whose versions of the Jesus traditions were edited into the Johannine *Gospel* as we have it today, used this narrative to depict Jesus in a particular light: “My lady, what is that to us? My hour has not yet come.” Jesus did not set about looking for an opportunity to put on a performance. He simply shared his wisdom, and disciples followed him. Here he was simply respectfully joining a wedding festivity. But Mary felt that something good should be promoted. So Jesus indeed made something good—“…you have kept the good wine up to now”—six nine-gallon stone jars of it! And so the disciples were emboldened, and others joined them.

*Wine and Truth*

Before we dine, during and after,  
our blood-red Merlot  
calls forth from being together  
how, in moments like these,  
love leaks out,  
meaning emerges from chaos.

Tom Keene

December 26, 2005

**139. Third Sunday in Ordinary Time (C)**

**Third Reading** (Luke 1.1-4, 4.14-21)

It is tempting to skip over Luke’s introduction to his gospel, but we can learn some things about early Christianity from it. The practice was to catechize new Christians with the sayings of Jesus: “…the sayings by which you were catechized.” These would include such passages as the Beatitudes, the Lord’s Prayer, and the parables. Luke says he was adding the narrative of the deeds of Jesus, which he was putting in a serviceable order:

Whereas many attempted to reorder the narration of the doings that have been confirmed among us, as eye-witnessed from the outset and those who became ministers of the word handed down to us, I too, having traced everything accurately from the beginning, thought to write it in an order for you, O excellent Theophilus, so that you may learn to have confidence in the sayings by which you were catechized.

The focus of the good news was the largely ethical content of the Jesus sayings, which also appear in Matthew’s gospel. The narrative of the actions of Jesus, which appears to have come largely from the Gospel of Mark, were in an order in that gospel that Luke found less useful for teaching purpose. Luke may well have had such works as the Gospel of Mathew in mind when he mentions other attempts at reordering, but he does not appear to have used Matthew’s gospel as a source. We should remember that an early Christian church was in place before a Christian Bible was published. The written Bible came from the church, not the church from the written Bible. Taking the Bible as the literal words of God rather than as traditional words witnessing to the Word, is to mistake the messenger for the message. Luke himself felt free to change the presentation in the service of what was to be presented.

Luke designed the excerpt from the fourth chapter of his gospel to present the theme of Jesus’ teaching. Already a reputable teacher elsewhere in Galilee, Jesus enters the synagogue in Nazareth and reads from a few passages of the prophet Isaiah. Jesus did not turn to the Law or teach the Law; that was not his theme.

“The spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he anointed me.” *Anoint* is the same word stem as that of *Messiah* or, in Greek, *Christ*. It refers to the conferral of a life’s mission. The spirit “…has sent me to announce good news to the poor.” What is good news to the poor is not, at least superficially, good news to the rich. The Isaiah selections go on to speak of the release of people from prison. That would be debtors’ prison. Before the modern era, criminals were punished physically or executed, not imprisoned after being convicted; but poor people who could not pay their bills were held in prison until friends, family, or a sympathetic person paid off the debt, or they might be sold into slavery. To proclaim release to the imprisoned would be far more destabilizing to an oppressive system of rule than to help one or two criminals escape.

Isaiah, as quoted by Jesus, also proclaims a “recovery of sight to the blind….” This is from the widely used “Septuagint” Greek translation; the Hebrew probably intended to refer to prisoners emerging from darkness into the light of the outdoors. Either way, the release of the poor and the abandonment of restricting the poor involve an enlightenment. Those who would otherwise keep the poor in darkness, unseeing, would “…send away free those who have been oppressed.”

*An Addiction to Justice*

A life:

disheartened often,

futile at times,

sufficient never,

persistent always,

believing ever.

Tom Keene

November 15, 2012

**140. Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time (C)**

**Third Reading** (Luke 4.21-30)

“Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.” The scripture was about good news being proclaimed to the poor and a Jubilee Year in which debts would be written off. And all “…were amazed at the words of good will that were coming from his mouth.” Many see what comes afterwards in the narrative as evidence of skepticism in Nazareth about Jesus, but it should be understood as evidence of local pride: “Is he not the son of Joseph?” Luke has Jesus understanding it that way: “Undoubtedly you will recite the proverb to me, ‘Physician heal yourself. Do what we heard came about in Capernaum also here in your homeland.’” But Jesus would have nothing to do with even the slightest parochialism. His mission was to proclaim good news to the poor, not boost local pride. Local pride would be a distraction.

So Jesus cites two cases from the Hebrew scriptures where divine favor was shown to foreigners rather than to Israelites—Elijah’s extension of the meagre food supply of the generous widow of Zarephath in Sidon (1 Kings 17) and Elisha’s curing Naaman the leper from Syria (2 Kings 5). His citing such cases reversed the attitude of the people in Nazareth: “And when they heard these things in the synagogue, they were filled with much anger….”

Parochialism, of course, is not unique to first century Nazareth. It is not simply a matter of reluctance to find wisdom in a faith tradition other than one’s own, but also a refusal to extend good will to the “other” in general. That begins with a repressed doubt about one’s own homeland, i.e. an underlying lack of confidence: The locals in Nazareth “…were amazed at the words of good will that came from his mouth.” The accompanying doubt about other homelands is usually less repressed.

*Anne Frank Listens*

In hiding,  
sounds turn vital,  
to be grasped,  
ever so briefly,  
as they slip,  
quicksilver,  
through fingers.

Day sounds   
amid the rule of silence:  
     turning book pages,  
     newspaper crinkle,   
     cow bells along the street  
     (cattle prodded to butchers?)

Silences:  
         thoughts of breathing free,  
   running in flowering field,  
   growing into womanhood,  
   yearning to love.

Night,   
rules relax:  
   talk, always soft,  
   radio low,  
   rain, roof's staccato drumbeat,  
   trooper boots on cobblestones - coming,  
   trooper boots on bridge - going.

Finally,   
boots on stairs,   
shouting.   
Door breaks.

Tom Keene

**141. Fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time (C)**

**Third Reading** (Luke 5.1-11)

Jesus, seated in a boat, had finished teaching the word of God to a crowd on the shore of the Lake of Gennesaret, or Sea of Galilee. He said to Peter, “Put out into the deep and let your nets down for a catch.” This can be taken as a simple miracle narrative: “Master, laboring all night we caught nothing, but on your say so I will cast the net.” Then the catch is so great that with a second boat they still have difficulty bringing it in. But the narrative of the ministry of Jesus as taken over from the *Gospel of Mark* had plenty of miracles. Why did Luke add this one?

Unlike the other Evangelists, Luke not only followed the narrative of Jesus up to the Passion and Resurrection but also added that of the founding of the Church. The narrative in Luke’s *Acts of the Apostles* features several movements within the Church; today we would call them denominations. There were the movement led by James the Brother in Jerusalem, the movement led by Peter first also in Jerusalem but later in Antioch on the Orontes and eventually in Rome, and the movement led by Paul in cities of what are now Turkey and Greece. The movement led by James would disappear from history and from Christian consciousness, hinted at by a few references in Paul’s *Letter to the Galatians*, a few legends recorded in *Acts* and in the history written by Bishop Eusebius of Caesarea, and the self-identification of the author of the *Letter of Jude* as one of the Brothers from James’ community. The author of the *Letter of James* seems to have used the pen name *James* in memory of that community.

Luke’s narrative would feature the movements around Peter and, especially, Paul. A rivalry developed between the two movements, and Luke went to great lengths to make them both a part of the one Christian narrative. His imagery, that of two boats with their crews working together to bring in a catch too large for both, has an evident meaning for us.

*Fisher of Men*

*(for Pierre Teilhard de Chardin)*

Bathers buoyant, effervescent swimmers,

celebrate incognizant the evolutionary lines

connecting boys on diving boards doing cannonballs

with flying fish soaring for joy,

connecting circles of all-seeing fish-eyes

with vestigial gill slits in embryos of selves,

lines that converge in the god-man-fish,

who spurted from the fecund virgin's watery womb,

who harrowed subliminal depths of Stygian waters

and rose to reap fiery harvests in hearts,

whose now-knowing care knits, in illuminating lasers,

a net to catch and caress all that swim

in the spawned, spermatic seas of time and space.

Tom Keene

August 28, 1988

**142. Sunday in Ordinary Time (C)**

**Third Reading** (Luke 6.17, 20-26)

This is the Lukan version of the beatitudes. Luke makes it the principal teaching of Jesus, given immediately after Jesus selected twelve of the disciples and named them apostles The teaching was meant for people of all nations, Jews and gentiles alike: “…and there was a great crowd of his disciples and a great number of people from all of Judea, Jerusalem, and the coastal area of Tyre and Sidon.”

“Blessed are you poor, because yours is the kingdom of God.” This is not a charitable donation. The kingdom is not *for* the poor but rather belongs to the poor; it is theirs by right. And it does not belong to other people who are poor, but to “you,” disciples. A true disciple is poor, not living the “good life” based on services provided by the poor.

“Blessed are you who hunger now, because you will be filled.” Sustenance does not bring enjoyment to someone who is not hungry. Happy are you if you can enjoy and give thanks.

“Blessed are you who are weeping now, because you shall laugh.” Someone who does not know to weep will not share in the laughter of others.

Blessed are you when people treat you like a prophet—better yet, when you speak truth to power as prophets tend to do—“…when people hate you and when they excommunicate and insult you and spurn your name as evil because of the son of humanity. Rejoice on that day and leap for joy; for behold your reward will be great in heaven; for accordingly their fathers treated the prophets.” Particularly happy are you if you speak truth to power because of Jesus, who referred to himself as the son of humanity.

To be someone poor, an owner of the kingdom, to be able to enjoy what nourishes, to know when to weep with others, to break through the self-justifying rhetoric of power and to state the truth—such is the principal teaching of Jesus.

*The Sea*

At dusk, she is an old woman.

Whitecaps highlight her hair,   
scudding to her shoreline shoulders.

She scents herself with salt in memory   
of lovers whose names she forgets.

Her heart is dark with sailors’ bones:  
men who loved her unto death.

At night she pulsates under stars  
wearing black for her late loves.

At sunrise she sheds her mourning dress  
and dances in silvery slip.

And she is young again.

Tom Keene

**143. Seventh Sunday in Ordinary Time (C)**

**Third Reading** (Luke 6.27-38)

It is a principle of criminal law, at least as we know it, that victims of crime as well as their family and friends are not to serve as prosecutor, judge, or jurors in the case in which they have been victimized. The point of the law is that the state, as a neutral party, should administer justice, that uninvolved jurors should decide upon guilt, and that not even the appearance of revenge should taint decisions to prosecute, convict, or punish. The establishment of such a system of justice rather than one of blood revenge and duels is an important step in civilizing humanity.

This passage from the Sermon on the Plain in Luke’s gospel, which parallels the Sermon on the Mount in the Gospel of Matthew, would have a follower of Jesus who is victimized accept the mistreatment. Where there is an effective rule of law, “turning the other cheek” and similar behavior is not hyperbole or an exaggerated ideal, but eminently practical. The implication is that civilized people should actually behave this way.

But there is more. The Christian should endeavor to be at peace with someone who would perpetrate some injury. Offering the other cheek or a second garment can disarm. It might establish a relationship, as might giving to someone begging for a handout.

The stance of a disciple of Jesus contrasts that of those who seek to walk about carrying guns and looking at the world as someone ready to take aim.

*Enemies*

How dare you even suggest

we love our enemies?

Terrorists.

Barbarians.

Aliens.

Infidels.

Refugees.

Other races,

classes,

skins of other color.

Others for us to fear and hate,

others needed to bind us together

against a common threat.

To love such others is to betray us.

Surely you know what happens to traitors.

Tom Keene

November 20, 2015

**144. Eighth Sunday in Ordinary Time (C)**

**Third Reading** (Luke 6.39-45)

The Sermon on the Plain, Luke’s parallel to Matthew’s Sermon on the Mount, began with the Beatitudes and continued with a number of sayings that people remembered as being typical of Jesus. Here Luke includes a number of short teachings that also appear in the *Gospel of Matthew* and in the non-canonical sayings-gospel known as the *Gospel of Thomas*, which was discovered in Egypt in 1945. The passage centers on the theme of insight, which spiritual writers call “discernment.”

Can the blind lead the blind? If you have lumber in your own eye, how can you remove a splinter from someone else’s eye? How can a briar bush produce good fruit? From the mouth comes the overflow of the heart.

These sayings have an obvious relevance to individual conduct. A person lacking introspective insight can hardly understand or advise another. In fact, a lack of insight about oneself often develops into projection, where a greedy person understands others as greedy too, and a selfish person believes other also to be selfish. And we can only wonder how any one of us, so often lacking self-insight as we do, might misconstrue God.

However, we are not isolated particles in an unlit sky. Our insights and thinking reflect the insights and thought of others who came before us, who ow surround us, and whose dreams of the future pull us. And if ech one person—past, present, or future—is faulty in self-understanding, how much more faulty is our civilization-wide summation of error! Don’t nations with histories of prejudice and discrimination claim to be democratic, open, and egalitarian? The nineteenth-century critics of democracy spoke, perhaps unfairly, of a crowd mentality always and inevitably sinking to the lowest common denomination. This was an erroneous condemnation of societies because people are not equally influential; there are influential who can rise above moral mediocrity, take a wider view of the world, and raise others up as well. The point is to be one of them.

*Creation*

When god was a yearning girl  
and hormones seeped  
to make her ache,  
urged a germ of children,

when god

was a sighing boy,  
eyes and heart ranging  
to find some other   
to let in his seed,

could One find Oneself in chaos,  
in painter’s pallet mix,  
blasting light from dark,  
dry land from roiling seas,

creating a firmament for us  
to breathe and echo in our art  
the grunts and groans  
of first love long, long ago?

Tom Keene

**145. Ninth Sunday in Ordinary Time (C)**

**Third Reading** (Luke 7.1-10)

“I say to you, I have not found such faith even in Israel.” Jesus was speaking of the Roman centurion who sent messengers not only to ask Jesus to cure his slave boy but to say to him not to trouble himself but to perform the cure from afar: “For I am also a person established by authority, having soldiers under myself, and I say to one, ‘Go,’ and he goes….” This centurion is a *good* imperialist; he built the natives their synagogue and does not want to put their healer to too much trouble. But isn’t he nevertheless an imperialist? Didn’t the Roman imperial military eventually defile the Temple, destroy it, destroy Jerusalem, and slaughter thousands of God’s people?

How many good individuals are established in positions over others in evil ways? How many merchandise items are there that amount to nothing more than clutter? How many engage in “management,” manipulating people to make an undeserved profit for someone else? How many use their talents as communicators to create false impressions and impress people with false propositions? What skill goes into environmentally harmful mega-projects and inherently indefensible weaponry? How many trusted and trustworthy police help comprise a police state? How many teachers and counselors slick-talk children into outdoing one another in the ways that “well-adjusted” children are “supposed to”? How many churches vouch for *good* imperialists without questioning whether there is a good imperialism?

*Earth-beat*

Amid a throbbing universe  
our Mother circles her star,  
conceiving for us  
tundra and tropics,  
oceans and air,  
seasons and seeds.

In vernal vespers  
and maternal matins,  
we make pilgrimage  
to her cleansing streams,  
forest comforts,  
and mothering mountains,  
that we may breathe her breath,  
recall her heart beat in us,  
find in ourselves her universal pulse.

Tom Keene

**146. Tenth Sunday in Ordinary Time (C)**

**Third Reading** (Luke 7.11-17)

The narrative, which recounts Jesus raising to life from a funeral procession the deceased son of the widow of Naim, is unique to the Gospel of Luke. Just before this passage in the gospel, in the Lukan version of the cure from a distance of the Roman centurion’s slave, Luke refers to “Jesus”; but here, when he addresses the deceased son’s mother, Luke calls him “Lord,” an expression used for a divine personage and used in Jewish contexts as a Greek translation of *Adonai*, pronounced in place of the name of God. This makes the sentence, “And seeing her, the Lord felt compassion for her and said to her, ‘Do not cry,’” stand out as the central verse in the narrative.

This central verse highlights divinity and divine compassion. The God reflected in the Palestinian life of Jesus is not an aloof deity. The implication is not that God intervenes to prevent humans from feeling sorrow and to solve all human s’ problems for them; that would make humans aloof in a way that God is not. In the narrative, the procession was headed toward the burial site; the mother, already widowed, is now sorrowing more. What the Lord does is done *after* all that. And the Lord has *felt* it all.

When I was in my teens, I had to pass by orchards on the way to my high school. I could see wooden shacks between the straight rows of trees; those primitive structures were dwellings of a sort for the migrant orchard workers and their families. The structures did not have the usual double wall construction. Daylight flickered between the boards of the near and far sides as I went by. The city of Mountain View, California—not yet a center of the microchip industry—had a fence put up, lest the public *see* and perhaps *feel*. What would the Lord Whom Luke describes say of gated communities, clusters of dwellings walled off to keep outside what might move us? What would such a Lord say of worship that is isolated from sorrow-engendering realities or that fails to be launched by what should disturb? Worship comprised of, as it were, gated liturgies?

Voc*ations*

Are they calls   
to take up careers, to market ourselves,  
or to give flesh to the body becoming,  
to begin a telling of who we are?

What Who, what What calls?  
Some angel we wrestled in soul’s  
dark midnight before first light ever?  
Some sketch we roughed out on a scroll?

What signs can tell we heard the call?  
What scars bear witness that we answered?

Tom Keene

March 25, 2005

**147. Eleventh Sunday in Ordinary Time (C)**

**Third Reading** (Luke 7.36-50)

“Therefore, I say to you, her many sins are forgiven, because she loved much; but one who is forgiven little, loves little.” The comparison Jesus made between someone forgiven a large debt and someone forgiven a lesser debt should lead to the conclusion that forgiving the woman led to her loving God. However, the sequence is changed in the conclusion, and Who loves whom changes as well: God loved much and therefore her many sins were forgiven. This reversal of the logical sequence is no accident; Jesus is characteristically reported to have thrown surprises into his discourse.

What is the point? The obvious one is to forgive. A deeper point is to not write people off because of “what kind” of people they are. Deeper yet, perhaps, is that God’s wisdom does not follow transactional logic. The followers of Jesus are not to reduce religion to *Do et des*—I give something to you and you give something to me. In effect, Luke depicts Jesus as undermining the causal sequence: God forgives more and the one forgiven loves more; the one loving more is forgiven more. Jesus would not have people making deals with God. Would he have people making deals with one another?

*We Riff Raff*

We tax extorters and sex workers,

we wage slaves and migrant strangers,

we drunkards and beggars,

we zealous fanatics and searchers,

we puzzled and confused.

He gathered us at his table

to eat, drink, laugh, listen

and confide together,

close enough to behold,

smell, feel one another

and find in the roots of our being

a contagious Oneness.

Tom Keene

February 12, 2016

**148. Twelfth Sunday in Ordinary Time (C)**

**Third Reading** (Luke 9.18-24)

“‘But who do you say I am?’ And Peter, replying, said, ‘God’s Messiah.’” For at least a moment, the crowds had ceased expecting a military messiah. They began to identify Jesus variously as John the Baptist coming back from a death at the hands of the petty tyrant from the Herodian dynasty, or a resurrected prophet from the scriptures. But never mind the past; who do you say I *am*? Peter was one step ahead of the crowds: “God’s messiah.” Not the messiah preached even by worthy prophets, spoken of from antiquity and resurrected. Certainly not the messiah of even the religious traditionalists. But God’s Messiah.

But wait! Don’t say this too publically. They will kill me—the elders, chief priests, and scribes. “The son of humanity must suffer much and be rejected by the presbyters, chief priests, and scribes, and be put to death, and be raised on the third day.” Living transcendence is no simple matter.

We moderns ask why on the third day. The ancients took still being lifeless on the third day as a certain death. Today we would say he had to be rendered “brain dead.” Not until the most sanctimonious tyrants of the age rendered the human son of God brain dead could transcendence be truly lived.

## *Ground*

This feel for a ground in me that is more than me,  
that likes me, loves me, takes pleasure in me,  
from the moment of conception,  
sperm-fused egg adhering to womb wall,

to emerge into air, light, to feel, smell, taste  
all that comes and goes till this becoming body  
recycles itself back to its elements,  
freeing me to know, even more, my ground.

Tom Keene  
May 27, 2015

**149. Thirteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time (C)**

**Third Reading** (Luke 9.51-62)

“And it happened as the days before his being taken up (to heaven) were being completed he also set his face for going to Jerusalem.” Luke speaks of Jesus’ destiny as a “being taken up,” with Jerusalem as a merely incidental destination. It was obvious that Jesus would face death in Jerusalem, but he had another destination in mind. Ironically, people in a Samaritan village would not welcome him because he was on the way to the city whose rulers were as hostile to Jesus as to the villagers themselves. Turning away a traveler, much as self-proclaimed patriots turn away refugees and immigrants today, violated—and violates—a serious norm of hospitality in the Middle East.

“Lord, do you wish for us to call down fire from heaven and consume them?” No. Not even a parable was necessary here.

“I will follow you wherever you will go.” Several people were embarrassed by the behavior of their fellow villagers. They stepped forward to visibly associate themselves with Jesus, as he walked on. That was admirable, but Jesus had to forewarn one of them that the sojourner Jesus was not welcome in either of the two nations that hated one another so much. He had nowhere to lay his head.

To another: “Follow me.” That person did not simply bury his father and join the traveling group, but, to justify going back, offered the excuse that he had to bury his father. “Let the dead bury the dead themselves, but you, leaving, proclaim the kingdom of God.” A pithy statement indeed! There was more than one kind of death and more than one kind of life, and the call was to proclaim the greater kind of life.

And another wanted to go home to take leave first. They were now well down the road. This third from among those who associated themselves with the traveler, who had already left home, now wants to go back to take leave? “No one putting hand to plow and looking back is suitable for the kingdom of God.”

## *Poets*

As bodies played,  
the boy in me you resurrect  
mixed and matched  
from the man's musty cellars  
seasoned words  
to tell of the day you bring my night.

My poetry paled  
as morning sun  
through bamboo curtains  
turned your tears  
to gold.

Tom Keene

September 14, 1986

**150. Fourteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time (C)**

**Third Reading** (Luke 10.1-12, 17-20)

Jesus “commissioned seventy-two others, and he sent them up two by two before his face into all the cities and places where he was about to go. And he was saying to them, ‘The harvest is great but the workers few; so ask the lord of the harvest to send workers into his harvest.’” Later the text adds, “’…the worker is deserving of his wages.’” Centuries of preaching have applied these sayings to specifically church callings, and there is certainly nothing amiss in that. But these were sayings that Jesus accepted first, prior to including them in his commissioning of the seventy-two.

And it is probably a historical fact that Jesus himself used these sayings; they appear in both the *Gospel of Luke* and the *Gospel of Matthew*—what exegetes call “Q” or “source” material—and the one about asking the lord to send workers also appears in an independent ancient Coptic-language collection of Jesus sayings called the *Gospel of Thomas*.

Are there modern adages about treasuring workers? The very thought brings to mind the contested questions of minimum wage legislation and living wages. In Catholic teaching, an income from one wage earner should be enough to support a family; such a living wage is a family issue. Somehow people forget that. Clergy rarely preach on it.

I was once presenting this Catholic teaching in a church-hall class, citing papal encyclicals and assuming the principle would be uncontested even if the particulars of its implementation could be controversial. To my surprise, someone accused me of having a malcontent disposition for presenting such an idea. Malcontent—should I have been? Is displeasure inherent in the doctrine? Should we be malcontent? Anyway, my accuser continued, declaring angrily that welfare give-aways are bad for people’s souls. Is a living wage a give-away? The Lukan reading reminds us that the worker is deserving.

We live in a world of warped values, where management is valued more than productivity. For sure, management is something necessary; its very existence is a social necessity, similar to taxation. However, we live in houses that workers built and eat food that workers grew, gathered, delivered, and made delicious. Productivity is essential and merits being honored; those who produce deserve respect. Moreover, those who produce and are paid a living wage neither need, seek, or accept give-aways.

*Harvester*

Wine making

grape stomper:

barefoot,

he treads the grapes of his life,

squeezing facts to get their truths,

fermenting mash into spirits

to share with friends.

Tom Keene

2014

**151. Fifteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time (C)**

**Third Reading** (Luke 10.25-37)

You “…shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might” (Deuteronomy 6.5) and, “You shall not take vengeance or bear any grudge against the sons of your own people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself…” (Leviticus 19.18). Luke omits the language about not taking revenge or holding grudges, but his early readers, who were familiar with the passages from the Torah, would have had the omitted wording in mind. The lawyer who was asking Jesus the question wanted to “justify himself”—that is, straighten out his own thinking, which is what the Greek likely meant. So he asked who the neighbor was against whom one should not take revenge or hold grudges. Then follows the parable of the merciful Samaritan.

Is it virtuous to take no revenge or hold no grudges against one’s “own people” but be vengeful and resentful toward strangers? A law that would be so lacking in impartiality would hardly seem to be a law at all. The lawyer had a good question.

The parable is usually cited in terms of mercy. “Good Samaritan” laws protect from law suits people who help imperiled strangers. That application is good so far as it goes, but the parable is really about reaching out beyond religious and ethnic barriers. In our present era, when public figures engage in hate-speech rants, simply not acting that way seems to be virtuous. But the point is to *make* neighbors.

Today we take the European Union for granted. There was a time, however, not too long ago, when Germans and French were mutually hostile and had three wars. Similarly, Protestant and Catholic Irish promoted mutual hatred in the aftermath of British colonialism over the whole of Ireland. Responsible public figures used trade to unite mainland Europe in peace and used negotiation to bring Northern Irish factions into reasonable coexistence. Creating neighborhoods with neighbors in them is practical; it takes people with moral insight to be practical in that way. That is what moral leadership does.

*Incarnations*

Out of ancient waters,

out of zest for life/love,

out of depths and clarities

in being what we are,

in becoming all we be,

these fleshed out concentrations

breaking through to infinity’s utter possibilities,

proclaiming now what can be

in this day to day process

of living, dying and living on,

a begging to get up and go.

Tom Keene

June 10, 2016

**152. Sixteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time (C)**

**Third Reading** (Luke 10:38-42)

This is the narrative about Martha and Mary welcoming Jesus into their home, an episode peculiar to the G*ospel of Luke*. Many sermons seek to set priorities on the basis of this passage—be not distracted by worldly worries, for one matter only is important. Yes such active service as that performed by sisters in active religious communities is commendable, but a higher calling, so the sermons go, is that of contemplation within monastery walls. I must admit to a skepticism from the time of my childhood about such claims.

Among the gospels, that of Luke is more concerned with the role of women than are the others. With that in mind, contemporary exegetes point out that Mary, who was “sitting at the feet of the Lord” and “listening to his discourse” was doing what disciples of rabbis did, and that such disciples had traditionally been men. In Luke’s depiction, therefore, Jesus is commending Mary when she neglected what is sometimes called “women’s work” and absorbed herself in aspects of religion that were usually reserved for men.

Not too long ago I was making inquiries with Catholic institutions about arranging for a public viewing of a documentary about the Vatican investigation of American sisters’ communities for their “radical feminism.” Some were sympathetic but afraid the video would upset Church authorities. I wonder whether those authorities fully approve of the *Gospel of Luke*.

But there is a more fundamental matter in question. Why is there “women’s work” and “men’s work” in the first place? Why are minorities who earn their way into the learned professions so readily marginalized? Why are people whose insights are heeded before retirement not expected to have insights of equal value after retirement? It appears essential to distinguish between the capabilities that God creates in people and the categories that humans contrive.

*Encased*

(at Rita’s Fiesta Café)Encased,

the triangle-folded flag hangs on the wall.

Below it, the framed snapshot:

                a uniformed man smiles for the camera.

Some decided to send.

Some decided to go.

Most decided for the silence

that gives consent.

This man’s killing need not have been.

Cry out! Protest!

Tom Keene

June 10, 2016

**153. Seventeenth Sunday in Ordinary Time (C)**

**Third Reading** (Luke 11:1-13)

Luke does not use the liturgical version of the Lord’s prayer as found in the *Gospel of Matthew* 6:9-13 or in the *Didache* 8:2 (an ancient local church booklet) but presents it as part of his narrative: “When you pray, say, Father, let your name be made holy, let your kingdom come; give us each day our sustaining bread; and forgive us our sins, for we ourselves also forgive everyone wronging us; and bring us not into temptation.”

*Let your name be holy*: God is respected as God, not addressed as an instrument to be bent to our wishes.

*Let your kingdom come*: Kingdom, domain, imperium—the term was commonly used for what the Roman Emperor possessed. It is the *basileia* of God that is called for in prayer, not the one of emperors who overpower peoples and nations, not one by which one might be tempted.

*Give us each day our sustaining bread*: Bread was the simple meal of those who worked and produced; give us that food, not the worked-over delicacies of those who would be somebody.

And we have discovered what it is to forgive.

This is a prayer of few words; that feature is accentuated in Luke’s version. Prayer is not principally words. With practice its words become fewer.

So a visitor comes in from the road. The days were hot in Palestine. We in San Antonio understand such days as those. Travelers walked in the relative cool of the night and arrived when people usually had already turned in for the night. Often nothing was left over from supper. The prayer is not simply a request for something for oneself but for something to serve to another, to meet the need of a weary traveler.

Seek and you will find. Knock and it will be opened to you. And what is it that the parable is really about? The Father will “give the holy spirit from heaven to those asking him.” Here the holy spirit from heaven is a mind to serve.

## *Grandpa's Grace*

With belly rumbles,  
salivary floods,  
these morsels   
assault his senses,  
play with his passion   
to eat.

He lets them lie  
beneath his breath,  
his silent thanks  
and remember  
the mother of all  
from whence they come,  
remember:

 the reaper's blade,  
 the miller's wheel,  
 the oven's fire  
 the wheat underwent  
 to become this bread.

 the blood,  
 bones and teeth  
 the milk moved through  
 becoming butter and cheese.

 the birth of flesh,  
 its growth and death,  
 bleeding and skinning,  
 chilling and cooking  
 to be his meat.

Before these pieces  
pass taste buds,  
teeth and gullet,  
he holds them in thought,  
so with this awareness  
the Mystery gets to enjoy again.

Tom Keene

**154. Eighteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time (C)**

**Third Reading** (Luke 12:13-21)

“‘Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me.’ But he said to him, ‘Sir, who appointed me judge or divider over you?’” Property law does not come from God but rather is a human construction. Consequently Jesus did not want to take on the role of a probate judge. For sure, there is a great deal of law to be found in the Bible; most of it is Hebrew case law. Except for fundamentalists, Christians read Hebrew case law as a praiseworthy effort of people to maintain a just and orderly society, not an administrative handbook for daily life in a different time and place. Catholics and fundamentalists tend to have contrasting foibles: Catholics often mistake an administrative handbook (*Code of Canon Law*) for divine law while fundamentalists tend to reduce the greater matters of divine law to its accompanying, dated administrative handbook.

So, when “someone from the crowd” asked Jesus to supervise an administrative matter, Jesus first declined to do so and then proceeded to point to a greater matter of divine law: “Watch and beware of any greed, because one’s life is not by having an abundance of possessions.”

It is right and proper for communities to maintain a just and orderly commonweal. One thinks of community efforts to keep unfortunates from being homeless, of requirements that employers pay living wages and provide for retirement and health plans, of procedures to settle disputes before judges or arbitrators rather than in the streets with guns. It is incumbent upon all to be informed about such matters and to participate in the political process to establish and maintain justice and order. And all this is to be done in the spirit of the caution, “Watch and beware of any greed.…”

The account in Luke’s gospel illustrates the point with the parable of the rich fool who built big barns to horde more food than he could ever eat, only to die and have to answer to God for his greed.

Is it a just and orderly society if “the one percent” (as they are called today) have multiple “homes” in a variety of gated communities? Is a house in which people do not live on a continuing basis even a home? Some may disagree with me, but I do not see having wealth at one’s command as inherently evil; however, I have a problem with unproductive wealth, hording, food stored up in barns. To my mind, there is a moral difference between wealth put into productive ventures that put people to work and place useful products into a market for people to use, on the one hand, and wealth put into luxuries or used to control politicians who promise to cut taxes on such unearned income as capital gains while promoting taxes on such transactions as sales and imports that happen to fall on the “99%.” These matters can be technical; one must be informed about the federal and state tax codes to be aware of them.

*Let There Be Land*

You called the land

to rise from roiling seas,

lined the river basins

with fertile loam.

You steeped in greens

the forest-jungles,

rolled out the plains,

beige and flat as corn tortillas,

raised the mountains to make

fuchsia shadows with the sun.

You made the land

a place to plant and build,

free as the air,

open as the oceans,

vital as rivers and rain,

ours as much as the stars.

Now tell us, God,

when did you sell

the land to the rich?

Tom Keene

May 1, 1990

**155. Nineteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time (C)**

**Third Reading** (Luke 12:32-48)

The reading might be abbreviated to Luke 12:35-40 in some churches, but it is worthwhile considering it in context. “And be prepared, because you do not know the hour that the son of humanity is coming.” Jesus had been teaching the disciples that they should store up heavenly rather than worldly treasures, and that they should do so when they have the opportunity. He concludes with the statement about not knowing when the opportunity comes and goes.

“And Peter said, ‘Lord, are you saying this parable to us or also to all?’” Jesus does not seem to answer Peter’s question at first, but after a while he is seen to answer it indeed: “And to whom much is given, much will be sought, and to whom much is entrusted, an abundance will be asked.”

Jesus did speak in parables, using such worldly events as the acquisition of wealth and preparations for wedding feasts to confront his listeners with issues of spiritual importance and responsibility toward others. What are “spiritual treasurers”?

A treasure is not something used in the immediate present to meet momentary needs but things saved for future contingencies. They are not saved by being put in storage, where a thief may find them, but put to productive use, invested. A spiritual treasure is an investment in the mind, mind understood in a broad sense. It is a preparation of one’s power of anticipating outcomes. We generally call such an investment *wisdom*. It involves a breadth of awareness, a willingness to bring about proper developments, and a sense of proportion to guide one away from trivial goals and toward worthy ones. Such wisdom comes from educative experience.

Experience, of course, accumulates over time, but time can go by without that accumulation taking place. It is perfectly possible to squander time by, as it were, sleepwalking through it. There is a difference, for example, between thirty years of experience and one year of experience repeated thirty times over.

## *Navarro Street Bridge*

Here a people and city grew  
where water courses through the land.  
Here in San Antonio's heart  
with buildings, walks and streets I stand.

You'll remember other bridges  
for daring length, thin grace of line.  
You may not even notice me.  
There's not much claim to fame that's mine.

But a hundred men have made me,  
each man a lively heart and brain.  
With hands and guts of working men,  
I'm made with iron, sweat and pain.

Because of them I bear the traffic:  
strollers, busses, cars and cargo  
between Crockett and College streets  
at the river on Navarro.

My sign invites a thought for them,  
those hard muscled men who made me.  
I'm all they left, but take some time,  
ponder the mark they left to see.

You'll find no list of workers' names  
on this bolted down metal plate,  
just the name of a company  
in some far southeastern state.

By Virginia Bridge and Iron:  
Built back in nineteen twenty two.  
Read it. Know what it really says:  
Honor workers for what they do.

Tom Keene

**156. Twentieth Sunday in Ordinary Time (C)**

**Third Reading** (Luke 12:49-53)

Here Luke assembles fragments from the *Gospel of Mark* and from another source he had in common with Matthew (“Q”), forming a statement about casting fire on the earth and disturbing the peace. “Do you think that I came to give peace on earth? No, I tell you, but rather dissension.” Note that peace is not set in opposition to violence but to dissension.

It is well known that we do not intellectually grasp actual things in the world when we see them, but rather we grasp *images* of things, images mediated by reflected light, eye lenses, retinal nerve endings, and intellectual habits. We are limited to formulating more or less useful statements about images. Pope John XXIII used to emphasize the difference between truths and how we as a church present them. Sometimes quite contrary and seemingly contradictory statements are both true and both false. Jesus would have fire cast on the earth, but he was busy not with fire but with a water dunking, a baptism. We know that in the nativity section of Luke’s gospel, the heavenly choir proclaims peace on earth; we even echo this at Mass with the traditional prayer known as the *Gloria*; but now Jesus says he is bringing dissension.

Peace is godly, for sure, but not always; and dissension too is godly, but only sometimes. There are circumstances, arrangements, customs, practices, injustices with which we should not be at peace, and assumptions and attitudes from which we should dissent, even while peace and harmony are in themselves and on many occasions divine. The Spirit is present when we know when.

*Imagine*

Imagine that we might actually have chosen

the parents, relatives, and even the nation we have:

           for better and for worse,

in sickness and in health,

till not even death do we part.

That we and they somehow share a co-responsibility

for how we be and what we do.

Nah! No way!

Tom Keene

December 2, 2016

**157. Twenty-first Sunday in Ordinary Time (C)**

**Third Reading** (Luke 13:22-30)

“After the master of the house rises and shuts the door, and you begin to stand outside and knock on the door, saying, ‘Sir, open it for us,’ and replying he will say to you, ‘I do not know where you come from.’ Then you will begin to say ‘We ate and drank in your presence, and you taught us in the streets,’ and he will say to you, ‘I do not know where you are from; go away from me, all you workers of injustice.’”

We cannot speak directly of heaven and hell because we have not experienced either directly. Moreover, if we were to face a revelation of heaven and hell in this life, we would still not be able to comprehend it. So we use the metaphorical language of the slave trade (redemption) or danger (salvation). The New Testament book, *The Revelation of John*, and the twenty-fifth chapter of the *Gospel of Matthew* use a judicial metaphor, inspiring Michelangelo’s *Last Judgment* depiction in the Sistine Chapel. Our own culture is heavily influenced by psychology; so many today think in terms of developing (or not) an openness to a highest good; heaven would be a state enjoyed in a developed openness and hell would be a blindness or deafness to highest good. Perhaps we are insufficiently distant from our own culture to see this too as metaphorical.

Luke once more uses a metaphor that probably goes back to Jesus—that of a traveler arriving at night and knocking on the door of the household at the intended destination. The parable is spoken in the narrative in the lifetime of Jesus, and it refers to a post-Easter end-time: “After the master of the house rises and shuts the door….”

What are the grounds for redemption, salvation, acquittal, or psychological fulfillment? The judicial metaphor articulates those grounds in terms of rules broken or not. The psychological metaphor would render such violations as learning experiences and speak instead of a fundamental option for the good. Luke’s metaphor has the master of the house recognizing or not recognizing the voice of the one knocking. The recognition does not depend on belonging to the correct church: “We ate and drank in your presence, and you taught us in the streets….” Rather, the master of the house says to those not recognized, “…go away from me, all you workers of injustice.”

## *Clarissa*

You, Clarissa  
  of the dark searching eyes,  
  your eager soft smile,  
you test our beliefs.

You stagger us with your absence.  
Can we ever believe in a God who is good?  
When your going is so empty of sense  
  dare we look for it in our own lives?  
We search for meaning and find only pain.

Pain,  
overwhelming us so.  
Is this your final gift to us?  
Is there anything of value here?  
Dare we look deep into this pain?  
What will we do if we find nothing?

But look. The pain gathers us together  
  in touches and tears.  
And in protesting your death  
  We affirm life: yours,  
  ours, each other's.  
And we know,  
against all these seeping doubts,  
none of us would trade  
this cruel pain  
for the blessed numbness  
of your having never been.

How strange the power of this   
  present poignancy  
to shake the foundations  
  of our being and belief  
and just as surely strengthen.

How stunning that your brief  
  passing presence in our lives  
can evoke this forever grief,  
can startle memories of joy  
  just as forever,  
can bring this all together  
so we can see   
  - through this prism of joy and pain  
  for your having been and gone -  
what your life has meant all along.

And here is our gift to you,  
our pledge to live out and learn  
the truths you came to teach:

that joy and beauty  
are not the flowering  
of a long life,  
but the root of life itself,

that real power to touch a life  
resides not in the doings   
of strong hands and minds,  
but in the being of one such as you  
sprouting fresh from   
the ground of Being.

We will learn from you, Clarissa  
  And follow you too,  
  to that Father/Mother  
  from whom we all come,  
  to whom we all return.

You have pointed the way.  
You have gone ahead.  
We will not forget.  
Clarissa.

Recorded by Tom Keene  
August 20, 1977

**158. Twenty-second Sunday in Ordinary Time (C)**

**Third Reading** (Luke 14:1, 7-14)

“But when you hold a reception, call the poor, the crippled, lame, and blind; and blessed would you be, because they have nothing to repay you with, for you will be repaid in the resurrection of the just.” Luke presents Jesus applying his banquet parable to the end-time judgment. The householder who invites in the poor and afflicted is termed “just.” Before that, Luke presented Jesus as advising guests at banquets to seek humble rather than honored places—in antiquity guests were explicitly placed by social rank at banquets and were even given more expensive or less expensive food according to social rank.

Have you ever attended an event only to be seated next to someone who had no intention of getting to know you or let you become acquainted in return, but who only wanted to get the attention of someone else more important? I do not think that is what is being recommended when Luke has Jesus advise people to take the less honorable places. Those who merely tolerate the *déclassé* around them only as long as they can leave the lower status people behind are hardly being “just.” Parables are meant to provoke thought, and thoughtfully engaging this one will not leave us satisfied with a mere tactic for advancement, a humility that is put on as a mere stratagem. That is why the narrative goes on to depict Jesus advising his host to bring in the poor, crippled, lame, and blind.

The insight behind the parable applies beyond interpersonal behavior. In work-place politics many people ally themselves with bosses, however wrong-headed and unjust the latter may be. It is also the case that in voting behavior, the mass of the many sometimes wants to be counted among the number of the few—something when looked at from afar is obviously a mathematical impossibility. Then there are those who adopt dress styles, buy vehicles, and even inhabit homes, sometimes at great financial sacrifice, in order to identify with the privileged.

I was once making this point at a RCIA session, and mentioned not buying pricey automobiles that would be intended to impress people. To my surprise, a few intended converts rejected the suggestion out of hand. An unsuccessful lesson? A few weeks later a young woman pulled me aside; she had to talk to me. Our parish seemed better off than she was, and she had been driving her own old, battered car on Sunday mornings to her in-laws’ and switching to their fancier vehicle to make the drive to the church parking lot, so as not to be embarrassed. She wanted me to know that after that RCIA session she began to drive her own car to the church, different-colored door and all.

Thank you, Lord!

*How I learned to be a man*

(For Gust Keene and Fr. Gene Zimmers, S.J.)

The man with lunch bucket, cement flaked work clothes,

who, with his bricklayer craft, told me all.

Another man, who put his vision into action

and launched my ship for shores unexplored.

Both,

not from any office, parent or priest,

but from their magnetic wholeness

laid out a mold for me to fill.

Tom Keene

July 29, 2016

**159. Twenty-third Sunday in Ordinary Time (C)**

**Third Reading** (Luke 14:25-33)

“And many crowds congregated around him, and turning he said to them, ‘If anyone comes to me and does not hate one’s own father, mother, wife, children, brothers and sisters, and friends, and even one’s own life, one cannot be my disciple.’” Then Jesus went on to speak of the cross. Most do not read this saying, which is Luke’s elaboration of one found in the *Gospel of Matthew* as well as in the Coptic *Gospel of Thomas*, as encouraging familial hate for its own sake, but a willingness to follow the way of Jesus even if family and friends object. Jesus does not endorse familism, a willingness to shortchange strangers in order to further one’s own family. Neither does he endorse favoring one’s own inner circle, favoritism, at the expense of others.

The phrase “cost of discipleship” is often associated with Dietrich Bonheoffer, the theologian who went against the times and whom the Nazi government executed. Jesus connects such costs of discipleship, as criticism or even estrangement from family and friends, to preparation: “For who of you, wanting to build a tower, does not first sit down and calculate the expense….” Thus the focus is not on alienation from family or leaving an inner circle, but on being *ready* if such are necessary. So “…each of you who does not renounce everything at one’s disposal cannot be my disciple.”

So anyone who would be a Christian faces the question: What will I be unwilling to do—what lines of work or kinds of employment practices? What am I unwilling to do for followers, friends, family favor, fame? What costs might come on account of the Christian cross?

*Imagine (again)*

Imagine the calm of being

            the only man in a room of women,

            the only woman in a shop of men,

            the only straight in the LGBT bar,

            the only Anglo in the Mexican restaurant,

            the only progressive at the conservative rally.

Imagine us all

finding comfort in community,

strength in identity.

Tom Keene

July 15, 2016

**160. Twenty-fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time (C)**

**Third Reading** (Luke 15:1-32)

At some masses, the reading may be shortened to Luke 15.1-10. Luke, however, makes something of a progression in a sequence of three parables, and it is worthwhile following him in the way he has Jesus developing a point.

We all know the Parable of the Lost Sheep; Jesus told it when some proper people criticized him for associating with disapproved-of elements in society. To an educator, as such I was most of my life, it was especially rewarding to occasion insight on the part of one or more students who were oftentimes hard to get through to. It was similar to the fishing story of the one that almost got away. We all know that feeling.

But then there is Luke’s follow-up narrative of the lost drachma. A drachma was a coin of small value. The woman who swept the house looking for it was more concerned about losing something than she cared about the value of the coin itself. Once finding it, she celebrated with her friends; no doubt, the cost of such a celebration exceeded the value of a drachma. Telling her friends about looking high and low for that old coin was more important than the coin itself. A story for the friends seems to be the point.

The two stories lead up to the narrative traditionally called the “Parable of the Prodigal Son.” The central feature of the narrative is not the prodigality of the younger son but the prodigal compassion of the father. By one logic, we can understand the protest of the elder son: Why celebrate that never-do-well? By another logic, we can understand the father’s reply: My son your brother was lost and now is found, was dead but now is alive. The celebration with bag pipe music and dancing in the rustic farmhouse is not simply over someone gone and come back, but a return, a response to the father’s familial feeling, preserved in consciousness all along in a persisting memory throughout the excursions of the wanderlust son. A story for the family would be the point, wouldn’t it? A family restored and storied?

*Count My Energy In*

Let each and every quantum of kindness,

all affirming handshakes,

each embrace of the lonely,

every smile of welcome,

build to critical mass, a pool of intent

whose cosmic gravity draws us home.

Tom Keene

August 27, 2016

**161. Twenty-fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time (C)**

**Third Reading** (Luke 16:1-13)

“‘How much do you owe my master?’ And he said, ‘One hundred baths of oil.’ And he said to him, ‘Take the note and, sitting, quickly write fifty.’” A bath was a Hebrew measure, between eight and nine gallons. It was against the religious law to charge interest; so instead someone who owed a sum worth a vast amount of olive oil would be required to write a promissory note for a larger amount. The debtor would borrow money or, more often, rent land for a sum worth forty gallons of oil, and then be required to sign a note promising to pay fifty. Here the unjust manager had required a note promising payment of one hundred. He had expected to keep fifty gallons or so for himself as his commission. When the unjust manager’s master found out about it, he was ready to fire him and directed him to write up an inventory of the accounts. The manager proceeded to do so, cancelling his exorbitant commissions. “And the master praised the unjust manager because he acted prudently….”

Even in the comparatively simple world of antiquity, there were technically legal ways to engage in unjust transactions. The kind of injustice described in the parable found in the *Gospel of Luke* involved taking advantage of people who needed an extension of credit. The people who are wise in the ways of the world know of many more ways to take advantage of people and situations today. One thinks of pay-day lenders and car title lenders. And sometimes the standard “service charge” which is imposed at banquets in lieu of informal “tips” or “gratuities” never goes to the servers at all. Sometimes the purpose of a graduated income tax is subverted by legislators, who are in the pay of the wealthy, imposing lower tax rates for the kinds of income (as opposed to amounts of income) that come from wealth rather than from work. Sometimes insurance companies find ways to avoid paying up when they evidently should.

The “master” in the parable is obviously a stand-in for God. What may be less obvious is that all of us are mere managers and that we will all be dismissed.

*Discernments*

What is the difference between

desire’s rage,

captivating though it feels,

and stark appreciation’s profundity?

Is one a want to grasp

while the other just letting be?

Is it in knowing

that in possessing

we can be possessed

and that by letting go

we fly free?

Or that by dying to having

we are born into being?

Tom Keene

March 20, 2009

**162. Twenty-sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time (C)**

**Third Reading** (Luke 16:19-31)

“Now there was a man who was wealthy, and he wore purple and linen, enjoying himself splendidly every day. But a poor man named Lazarus had lain near his gateway, having sores and longing to be fed from what was dropped from the table of the rich man.” We know how the story goes. It has one lesson about mercy, and another about those who will not listen to Moses and the prophets, or even to someone who rose from the dead.

How do we “not listen” today? It is my observation that we warp the meaning of the scriptures so that they seem to be about personal salvation rather than the common life.

I had the occasion to translate the following, from a 1982 memoir of a 92 year-old cousin, about his childhood in Calabria at the turn of the nineteenth to the twentieth century. An inquisitive child, he would be brought to visit his maternal relatives, and rather than stay around his mother and her family he would look for a caretaker named Placido, who took care of the horses:

“By the way, Placido has his own story. I would like to tell it. He was an outcast, born in Veneto. He worked as a day laborer for a road construction company. I do not recall which road project brought him near San Fili. That year it was a harsh winter with heavy snow, and the company could not continue its work, laying off the entire workforce. Without shelter, Placido was found on the street. It was just one of those snowy days, and Placido was trying to reach town, but it was by chance he found himself close to [our] palazzo. He saw the door of the stable open. He thought of taking refuge temporarily and taking a breather. Someone saw him and reported it to Uncle Gaetano, who sent the same person to tell him that if he needed to speak with him, to come up freely. With this invitation, he came up. He was a pitiful figure of a man, advanced in years, toothless, dripping with water all over, wearing plain summer clothing. He told his story to Uncle Gaetano who, after hearing it, made him the proposal of hiring him immediately to fetch water for the house and for the animals of the watering hole area, and to look after the coop and stable, with pay and maintenance. He accepted with thanks.”

The narrative goes on to say Placido was well-liked and esteemed by all, and when he died some years later the family, friends, tenants, and neighbors walked with his casket to the family graveyard for his burial, accompanied by the municipal band, which played without permission.

*Cavalcade*

We are women in labor, giving birth,

in bliss, in pain to the living out

that is ourselves amid others.

We are cells in the meat of the cosmos,

coming into breath, going out,

making room for more.

Our birth to death time a lens

to behold the story we become,

a string of adventures our bodies live out,

our minds take in, remembering, forgetting.

Our space on this planet a niche

for our deeds to happen and pass,

our place in a procession,

where all life dies that all life may live,

where all is sacrifice, all is holy.

Tom Keene

September 1, 2016

**163. Twenty-seventh Sunday in Ordinary Time (C)**

**Third Reading** Luke 17:5-10)

“’Increase our faith.’ But the Lord said, ‘If you have faith like the mustard seed, if you said to this mulberry tree, Be uprooted and be planted in the sea, it will even obey you.’” This is one of those cases where Jesus’ reply does not at first sight appear to answer what was said to him, but upon further consideration turns out to be a thoughtful response. The disciples’ request, “Increase our faith,” is Luke’s narrative. Luke found the Jesus-saying about faith being like a mustard seed in the source that Matthew also used, called “Q” in scholarly tradition. So why does Luke place it at this point in his narrative?

“Increase our faith.” Is faith something that comes in quantities? Does it have a metric similar to that of a yardstick? Is “more” of it somehow better than a lesser quantity of it? Evidently the answer is, “No,” given the saying about faith being small like a mustard seed but still powerful enough to yank out and replant in the sea a mulberry tree.

There are occasions in which believing something that is less plausible comes to be credited as reflecting “more” faith. Some would maintain that taking the *Genesis* creation poem literally reflects “more” faith than regarding it as a poem and accepting the plausible theory of evolution. Some would assert the historicity of the legend of Noah’s ark or maintain, on the basis of the New Testament book of the *Revelation of John*, that only 144,000people will be saved. And largely on the basis of the difficulty of a moral teaching, some would oppose contraception. Again, largely on the basis of difficulty, some exclude women from ordination.

Is God, and was God’s self-revelation in Jesus, so mean-spirited that humans would be endowed with intelligence only for that intelligence to be a stumbling block? A few verses before the request, ‘Increase our faith,” Luke has Jesus saying, “That stumbling blocks not come is impossible; rather, woe to the person through whom they come.”

*Searchers Reflect*

When we yearned in prayer, we did the talking,

let the All do the listening.

Then we gave up the words,

let the Here and Now send the signals.

Now, we ease into play in the silence We share.

Tom Keene

May 17, 2012

**164. Twenty-eighth Sunday in Ordinary Time (C)**

**Third Reading** (Luke 17:11-19)

According to chapters thirteen and fourteen of *Leviticus*, a person afflicted with skin spots or sores was supposed to show them to a priest. In this respect, the Israelite priests served a medical function in antiquity, and they had people with such skin disorders seclude themselves for a time; if the condition cleared the person would be readmitted to society after arranging for a purification ritual. In the gospel reading, ten people with skin disorders ask Jesus for mercy. Evidently, Luke understood the request to be for a cure. Jesus, since he was not a priest, advised them to show themselves to one of the clergy. In so doing, he was acting as a teacher of the law, not as a worker of miracles.

The legend came to Luke without much detail. The narrative vaguely places the events on a journey “through the middle of Samaria and Galilee.” The journey would have begun in Galilee in the north and then cross southward through Samaria, heading toward Judea and Jerusalem. Travelling through Samaria was theologically fraught since Samaritans were rivals to the Judean population; Galileans were descendants of migrants from Judea and generally keen on maintaining their Judean identity.

The ten with skin disorders found themselves cured before they could show themselves to a priest. The clear implication is that Jesus had something to do with their healing. We do not know whether the ten were going to a Samaritan priest or a Judean one. Perhaps nine of those cured went to a Judean priest, and the one Samaritan could not accompany them safely. To Luke, that was not important. Rather, he focuses on the one from the ten who returned to Jesus rather than arranging for a ritual in a temple.

For nine, participating in their religion was a distraction from following the Messiah, and for one not participating in religion became the occasion for turning to the Messiah.

## *We poor*

We hunger,  
  our bellies pinch the mind  
  to think, think only of food.  
Yet there it is, surrounding us.  
Grocers, bakers, butchers offer their goods.  
All we need is money.

Tom Keene  
May 9, 2008

**165. Twenty-ninth Sunday in Ordinary Time (C)**

**Third Reading** (Luke 18:1-8)

The reading tells the parable of an unjust judge who had been refusing to pay attention to a widow’s repeated petitions for justice; in the end he gives in, only because she was causing him trouble. Homilists usually use this parable as an occasion for preaching about prayer, and rightly so. But look closely at Luke’s introduction to the parable: “And he was telling them a parable about it being necessary for them to pray always and not lose heart….” It is always worth while giving such passages a “slow” reading.

1) Pray always: Obviously, prayer as envisioned by Luke consists not only in occasions of addressing words to God. It goes beyond talk into “always.” Indeed, imagining God as a listener is an anthropomorphism. Verbal prayer is important for its effect on the one praying, not for some effect it would have on God. In fact, the statement that follows the parable, about God being so much more than…, points to going beyond anthropomorphisms.

2) Do not lose heart: Luke saw that it was important for him to give encouragement to his fellow Christians. Prayer as an activity that is not limited to occasions of verbalization is important to others as well as to oneself. Conduct for justice, a life lived for such, is an “always” prayer that can keep others from losing heart. Moreover, it can cause unjust officials trouble.

*The Poetry of Prayer*

How do we

celebrate the universal in the particular?

the forever, world without end

in this here? in this now?

the good in the conflicted?

truth in illusion?

beauty in yet to become?

unity in diversity?

this I that is you?

this You that is I?

the All-That-Is

in mere words?

But let us try:

We thank Us for Us.

Tom Keene

February 25, 2005

**166. Thirtieth Sunday in Ordinary Time (C)**

**Third Reading** (Luke 18:9-14)

Before we read the gospel at mass, we have a private prayer: “The Lord be in my mind, on my lips, and in my heart.” This is accompanied by the motion of signing a small cross on the forehead, then another one at the mouth, and finally one on the chest. It is actually a difficult prayer; the mind distracts easily and focuses only with effort. The lips are controlled more readily than the mind, but still not without firm intent. And the heart…. How do we fix the heart on anything but the self?

The reading is about two people at prayer in the Temple. “The Pharisee, standing, prayed these things about himself: ‘O God, I thank you that I am not like the rest of humanity….’ But the tax collector, standing at a distance, did not wish even to raise his eyes toward heaven, but beat his breast saying, ‘O God, be merciful to me, a sinner.’” The second one is like the prayer for a selfless heart, very difficult.

Most of us as individuals have help from others in cultivating humility. There seem to be so many people eager to take us down a notch or two! But as groups, inhabitants of social categories that have pretentions, we insulate ourselves from such “help.” Luke’s gospel narrative make a point of citing such collective categories—Pharisee, tax collector. Both categories made their importance felt in ancient Palestine, albeit in different ways. The Pharisees used social approval, while the tax collectors had the force of the imperial state behind them.

One should be individually humble; of course. That is virtuous. But it is also self-serving to share in the pretentions of a collective identity—class standing, religious identity, nationality. The rich and poor isolate themselves from one another. The religious traditions, and even denominations, contain interfaith discussions within dedicated occasions rather than venture outward courageously. Nationalities resist integration and immigration.

*Donut Shop*

One central sanctuary  
in this multi-centered universe,  
a resting place for pilgrims,  
all bringing their life stories,  
some in the closing chapters.

A few, dunking with care,  
linger over donuts and coffee.

Their angels  
bless the absence of juke box and TV,  
bless the silences between chit chat,  
bless a quiet  
in which to sire thoughts,  
of being, in this moment,  
content.

August 1, 2008

**167. Thirty-first Sunday in Ordinary Time (C)**

**Third Reading** (Luke 19.1-10)

Before Jesus said anything to Zacchaeus about mercy and justice, Zacchaeus was already undergoing a moral conversion. The Lukan account seems to symbolize this with the narrative of him climbing a sycamore tree in order to see Jesus over a crowd. Zacchaeus was giving half of his wealth to the poor and making restoration to people against whom he had been guilty of extortion. Today we would say that he was engaged in “restorative justice.” All the people in the crowd grumbled about Jesus even having anything to do with Zacchaeus. So we have in Luke’s narrative a contrast between restorative and punitive approaches to wrong-doing.

Restorative justice is usually spoken of with respect to crime, but as a principle it is obviously broader in its relevance. Restorative justice seeks to repair the harm caused by crime and to transform both the perpetrator and the victim by having them meet to decide how the restoration can be brought about. The approach may not succeed in every instance, but it does lead to questions that are germane to every instance. What led to the crime in the first place? What barrier prevented the perpetrator from seeing matters from the standpoint of the victim? What baggage prevents the victim from seeing the perpetrator as a person? If the victim were in a position to be tempted and succeed in victimizing, would the course of action be other than a reciprocal of what the perpetrator had done?

Restorative justice is more than mere restoration; it is justice. Is it not a lack of justice that keeps people apart in the first instance, unable to see the world from one another’s standpoint?

“Today salvation came to be in this house.” “He too is a son of Abraham.”

## *Dining with the Muse*

It's been some years now and up you pop,  
riding the restaurant's babble and clatter,  
weaving between colors of summer dresses,  
permeating aromas to get to me.

Affable intruder, you emerge,  
float, sail this swirl of faces  
from the rivers of earth,  
converging out of East and West,  
the Americas and Africa.

Or do you bleed, breathe,  
seep out from within,  
to whisper of your liquid power,  
my saturation in your unseen mist?

You've caught me with nothing to say,  
so I listen to the feeling of you  
and agree: it's all so brief.  
There's hardly time to cherish it all:  
the regret for loves lost,  
the shame for the trusted betrayals,  
and sorrow for sins against self.  
Or chance to savor the fool-fired wisdom  
that could settle for this  
yet yearn for more.

One last word before you slip away  
to hide again behind the years.  
A word to complete the circle,  
an old word, as old as the beginning,  
a word about these chiles verdes,  
this rice and beans, this earth  
where we eat, make love and die:  
"It is good. Just because it is, it is good."

Tom Keene

August 10, 1993

**168. Thirty-second Sunday in Ordinary Time (C)**

**Third Reading** (Luke 20:22-38)

The Jerusalem leadership was clearly displeased with Jesus. “Some of the Sadducees, who say there is no resurrection,” put a question to Jesus in an attempt to seize upon something he said to turn him over to the authorities. Their question about seven brothers marrying a woman and dying one after another had nothing really to do with a provision in the marriage law or marital status in the afterlife and everything to do with setting a trap.

The provision in the Law was a form of welfare for widows. A childless widow would have to live on without a family; so a brother-in-law was required to marry her and to father a child. Today in some cultural systems, having multiple wives is intended to be that kind of social safety net. But Jesus’ questioners ignore the point of the legal provision and use the Law instead to try to trip up their opponent.

The real question, then, is not one about the Law or marital status after a resurrection, but why some people would want to trip someone up in the first place. There must be something unstable, precarious, or wanting in the situation of those seeking to trip another up. Does this sound something like modern political discourse?

*Distillations*

From zygotic conceptions

to final dissolutions

we contemplate

the comings and goings

of our very selves

and wonder at

each where and what,

each how and why.

Then puzzle

what we can do

with all the stuff in between:

     the love-joy-heartbreak,

     moments of aha,

     events that stun,

then finally plead

to some secret strata

perhaps lying under all this:

*Fire us up,*

*boil us down*

*to essences we are*

*from which may come evermore*

*atoms and galaxies*

*over and over,*

*again and again.*

In this finite deck of cards

does there wait a perfect hand,

a royal flush that tells us:

This is as good as it can get.

Welcome to eternal rest.

And does there also wait

that joker of completion

that says: Never.?

Tom Keene

September 28, 2011

**169. Thirty-third Sunday in Ordinary Time (C)**

**Third Reading** (Luke 21:5–19)

In the early modern period it became the architectural fashion in the Alpine or Tyrolean region—western Austria and northern Italy—to install huge clocks in church towers. People in the Tyrol are known for being prompt and business-like. To this day people to the south, in peninsular Italy, joke about their northern neighbors, saying that they put clocks on their churches and worship them.

Some who read the ancient end-times discourses from Christian tradition, such as that from the *Gospel of Luke* which is read at the last numbered Sunday (“ordinary time”), worship time in a way similar to the mocking reference to worshiping clocks. “The Rapture” becomes more important than living as the Messiah lived. This is despite the fact that the Messiah is quoted as saying, “See that you are not misled.” “Do not go after” the people who say, “The time is near.” Jesus, as depicted by Luke, did not make time a matter of doctrine or revelation.

Matters may become frightening, and people may be tempted to look for the End-time. “Do not become alarmed.” What is frightening may simply “lead you into testimony,” that is, carefully speaking the truth. Speaking with what words? Do not worry: “…I will give you mouth and wisdom….”

How do we know wisdom when we see it? It appears to depend on a long-term rather than immediate perspective, a broad contextual view rather than one contained in a stimulus-response reaction. And the long-term extends beyond a single life and self, to a historical sense of proportion and community-wide good. From that bigger picture, there is no real loss. “And not a hair from your head will be lost.”

## *Dream before Judgment*

Accuser and advocate

Accuser concludes:  
  Your honor,  
  his writings were not worth reading,  
  his loves were lusts for shadows,  
  his deeds decomposed in acids of ego,  
  his life was hardly worth living.

Turn over this runt-soul to me.

Advocate laughs:  
  Your honor, his choices,  
    no matter how few, were his.  
  (No one will take that away,  
  least of all you, your honor.)  
  His choices began in freedom,  
  no matter how little.   
  There lies some honor, your honor.

Welcome home, child of freedom.

Tom Keene

April 5, 2001`

**170. Solemnity of Christ the King (C)**

**Third Reading** (Luke 23: 35-43)

“If you are the king of the Jews, save yourself,” joked the Roman soldiers as they mercifully offered Jeshua some wine. The scene is the crucifixion of three naked convicts on one large beam, with the one named Jeshua tied up and hanging between two other criminals. While the soldiers made as brutal a spectacle as they could by bruising up the two other criminals with cudgels, they pitied the hapless street preacher in the middle, whom they whipped bloody so that he would die sooner. They offered Jeshua some of their wine since he was the mere king of an imagined kingdom. As the *titulus* fastened to the crossbeam said, “This one was the king of the Jews.”

The soldiers were just doing their job. They were paid to do what they did—torture and kill three convicts. But they lived double lives, mechanically carrying out their assigned public duty but entertaining their private consciences at the same time. Within the parameters of their official policies and procedures, they made the torture go faster for poor Jeshua, the one in the middle, and shared a little wine to wet his parched lips. After all, they reasoned, his realm was merely delusional and, like their consciences, private. Their assignment, in contrast, was factual, their duty a reality.

Unlike the soldiers, the two other criminals had no consensus between them. One of them was firmly grounded in the universe of official opinion, which he mockingly shared with the soldiers’ sense of duty: “Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us.” The other criminal may or may not have recognized some dimension of reality in the discourse of the street preacher, but he was at least tuned into the soldiers’ private, if not particularly courageous, consciences. After all, Jeshua, bleeding and turning pale between them, “did nothing out of line.” Well, maybe what he was saying was completely out of line, but it was not unsavory. Then, perhaps to humor the preacher, he asked him to remember him when he entered into his kingdom.

*Help me*

(In the voice of Trump supporters)

Help me understand

with the help of your understanding me.

Listen to my tale

of how I got to where I am.

Feel my confusions,

my unyielding certainties.

Speak to them

that I may feel understood.

Show me where my hopes abide

to counter my fears and hates.

Tom Keene

November 12, 2016

**Essays**

**171.**

**Abortion: Beyond Slogans and Placards**

Anonymous

**Background considerations**

Abortion as a political issue is divisive, and the acrimony associated with it carries over into discussions of such other topics as government regulations over health insurance and stem-cell research. It is not a simple issue that the public can address adequately with the medium of slogans and rhetoric. Even when careful pollsters try to obtain some sense of the public sentiment on the issue, the “results” vary with how the questions are worded. While at times there appears to be a “culture war” going on between the advocates of “pro-choice” and those of “pro-life” positions, much of the public sees merit to both positions, holding views that are more nuanced than those of the culture war combatants.[[3]](#footnote-3) In an endeavor to promote a more rational mode of discourse, this essay explores such matters as the beginning of life, and related to that what is meant by “life,” as well as the role of law and morality in society. It summarizes a number of positions that people advocate, but while it seeks to show the rationales behind the various positions, it does not itself advocate any one of them.

Most of the debate pertains to abortions performed where the bearing mother’s life is not in danger from the pregnancy and where the pregnancy is not the result of rape or incest. The reasons why these two exceptions are made by many who would otherwise oppose abortions are rarely spelled out. The case of a pregnancy endangering the life of the mother falls under the traditional principle of double effect, wherein there is no alternative to the action of performing the abortion and the intent of those responsible for it is attached to saving the life of the mother and not to taking the life of the unborn. In 1991, an Evangelical Lutheran Church in America social statement on abortion provided such a rationale for the second exception:

A woman should not be morally obligated to carry the resulting pregnancy to term if the pregnancy occurs when both parties do not participate willingly in sexual intercourse. This is especially true in cases of rape and incest. This can also be the case in some situations in which women are so dominated and oppressed that they have no choice regarding sexual intercourse and little access to contraceptives. Some conceptions occur under dehumanizing conditions that are contrary to God’s purposes.[[4]](#footnote-4)

The statement, in effect, bases its reasoning on justice for the bearing mother.

Law itself is not a simple matter. There are criminal law and civil law, and these two work in quite different ways. Criminal law is an intervention by a legitimate government in order to prevent and substitute for private revenge; rather than aggrieved partisans of a victim wreaking vengeance on a perpetrator, the government prosecutes a case against an alleged perpetrator and must convince a neutral judge or jury beyond a reasonable doubt that a statute had been violated and that the accused perpetrated the deed that violated the statute. In the matter of an abortion, differences arose historically over reasonable doubt, not usually over who was responsible but over whether a life had been taken. Differences also arose over whether government has any business criminalizing abortion procedures; in American law the Tenth Amendment speaks of powers not delegated to the United States by the Constitution nor prohibited to the States being reserved to the States or to the people. The courts hold that at least *some* abortion decisions are reserved to the people. This is popularly termed a “right to privacy.” Since the courts have established this precedent, it is unlikely that it will be reversed because of the principle of *stare decisis*: because of that principle, it is simply unfair to convict someone for something that had been declared by the courts beforehand not to be a crime at all. Since the Supreme Court established the precedent on constitutional rather than statutory grounds, the passage of laws re-criminalizing the kinds of abortion in question will not ultimately change the state of the legal situation, since the new laws too would be declared unconstitutional and set aside.

Civil laws often provide benefits to the people collectively, as in provisions for the common defense, or to people individually, as in such programs as Social Security and Medicare. Early in the history of the Republic, for example, Congress imposed a payroll tax on mariners in support of hospitals for their medical needs. What benefits are to be provided and which categories of people are covered by any given program is up to Congress, provided that there is no discrimination in violation of the equal protection of the laws principle as articulated in the Fourteenth Amendment. Congress has legislated that federal appropriations not fund elective abortion procedures. In this sense, there is no “right to an abortion.” The civil statute in question, popularly known as the “Hyde Amendment,” can be changed by Congress; however, there is good reason for not legislating such a change, since doing so would require people who have moral objections to abortion to help fund it, contrary to their own consciences.

In past centuries, whether an act of infanticide took place, as opposed to an occurrence of a still birth, was ascertained by removing the lungs and seeing whether they would float in water. The thinking was that if it were not a still birth, the new born would have taken a breath and therefore filled its lungs with air. Medical science would not hold that procedure to be accurate today, but it had a certain reasonability about it. If the new born manifested one or more vital signs, it was deemed to have been alive at some time; however, it there were no evidence of one or more vital signs, it cannot be determined that there had been a live infant and hence any conviction of infanticide could not be made beyond a reasonable doubt. One of the medical reasons for rejecting the procedure is that the time of birth no longer marks the moment after which one can observe whether or not there are vital signs. Prior to birth, it is possible in our technological age to observe movement, pulse, nutrients and oxygen being supplied through the blood circulatory system, and growth. Statutes and court rulings have sought to indicate the presence of such vital signs prior to birth with the admittedly crude measure of the number of weeks a pregnancy has run its course.

**Morality versus Law**

What morality may require and what law may require sometimes differ. The historic peace churches, for example, find that the two kinds of imperative require contrary lines of action when a war has been declared. This does not mean that the two kinds of imperative are mutually irrelevant; the law often serves as the teacher of non-believers. Where believers would have all citizens refrain from what a law may permit, they may engage in prophetic discourse. In the example of the peace churches, those in other traditions who are not pacifists may hold those churches in high regard and find the world safer and saner where the voices of the members of the peace churches argue and caution against war, lest the nation enter into conflict too readily. In effect, the peace churches serve as a teaching voice in society, lest daily life be reduced to the minimally acceptable behavior that is required by law. Similarly, where law permits abortions under some conditions (usually expressed in terms of a number of weeks of pregnancy, danger to the life of the bearing mother, or after a rape), the prophetic voice of those who object morally to abortion under some or all of the legally permitted conditions urge people to aspire to a higher level of morality, as they see it, than what is minimally acceptable under the law.

One important facet of morality holds that one should refrain from an action where there is doubt. A host should not serve food if there is doubt over whether or not it is contaminated, or use an infant car seat if there is doubt over whether it is safe. In contrast, as noted above, criminal law does not convict where there is reasonable doubt. Consequently, there is a gap between what morality requires and what criminal law requires. Reasonable people would not want a moral code to be propagated that discourages people from refraining from possibly causing harm under circumstances of reasonable doubt, and reasonable people would not want a legal code to convict under circumstances where there is reasonable doubt that harm has been caused. Consequently, the legal status of a given abortion procedure does not determine its moral status, and its moral status does not determine its legality. There is a space between the criteria for moral action and the criteria for legal action, a space in which some abortion procedures may be located.

**Implications of Religious Pluralism**

Statutes that criminalize categories of action, such as murder, fraud, assault, and tax evasion, can certainly be enacted on moral grounds. The fact that they may parallel religious proscriptions does not render them invalid. However, within a constitutional framework that allows for no establishment of religion, proscribing an action because of a uniquely religious tenet would be invalid. Criminalizing the teaching of evolution because of a literal reading of the creation poem in the biblical book of Genesis would not be a valid law. Similarly penalizing a public educator under civil law for teaching evolution would be unconstitutional. Conversely in public schools, teaching intelligent design as science (as opposed to a proposition in the history of philosophy) uniquely on the basis of the Genesis creation poem would be unconstitutional. The United States is a religiously pluralist society, and since the time of the adoption of the First Amendment to the Constitution federal law has respected a separation of church and state. The Fourteenth Amendment extended this separation to the several states.

Applying this same framework to abortion procedures, laws can validly proscribe the taking of pre-natal life where it can be demonstrated that a life would be taken, without recourse to uniquely religious tenets that a life and not something less than a life is in question (and the life of the bearing mother is not in manifest danger). In saying this, it is not maintained that there should or should not be such laws, but only that the religiously pluralist nature of American society and a Constitution so written to respect that pluralism appear to disallow proscribing the taking of a life where only a uniquely religious tenet would hold that a life is in question in the first place. For this reason, it is important to specify when life can be shown to exist *on non-religious grounds*.

**Stages in the Early Development of a Life**

***The Moment of Conception***

Some people hold that life begins at the time of conception. In terms of abortion, a first issue is whether traditional religious teachings pertain to “the moment of conception.”[[5]](#footnote-5) A very early Christian teaching (*Didache* ch. 2) articulates a commandment not to kill a child by abortion, but it does not specify when a life is present so that a killing would be taking place. Modern parallels say much the same thing: Pope Pius XI, for example, says that “taking of the life of the offspring hidden in the mother’s womb” is a “very grave crime” (*Casti* Conubii 63), assuming that a life is already there to be taken. Similarly, the Second Vatican Council (*Gaudium et Spes* 51) said—“So therefore life from a conception must be guarded with utmost care; abortion and also infanticide are abominable crimes”—it did not say how close to the time of conception a life is present to be guarded.[[6]](#footnote-6) Pope John Paul II tried to be very precise: “…a procured abortion, *however it is accomplished, is indeed a direct killing of a human in its initial time of life, which runs its course between conception and birth*” (*Evangelium Vitae* 58).[[7]](#footnote-7) Clearly, the traditional Christian belief is that there is life before birth, but no formula specifies at what point life begins prior to birth. The phases of development prior to birth have been observed to have implications for the morality of a given abortion.[[8]](#footnote-8)

With the benefit of science, one can identify the moment of conception as the usual point in time that genetic individuation begins to occur. The conceptus has different genes from those of the bearing mother, and in that sense it is not a “part of her body.” But is genetic individuation “life”? If by “life” one means protoplasm that can undergo cell division, there is life. However, well after birth a severed limb has life in that sense, but it is not “alive” in the same way that the person who lost the limb is alive. Even when someone dies, there are live cells that survive for a while. Moreover, there is the phenomenon of twinning; when would there be one life and when two? There is also the rare occurrence of two concepti merging to become one; has one of the “lives” been lost? While it is possible for some to believe that life of a kind that merits protection can begin at conception, such a conviction would come from religious grounds (other than Christian tradition) and not knowledge based on observation and reason. As noted above, in a pluralist society a law, in contradistinction to a moral stance, must be based on something other than a uniquely religious tenet.

Whether one takes the moment of conception to be the beginning of life has a practical implication. Those who hold this view have a rationale for regarding some methods of birth control as abortifacients. The “morning after pill,” for example, prevents the implantation of a conceptus into the uterine wall. While one issue arises whether the use or even manufacture of such a pill should be allowed under law, another is whether federal governmental funds could be used for such pills. Those who believe life begins with conception could argue, logically, that using federal funds in that way would be contrary to the Hyde Amendment. Another issue involves the free exercise of religion provision of the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution; some argue that a governmentally mandated participation in an insurance plan that covers such pills infringes upon the free exercise of a religious stance that opposes the pills. As of this writing, the Department of Health and Human Services has accommodated religious institutions that object to participating in such coverage in their mandated medical insurance plans, but the objection remains that those who object on religious grounds should not even be required to fill out forms to seek the exemption.[[9]](#footnote-9) This bears some analogy with pacifists who decline to even register as conscientious objectors, which gives occasion to a protest more than it prevents military action from taking place.

***After Implantation into the Uterine Wall***

Until the conceptus has attached itself to the uterine wall, it has not grown; it has only subdivided into ever smaller cells. After implantation, however, a support system supplying nutrition and oxygen develops, ultimately becoming the umbilical cord. Significantly, growth and minimal vital signs occur from this point in time. It can be said that there is embryonic structure and function, and that is usually what is meant in biology by a living multicellular organism. Some would argue that a greater degree of integration among the bodily functions is necessary for there to be genuine life, and others note that the genetic code, while not that of the mother or of the father, is not fixed yet. Others would look for the first central nervous system activity, brain development, and cardiac activity.[[10]](#footnote-10) Nevertheless the presence of signs of life parallels the indicators used to determine whether humans near death are or are not alive. So clearly, there is human life inherent in the fetal developmental process; the issue for some is whether it is sufficiently person-like to merit protection.

A fetus reaches a significant threshold when “quickening” occurs. The nervous system has become sufficiently coherent for the limbs to move. Anecdotes suggest that memory occurs before birth, albeit not the conscious making an object of one’s past that characterizes recollection; people have been able to reproduce lines of music that had been sung by bearing mothers, without their having heard the music again after birth. It might be asked whether a right to protection depends upon a higher form of consciousness than unreflective memory; the answer would appear to be “Yes” since the right to protection is not generally denied to people who are soundly asleep, who are under an anesthetic for purposes of surgery, or who are in a non-permanent coma. Consequently there is widespread opposition to late term abortions except where serious threat from the pregnancy to the mother’s life is the concern. For example:

We oppose the use of late-term abortion known as dilation and extraction (partial-birth abortion) and call for the end of this practice except when the physical life of the mother is in danger and no other medical procedure is available, or in the case of severe fetal anomalies incompatible with life.[[11]](#footnote-11)

***Social Context***

For some people, the presence of human life is a very important but not completely decisive factor. “An ethical view does not require an *undifferentiated* concern for life,” says one church’s statement. It argues that factors other than the existence of life “may appropriately be given equal or greater weight,” citing “the welfare of the whole family, its economic condition, the age of the parents, their view of the optimum number of children consonant with their resources and the pressures of population,” among other factors.[[12]](#footnote-12) The statement goes on to observe that many would not agree with this assessment.

The social context is particularly important in suggesting governmental legislation. The well-being of families needs to be promoted through just wage legislation, the guaranteed provision of medical care, and physical and educational infrastructures that support large populations, educate the young about responsible sexual behavior and the value of life, and provide forms of population control other than abortion.

***Conclusion***

There are undoubtedly important issues that have not been dealt with in these pages, but hopefully the latter contain the kind of reasonable discourse that is required for the formation of public policy. Simply selecting a preferred conclusion and marshaling arguments in support of it does not do justice to the values that inform the reasoned considerations that people have made. Unborn human life cannot be simply dismissed as the obsession of conventional people who have not thought about the issue; well-thought out sophisticated considerations support the value of life. Similarly, our legal system is an impressive civilizational achievement; there are good reasons to keep government limited and protect privacy, and to avoid legislating morality, mixing government and religion, and refraining from convicting people of murder where there is reasonable doubt that a life has been taken.

**172.**

**Authoritarianism versus Subsidiarity**

Anthony J. Blasi

The exact opposite of authoritarianism is anarchism, not subsidiarity. However, authoritarianism is a problem in today’s world, and anarchism is not. Anarchists have difficulty in achieving strategic coherence because of their principle, while heavy-handed tyrants, in contrast, achieve their ends by virtue of their ability to amass and align whatever resources that are available to them for achieving their usually self-serving ends. Consequently we need not be concerned at the moment with anarchy, while we should be concerned with the excesses of authority. So here it is subsidiarity that we contrast with authoritarianism, not anarchism.

One will not likely encounter discussions of subsidiarity in popular discourse; indeed the very term is an inside word among social theorists, and Catholic ones at that. Subsidiarity as a concept, without the term being used, turned up in the 1891 encyclical of Pope Leo XIII, *Rerum Novarum*, where the family was identified as a “true society” no less than the state (#13). The context was Pope Leo’s critique of a “socialism” that would deprive wage earners and their families of all the fruit of the wage earner’s labor and turn it over to the state. The state, he said, “must not absorb the individual or the family; both should be allowed free and untrammeled action so far as is consistent with the common good and the interests of others” (# 35).

Forty years later, the manifest problem was not only a socialism strictly defined as an absence of personal property but also Fascism, which monopolized power, as opposed to property, in the hands of the state. Without using the term, Pope Pius XI, in his 1931 encyclical *Quadragesimo Anno*, described subsidiarity in terms of non-state organizations rather than in terms of individual and family prerogatives:

Just as it is gravely wrong to take from individuals what they can accomplish by their own initiative and industry and give it to the community, so also it is an injustice and at the same time a grave evil and disturbance of right order to assign to a greater and higher association what lower and subordinate organizations can do. For every social activity ought of its very nature to furnish help to the members of the body social and never destroy and absorb them. (#79)

Subsidiarity is not a mere federalism, whereby some functions would be delegated to the national government and others reserved to state governments. In the first instance, subsidiarity is more sweeping than that; it recognizes considerable autonomy on the part of businesses, unions, schools, clubs, and individuals. In the second instance, it would have the higher organizations protect the autonomies of the lower organizations and even assist the when they face difficulties.

Though neither pope used the expression “subsidiarity,” both invoked it, and they did so as a principle, not a mere teaching against “socialism” strictly defined or against Fascism (it too going without being named). As a principle, subsidiarity has applications beyond questions of economic rights and political absolutism.

As a first example where the principle of subsidiarity appears to be applicable, there is the matter of the local physical environment. It would appear to be a matter of human rights under the principle for a municipality to prevent fracking and other industrial practices that threaten to pollute local water sources and destabilize the local geographies themselves. Similarly, municipalities appear to have a right within their geographical boundaries to prohibit plastic market bags and other materials that threaten to clog drainage systems. Interference with such rights of subordinate levels of human organization would be a “crime against humanity” –“gravely wrong,” to use the language of Pius XI.

As a second example, individuals and families have a manifest right to migrate both for purposes of escaping from oppression and persecution and for purposes of earning a living. Because of modern industrialization, especially the mechanization of agriculture and the internationalization of trade, it would be a violation of human rights to force people to live and try to work in rural places and in underdeveloped nations. Families have a right to be united, and their members have the right to develop and use their talents, irrespective of the political boundaries that need to be crossed in the exercise of that right. This is simply to have state entities, which establish and maintain boundaries, respect the rights of the smaller social entities, families.

The contemporary world is not only an industrial one but also a professional one. We are living amidst an explosion of information, knowledge, and specialized skills. There are more specialties than there were in the past, and in order to function within a given specialty one must delve more deeply into a given sphere of knowledge and skill than was the case in previous centuries and decades. This implies a duty on the part of the specialist to develop professionalism, an obligation on the part of the state to make appropriate educational opportunities available, and an obligation on the part of employers to allow sufficient autonomy on the part of specialists to exercise their craft.

Such complex organizations as research institutes, governmental agencies, medical facilities, media outlets, and educational institutions must themselves be accorded sufficient autonomy to organize themselves so that their constitutive departments in turn also have sufficient self-governance for their personnel to function as true professionals. I have personally witnessed these subsidiarity-related issues at play in higher education, where university presidents met the unreasonable mandates of government-appointed system boards in order to keep their positions as presidents, however bad the consequences would be for students and personnel. Those unreasonable mandates included adopting student information computer software that was more expensive and of lower quality than what was already in use, over the objections of the software specialists; appointing minimally qualified faculty over stronger candidates because the former had political connections, despite objections from the relevant departments; eliminating language and science degree programs in an age of globalization and scientific development, over the objection of faculty bodies; “streamlining” degree programs into fewer credit hours even as the quantity of useful knowledge increases, again over the objections of faculty bodies; and the creation of non-disciplinary courses based on pop-level advice books and non-disciplinary degree programs with few specialized demands, both, again, over the objections of faculty bodies. The specialists not only know far better than boards and executives how to practice their crafts, they have a right to act on their knowledge. Similar things occur in other settings.

I suggest that there are tell-tale signs of insufficient subsidiarity: 1) large executive bureaucracies that exceed the magnitude of the front-line working specialists; 2) top-down mandates; 3) micromanagement; 4) huge CEO compensation packages, unrelated to quality of performance; 5) lavish executive meetings and retreats for the vague purpose of strategic planning; 6) increases in the cost of specialized services that bear no relation to the compensations of the front-line specialists who provide those services; 7) policies that shelter executives of higher level organizations from communications from people from lower levels; 8) increases in the difference in compensation between the top 1% to 5% of the income pyramid and the bottom 50% to 60%. These are not discreet phenomena that happen to be unfortunate; they are interrelated aspects of an insufficiency of subsidiarity.

Incidentally, ecclesiastical organizations are not immune to such an insufficiency.

**173.**

**Biblically Correct Bathrooms?**

Anthony J. Blasi

“If King James English is good enough for God, it is good enough for me!” Such was a legendary dismissal of translating the Bible into contemporary English. As a translator of the New Testament from the Greek, I have been told much the same thing by street pamphleteers, albeit not in the legend’s exact words. The objection, of course, betrays a complete lack of historical consciousness. King James English was even less the language of John the Baptist, Jesus, Mary, and Paul than it is mine. At least, I have been told by my elders that some of my great grandparents spoke something like King James English.

Today politicians who mercilessly brandish the Evangelical label like a weapon are claiming that regulations intended to prevent discrimination against trans-gendered people contravene their faith tradition. A spokesman for an organization that describes itself as a Christian faith-based political action committee condemned such non-discrimination measures as part of an unchristian agenda. It may be nice to see such public interest in biblical exegesis, but I know of no gender-segregated bathrooms in archaeological sites from antiquity, and certainly no mandates for such in the scriptures. Indeed, running water as we know it now is not even as old as King James English. I can even remember rural homes lacking running water from my childhood—and I too am younger than King James English. And well beyond childhood, I have traveled in European nations were restrooms were not gender segregated.

I have personally known three trans-gendered people. One was a co-parishioner who worked for a city police department. He assumed a female identity after his daughter died and his wife developed severe symptoms of Alzheimer’s disease. After becoming a woman, my friend wrote me the following for use in an introductory sociology text that I co-authored: “I learned what gender dysphoria meant; I was horrified. I figured out that this was the name of the monster that made me wonder about myself in my mid-teens; made me try and fail to become close friends with girls who, unfortunately, saw me as one of the guys…; and even made me one very depressed day in high school think what I had always thought was unthinkable—suicide.” She goes on: “When I finally began transitioning on the job in 2001, I lost a number of friends and many coworkers were unkind if not outright nasty, but there’s always a saving remnant.” She added, “It would take years before my family of birth came to terms with my femininity….”

She sent me a pamphlet where I found this testimony by a writer who had become a man: In middle school “classmates began to call me a lesbian. I became convinced that I was a lesbian and that was the end of it. I was made fun of constantly by classmates and people who were supposed to be my friends. The hatred that I felt about being in my body was growing more and more unbearable by the day. I would not want to wake up in the morning. …I wanted to kill myself so badly.” After seeing a therapist: “As soon as the therapist and I began talking, I was introduced to a new word: ‘transgendered.’ For me it meant a female who had the brain of a male and believes should have been male.” He goes on, “From that time forward, I spent my life explaining…that it was perfectly normal to like girls because I think, act, and have the brain of a male.” But that did not solve all the problems: “As I expected, people were too rigid and could not open their mind to accept me for who I really was. My parents, however, were very accepting.” His narrative goes on to describe the difficulty getting the birth registry adjusted after medical personnel had made the necessary hormone prescriptions and performed the necessary surgeries. According to the pamphlet, the writer died young of “a deadly combination of isolation and drugs.”

The second transgendered person I have known was a professor in another department at the university where I taught. His family had been important in the history of that university; in fact, the building where I had my office had been named after his mother. I found him a good conversationalist in the faculty dining room. But then he resigned without explanation and was said to be moving to Washington, D.C. A few years later at the meeting of the “L Club” (liberals) in my city, a woman was scheduled to speak on transgendered issues. She was a bit nervous about my recognizing her, because she in fact was my former colleague and had moved only about thirty miles away, accepting a position at another university. She gradually became an activist for her cause. She passed around some materials as she spoke, including a photograph of a high profile Republican senator with herself and, much to my surprise, the co-parishioner I mentioned above. The two transgendered women had gone to Washington to lobby for some language in a bill.

The third transgendered person I have known was the daughter of a relative. She made the change in young adulthood, only to face rejection by some of his immediate family. Others in the family have made a point of accepting him. I learned from my co-parishioner early enough to be among the latter.

So now we have politicians making a public spectacle of themselves with their vengeful conventionality, and we have “faith-based” professional fund-raisers egging them on. Are they really moved by biblical concerns? Or, rather, having been frustrated by what they dismiss as political correctness in matters of race and sexual orientation, are they satisfying a need for a target for their baser demons? They seem to have eyes and not see, ears and not hear.

**174.**

**C.G. Jung: the Self and the Christ Image**

Tom Keene

Carl Gustav Jung (1875-1961) was a scientist who refused to limit his thinking to the box of the scientific method. The method of science is to work *exclusively* with that evidence which is measurable and with that logic which is demonstrable. For one scientist’s discovery to be accepted by the scientific community, that discovery must be replicable by other scientists. Knowledge that is not replicable, such as intuitive insights, or valued appreciations such as goodness and beauty, is excluded from the scientific method. Thus science has nothing to say about the meaning of a dream to the dreamer, or the validity of beauty in the eye of the beholder.

Jung’s work with the experiences of his patients and introspections into his own experience led him to go where no scientists had gone before. This essay explores one of those places: the connection between the Christ Image of the collective consciousness and the archetypal Self of the collective unconsciousness.

First some background on Jung’s notions of human consciousness. Jung distinguishes four levels or layers of consciousness.

Most immediate to us is *our personal consciousness*, which is numbered second because it presupposes another. When I wake in the morning and remember my name, what day it is, and where I need to go, I have entered into the level of my personal consciousness. Prior to that waking, I was personally unconscious. In other words, my consciousness was operating at a different level, that of *the personal unconsciousness.* At that first level I may have had several dreams. Unless I remember those dreams and consider them they will remain at that unconscious level. Also at that unconscious level there may be residues of personal experiences long forgotten: the memory of my first steps; my first words; my joy in splashing the bathwater.

A third level of consciousness is *the collective consciousness.* We enter this level when we become aware of the consciousness of those around us. We realize that other humans populate this world and that they have words, actions and a presence that matters very much to our survival and wellbeing. Growing up we internalize these things as part of our personal consciousness. We learn to talk, read, write in order to engage and embrace the meanings of this collective consciousness. When we step into a library, a packed theater, a busy street, a concert, we have engaged the collective consciousness. In other words, the collective consciousness is our culture, our society’s awareness, the mind of the world out there.

The fourth level of consciousness is *the collective unconsciousness.* For most of us this is unfamiliar territory and a level that most scientists, excepting Jungian therapists, avoid. One way to grasp the nature of this level is by analogy with our own bodies. Each of us inherits a body and a unique DNA that comes from two parents, four grandparents, eight great grandparents, and then untold generations of direct ancestors going back to the beginnings of humanity. If our DNA comes from a collective of physical ancestors, where does our consciousness come from? Jung explored the possibility that our capacity for consciousness comes from these same ancestors going back to the beginnings. Not just the capacity but also the contents derived, like our DNA, from ancestral experiences. Jung compared the mythologies and dreams of various cultures and noted common characteristics that could not be accounted for by intercultural transmission, i.e. by the collective consciousness.

Jung called this level of awareness the *collective unconscious*. We might also call it our psychic DNA. The contents of this level Jung called archetypes. Examples of these archetypes are the anima, (the unconscious knowledge in a man of what it is to be a woman) and the animus (the unconscious knowledge in a woman of what it is to be a man). In other words, like our DNA, operating within our bodies without our awareness, the anima and animus operate within our fourth level of consciousness without our awareness except when they break through to us in dreams or intuitions.

Jung articulated a whole range of archetypes. He noted a particular archetype, the universal urge in humanity toward wholeness and creative self-fulfillment. He named this instinctual drive the Self. Jung’s associate and editor, Violet de Laszlo, described the Self.

The Self by definition comprises the full scope of a personality from its most individual traits to its most generic attitudes and experiences, actual as well as potential. Hence, it transcends the existing personality. The archetype of wholeness or of the Self can therefore be regarded as the dominant of psychic growth. The inherent plan of an individual integrative psychic process can thus be likened to the biological plan inherent in the seed of any living organism. This process can be experienced existentially in our personal life history, and symbolically wherever the image of wholeness or of the Self is present. Indeed, the individuation process (one’s growth and maturation over a lifetime.) can be said to lie at the core of all spiritual experience, since it is coequal with the creative transformation of the inner person, and hence reflects the archetypal experience of an inner rebirth. In this context the impact of the symbol (i.e. the Self) becomes the experience of “meaning” itself, and the archetypal image becomes an ultimate psychic truth and reality. Here then would seem to lie the central connecting link between psychology and religion.(*The Basic Writings of C.G. Jung*, ed. Violet Staub de Laszlo, The Modern Library, New York, page xvii)

The present essay proposes that one reason the Jesus story attracted the first Christians was that it resonated with the archetypal Self that lies at the center of humanity’s collective unconscious. In other words, the human and divine dimensions of our experience can come together when the conscious experience of Christ connects with the unconscious experience of the Self. Religions other than Christianity can do the same thing with the archetypal Self through other ideas, images, ritual and events.

Both elements in Jungian psychology and Christian religion, the Self and the Christ, function to bring the personal consciousness beyond the limited ego to a holistic and healing growth. Both symbolize totality. Both function to redeem the self-destructive in the psyche’s ego. It would seem that other religions in humanity’s collective consciousness bring about in their own way the connection to wholeness and completion. What we do here is to use Jung’s insights to describe how that works for those who grasp the Jesus story. In doing so we may also get another understanding of how the faith experience functions.

In his essay “Aion,” (as reprinted in *Psyche and Symbol*, ed. de Laszlo, Doubleday, pp. 57–60) Jung asks, “Is the Self a symbol for Christ or is Christ a symbol for the Self?” He states that he affirms the latter. But he goes on to say that the idea of the Self can never match the Christ Image because, though they both have tremendous powers as symbols, only the Christ Image has the “character of a revelatory historical event.”

 Furthermore, Jung writes, recognition of the Self, “does not in any way circumvent the Christian mystery: rather it creates the psychological pre-conditions without which ‘redemption’ would appear meaningless.” By “redemption” Jung seems to mean man’s completion and refers to Jesus’ words, “Be you complete (Greek *teleioi* or *teleos*, the root of our English word teleology) as your heavenly Father is complete.” For Jung, redemption occurs in the process of “individuation” when persons, facing up to their incompleteness, undertake the journey to completion.

 At present, I am more intrigued than clear about the Christ/Self relationship. The following thoughts revolve around what I understand to be the task of the faith-seeking person: to integrate into one’s own ego or personal consciousness the elements of the Christ Image that one receives from the collective consciousness (i.e. religion, culture, society, teachers, parents, etc.) and those elements of the archetypal Self coming from the collective unconscious which encourage us to become whole.

*“Faith” in Jungian Terms*

Religious faith, it seems to me, is a personal experience and acceptance of the transcendent. Such acceptance is not merely the result of logical thought and sensory data computed on the conscious level. It is also the result of the feeling for and intuition of events and realities below the level of consciousness. Faith then is a conscious engagement of the invisible dimension, a dimension which being beyond the consciousness is therefore of the unconscious. After such a faith experience one’s sense faculties and rational judgments may confirm this engagement allowing the ego to integrate the objects of faith into one’s conscious worldview. “I believe that I might understand,” may be expressive of this process.

 For New Testament writers, faith is the experience that validates the word we hear from others. Paul puts it this way, “So then faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God.” (Romans 10:17) But the faith experience encompasses more than the word we hear from others. It is a grasp of the invisible, the contents of the unconscious. The author of the letter to the Hebrews says, “Faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things unseen.” Hebrews 11:1)

 To put it in Jung’s terms, Christian faith happens when persons integrate into their awareness those elements of the Christ Image, or the Jesus story, that they discern to be “true” and link them with elements from the Self in their collective unconscious. Such integration takes place within the framework of persons’ experience sometimes through reflection and prayer and other times through a lightning stroke of insight. Mere credulity is never a substitute for the authentically experienced, deep Self and self acceptance we call faith.

*The Jesus of History and the Christ of Faith*

It is said that Jesus is the most misunderstood person in history. The more I learn and think about the Jesus story and the more I discover what people believe about Jesus, the more I agree. Some Christian scholars distinguish between the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith. An historical community experienced the historical Jesus, his life and death. They also experienced an event called resurrection. It was that event that led to the Christ of faith, a belief in the cosmic meaning of Jesus. That meaning came to be understood as a root-level redemption from the dehumanizing powers that be.

*Integrating Elements from the Collective Consciousness*

As a child, I accepted uncritically the assumptions and beliefs of my society. But as a maturing adult, I increasingly selected my beliefs according to whether or not they were confirmed or supported by my experiences. I stopped believing in Santa Claus when my experience no longer coincided with my belief. Similarly, my belief in Jesus had to outgrow my childhood assumptions lest it become a shell empty of meaning. So I must evaluate the Christ Image I inherit from the collective consciousness as worthy of belief if it makes sense to me in terms similar to how I judge other aspects of reality. For example: Was Jesus a historical person? Do his teachings make sense? What are the meanings of the Jesus story? Which meanings can I embrace?

 This suggests that I make the historical Jesus and the Christ of faith my own by study, discernment and thought. What my reasoning and intuition can recognize as having the ring of truth will be accepted. What my sense of values discerns as good will be accepted. Thus is formed the Christ Image in my personal consciousness. What I cannot accept I will either reject outright or put on my mental shelf for future reference.

 But the Christ Image of the *collective* consciousness is not the Christ of faith. If Jung is really onto something about his levels of consciousness and unconsciousness, then the grace filled encounter with a healing force of cosmic meaning (the Christ of faith) involves an encounter with the collective unconsciousness.

*Integrating Elements from the Collective Unconsciousness*

The grace dimension of faith is experienced when some aspect of the numinous (the awesomely holy, sacred and transcendent) is encountered. By way of feeling and intuition, more than reason and evidence, one lets forces that emerge from the unconscious be recognized and accepted by one’s personal consciousness. Later, the personal consciousness may want to use reason and evidence to process this encounter to make sense of it. But whether the encounter makes sense or not it is still an encounter. To run from such existential encounters because they don’t fit collective standards of reality is to flee whatever cosmic meanings may dwell beyond the grasp of our scientific methods.

 According to Jung, the Self is a major integrating force that helps us “make sense” of our encounters with the collective unconsciousness. It also helps us to see the “sense” of what does not “make sense.” The Self’s integrating work helps the ego to realize that it is grounded in a greater reality than itself. Indeed, a person both as ego and Self is more than its own personal consciousness.

 If the ego stands at the bridge between consciousness and unconsciousness, the Self is the force that coaxes the ego into embracing the elements for personal growth on both sides of the bridge.

*The Self and the Christ of Faith*

Jung’s research holds that the Self appears in dreams and myth through various symbols. These symbols coincide with symbols that the collective consciousness of the church uses to convey the meanings of the Christ of faith. The stone is a frequently occurring symbol for the Self. So too, with the Christ Image. The Christ is seen as the “chief cornerstone” (Eph. 2:20) and the “spiritual rock” from which the waters of life spring (I Cor. 10:4). Another reference is 1 Peter 2: 1-8.

 The Self also appears as a helpful animal, while Christ is perceived as the Lamb of God throughout the book of Revelations, also in John 1:29, Acts 8:3, and 1 Peter 1:19. The Self also appears in myth and dreams as a child matching the Christ child of Bethlehem, the boy of 12 conversing in the temple and the Christ child of the St. Christopher legend.

 Early on, Christians adapted the symbol of the fish to represent Christ. I like to think that the fish is particularly apt for indicating the connection between the Self and Christ. Whether we fish by line or net, our catch is invisible (unconscious) to us until we raise it to the surface (our consciousness). Jung’s idea of the Self is grounded in the collective unconsciousness of humankind. The Christian idea of the Christ is grounded in that dimension of human experience attainable only through the gift that is grace, a happening not accessible via the personal consciousness alone. Grace can be seen as a raising to consciousness of God’s radical acceptance of our total humanness, a condition that preceded our birth and is therefore of the unconscious.

*The Logos and the Self*

The Wisdom literature of ancient Judaism sees wisdom as an imprint of God upon all creation (see especially Wisdom 7:24-26). This imprint on all creation finds articulation in the Greek word *logos.* John’s gospel uses the word to unite the experience of God’s imprint upon all creation with our experience of the Christ. A rich word, *logos* implies image, form, word, idea, and expression.

                        In the beginning, was the Logos,

                        the Logos was with God

                        and the Logos was God.

                        He was with God in the beginning.

                        Through him all things came to be,

                        not one thing had its being but through him.

                                                            John 1:1-3

Jung, by the way, was fond of quoting a Gnostic saying attributed to Jesus: “Lift up the stone and there you shall find me; cleave the wood and I am there.” (from *Jung: His Life and Work*, by B. Hannah, Putnam’s Sons, page 150)

Now if there is a grain of truth to John’s insight about the Logos, then it may follow that the Self (because it is the archetype of personhood and a primitive pattern of human fullness and divinity) is possibly patterned closely to the Logos of God, as was the personal consciousness of Jesus.

One of the factors that account for the impact of Jesus on history seems to be the power of his personality to actualize the potentials of psychic energies in others. Examples of this are the healings he facilitated, the flush of awareness at Pentecost, and his impact in those who seek to know him. For example, Jesus could be very clear about the limitations of his human consciousness or ego (“nobody knows that but the Father” in Mark 13:32 and “the Father is greater than I” in John 14:28). At the same time, Jesus is very accepting of the divinity within him. (“The Father and I are one” in John 10:29, “The Father is in me and I am in the Father.” in John 10:28) Except for the Buddha, it is rare to find any historical figure whose integration of ego and Self was nearly as fine-tuned as in the case of Jesus.

What I am suggesting here is the possibility that if the Logos pattern of God was present in Jesus and if the Logos pattern of God is present in all created things, then it is also present in the Self. In other words, common to both the Christ Image, as communicated to me through the collective consciousness, and the Self, as communicated through the collective unconscious, is the Logos, the image-expression­-form of God. That would make us, along with the rest of creation, images of God not simply by nature (“So God created man in His own image; in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them.”) Genesis 1:27, but also by making that fact realized in our voluntary conscious intent.

*Conclusion*

One reason for Paul’s success and that of the Deutero-Pauline writers in spreading the Jesus story throughout the cities of the Mediterranean may have been his ability to evoke in his listeners their intuitive access to that dimension of our unconsciousness that Jung called the Archetypal Self and that Paul called the Christ within.

 The Deutero-Pauline prayer for the Ephesians (Eph. 3:16-19) may express that process in terms that could have intrigued Jung himself. Here is a paraphrase of Paul’s prayer into language that reflects Jung’s concepts.

Paul:    Out of the Father’s infinite glory...

***Jung:  From total transcendence***...

Paul:    may he give you the power through his spirit...

***Jung:    may your psyche individuate...***

Paul:    for your hidden self to grow strong...

***Jung:    your archetypal Self...***

Paul:   so that Christ may live in your hearts...

***Jung: so that you may live the meanings of our human destinies...***

Paul:   through faith...

***Jung:   through ascertaining introspection...***

Paul:   and then planted on love and built on love...

***Jung:   and then entering into the psychic being of others...***

Paul:   you will with all the saints...

***Jung:   you will in union with all other individuating persons...***

Paul:   have strength to grasp...

***Jung:   possess a mature awareness...***

Paul:   the breadth and length, the height and depth...

***Jung:   of all conscious and unconscious realities...***

Paul:   until knowing Christ...

***Jung:   until knowing the unique and historic conjunction of the human and divine...***

Paul:   which is beyond all knowledge...

***Jung:   which is beyond all personal and collective consciousness as we experience it...***

Paul:   you are filled with the utter fullness of God.

***Jung: you encounter and receive the total source of transcendence.***

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**Charity is Not Enough**

Anthony J. Blasi

“For the whole law has been fulfilled in one saying, in this: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself’” (Galatians 5:14, citing Leviticus 19:18 in the Septuagint version). Saint Paul was not the only New Testament author to say this; it appears in the gospels as well. Why did the saying add “as yourself”? Could it not have simply commanded, “Love your neighbor”? No. The insight is also to be found at the core of the golden rule. If you do not want to be a mere object of somebody’s charity, you should not make your neighbor a mere object of your own charity. One might argue that making someone a mere object of charity is not real love. Granted, but it is that faux love, the unhappy connotation of the word *charity*, that I have in mind right now. That is what I want to maintain is not enough.

It is no secret that our parishes and congregations array themselves on a spectrum, from absolutely hateful places that are open only to a narrowly defined elect, to charitable ones that welcome all and give voice to the needs and rights of all. The former are guilty of sins of commission; I need not write about them. Most faith communities fall somewhere in the middle of the spectrum; they officially welcome all, though succeed in being congenial to only some, and they offer or generously support other agencies that offer food for the hungry, rent and light bill help to the needy, and perhaps even some respite for those troubled by trying circumstances. Such is to be commended as far as it goes, but in fact government does a great deal of that and services offered by faith communities generally address cases that “fall between the cracks” (more precisely, fall between the programs). I would not want the churches to cease offering social services. I must ask, however, why most churches remain silent about why it is that so many people need social services. And I must return to the phrase, “as yourself,” which is essential to the Law: Would I want to be in a circumstance where I had to be an object of some congregation’s or agency’s charity?

To appreciate the full bearing of that phrase, “as yourself,” it is necessary to recognize the nature of individual humans and their societies. Humans have attitudes, as opposed to mere responses to stimuli. Other animals habitualize responses to stimuli, sometimes complex responses; however, we imaginatively place ourselves in the shoes of others and anticipate how others would feel or respond if we acted toward them in a particular way. This imaginative exercise is what makes talk possible. If we were to use a particular word, we can anticipate what another person would take it to mean, and then we decide whether to go ahead or use it or use a different word. In the course of imaginatively assuming the standpoint of the other and anticipating how the other would respond to us, our own selves come into view in the manner of reflections. “As yourself”: the other and the self are aspects of the same insight. Rather than habitualize responses, we gain knowledge of other and self and, over time, build up organized identities.

This building up of the self, in the course of which we also build up recognitions of others, is not a mere matter of adopting prevailing types. We may in fact do what others do, but then when regarding ourselves from the standpoint of another we may be dissatisfied with what we have done and revise our course of action. We may even surprise ourselves! The philosopher Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz offers another reason why we do not simply conform to the ways of prevalent types; he described a constellation of silvery spheres, each of which reflected on its silvery surface all the other spheres in the constellation. Precisely because the “take” of each sphere is from a position in the constellation that is not shared by any other sphere, what is reflected on its surface is unlike what is on the surface of any other sphere. The more populous the constellation in which a sphere is located, the more different it is from any other sphere. People, of course, are not silvery spheres, “monads,” but we each have a unique “take” on the constellation of other people, and inevitably when we anticipate how others would respond to anything we would do or say we have unique views of ourselves—or more simply, unique selves.

What I want to point to is the co-occurrence of self and others, similar to what happens in mirror reflection. The others in our worlds do not cause us and we do not cause them. We co-occur and co-revise ourselves. If we place one another into categories and constrain who either others or ourselves can be, we are imposing stereotypes that would deny the uniqueness of each. As the great thinker of the turn of the nineteenth to the twentieth century, Georg Simmel, observed, “the poor” is such a category. He warned against “Christian” charity, which had more to do with the afterlife ambitions of the “Christian” than with the rights of those labeled “poor.”

As far as science and technology have advanced, including the science of economics, there is no natural reason why poverty should exist. It serves the unenlightened interest of a relatively small sector of society for poverty to be perpetuated. Yet even the beneficiaries of the unjust society do not want starvation and rampant homelessness; that is too unstable a circumstance that can lead to violent rebellion. So they tolerate and even promote a “safety net.” It is the dilemma of generous people in an ungenerous world that their charities fit comfortably into an underlying injustice.

The beneficiaries of injustice promote certain ideologies that shore up unjust circumstances. One need not depict these beneficiaries (often termed “the wealthy” or the “one percent”) as cynical or sharp-witted; they often sense in an inchoate way which insights endanger their status or who might be an agent of inconvenient change. In one famous example, the Romans did not crucify Jesus on the basis of any analysis of the revolutionary potential of his teachings. Rather, they tolerated ideologies that lent comfort to the beneficiaries of injustice because such ideologies do not cause trouble. One such ideology is racial and ethnic prejudice. Carrying such prejudice out into discrimination is no longer untroublesome in our time because of the requirements of law, but objections to prejudicial expressions are dismissed with the phase “political correctness.” There are privileged people, beneficiaries of education, who hold onto prejudicial stereotypes, not because they can put them into practice but because they are part of a cultural comfort zone for themselves.

A second ideology that thrives in an unjust society is anti-intellectualism. This ideology divides itself into two varieties. The first contains acuity of mind within a technical specialty. The specialized intellectual provides a service to people who hold power and resources, but does not question to what purpose the service is destined. One thinks of the engineers working for Hitler’s war machine. An exceedingly bright student in one of my classes early in my career had been dismissed upon graduation from a religious order and obtained, under pressure to find a job, a position in the central office of a large insurance company; his daily task was to find loopholes in insurance policies so that the company need not honor claims. He was talented; he did his job well; however, he was too morally circumspect to be happy or satisfied with his work. He did not buy into the ideology that was prevalent among his fellow workers. The second variety of anti-intellectualism dismisses mental skills across the board. One often hears the discourse of this kind of anti-intellectualism in political demagoguery. It promotes public policies that further societal injustice by defunding education, subverting education by substituting the cult of sport for the promotion of academic pursuits, and expanding the size and power of mindless educational bureaucracy. Note how this ideology targets education, the very institution in the modern world through which people not born to riches can empower themselves.

A third ideology is symptom fixation. This is the tendency to have on hand committed responses to the symptoms of injustice and a studied avoidance of the causal antecedents behind the symptoms. Here can be found the honorable industriousness of operating bread lines etc. It should be repeated, the works themselves are not objectionable, but the studied avoidance of why the works are needed is objectionable. The combination of the two leads to the paradox of a hyperactivity within a structural passivity. Let there be no doubt: Charity is no substitute for justice.

It is incumbent on such an essentially cultural community as the church to puncture ideologies and identify injustices. The free market of economic potentates is an unfree economy for most who live within it. It promised prosperity to all but has failed to deliver proportionate participation to many. A century and a half ago when churches organized charities, the very charities themselves served as a protest against the failure of the free market of the economic potentates. Now that the class system systematically denies class realities, now that the mass of the many seek, unrealistically, to be counted among the number of the few, charities comfort such climbers by convincing them they have a heart after all. The problem, however, and its solution are not to be found in the individual heart but in the collective mind.

**176.**

**Compassion and Contrivance**

Anthony J. Blasi

Compassion goes beyond feeling. In feeling *with*, people begin, already motivated by an engagement in the hopes, efforts, circumstances, and lives of others. Compassion begins with a recognition of who one’s neighbor is. Compassion is therefore not a prior motive, reason or purpose for action but a result of all that leads up to action. We live with others before feeling with them. More to the point we are conscious of our life with others when our living with them generates the feelings we experience along with them.

Philosophically one can propose a solipsism or a hypothetical scene about an individual marooned alone on an island, but in fact we live with others and are involved in their lives. What we do affects them, and what they do has implications for us. When they suffer, it requires some contrivance for us not to suffer with them. The drama and contests of an era center frequently on the making and unmaking of such contrivances.

The tragic racial history of the United States portrays for us the dynamics of contriving barriers against life together and consequently against compassion. A few years back, when African Americans (and seemingly too few others) were protesting the killing of young Trevon Martin in Sanford, Florida, by a neighborhood watch volunteer, any references I made to the tragedy in some circles were dismissed summarily. I could be forgiven, in many people’s eyes. I had worked for seventeen years with young African Americans as a faculty member in a historically African American university; but such an off-the-beaten-track experience would not really be salient to life in the wider world. There lies a first dynamic of counter-compassionate contrivance: Some worlds that people inhabit matter more than others.

Decades before that, I had the bizarre experience of being subject to the placement policies of education authorities. All children go through that, but it was much more evident to me. For a variety of reasons—none of them related to the mischievousness of an academically unchallenged child bored by an academically unchallenging set of schools—I had attended no less than nine different schools. A Catholic high school was the ninth. In one instance, a nearby school was designated a “Mexican” school, and I was sent by bus, along an un-nerving canyon route, to a low income “white” school, even as my parents would have preferred I attend the nearby school. In another instance, despite very high scores on “standardized” achievement tests, I was placed in the second tier of “homogeneously” categorized classes, along with Jews and classmates with slanted eyes, while coincidentally the “top” tier class consisted of “whites” having English-sounding names. It was only in high school, when I was first placed in a “top” tier class, that I ever had any African American classmates. The kind of social engineering I witnessed prior to high school is a second dynamic of counter-compassionate contrivance: Engineering the steering of people into separate categories. As children, I and my classmates were not supposed to notice this dynamic.

Historians of American ethnic relations sometimes mention the pre-World War I studies of academic educational potential in selected urban American school systems. Those immigrant groups who spoke English, such as the Irish and British, ranked higher and those who spoke other languages, such as the Italians and Russian Jews, ranked lower as not educable. Half a century later some natural scientists similarly used test scores to associate intellectual ability with “races” as defined by skin color (It seems they were unaware that cognitive functioning occurs within the cranium rather than in the epidermis!). Somewhat later two journalists published a book, *The Bell Curve*, that used tendentiously selected data to advance a similar thesis. (Meanwhile, social scientists, who had developed some expertise in statistical controls, sampling, and a variety of forms of data collection and analysis, had been refuting theories of racial intellectual superiority and inferiority since the time of the early American sociologist William Isaac Thomas.) This brings to light another dynamic of counter-compassionate contrivance: Using pseudo-scientific claims to explain the effects of social oppression in terms of the alleged attributes of its victims. Such blaming of the victims might be assumed to relieve the onlooker of any impulse to act.

More recently, we have witnessed the effort to use the force of the state to actually prevent compassionate action. In the 1980s, American foreign policy favored oppressive, murderous dictatorial governments in several Central American nations, and the resultant streams of refugees led to the United States Southwest and sometimes through the center of the nation to Canada. The federal government criminalized the offering of aid to these refugees. A sanctuary movement emerged in response. This was not unprecedented; something similar developed for escaping slaves with the “underground railroad” prior to the Civil War. Today we have a persecution of “illegal” people. Texas has a law—contested in the courts as of this writing—requiring the use of local police power to enforce a matter of civil, not criminal, federal law, once federal immigration official become aware of an “illegal” person in detention. The law also allows any law enforcement officer to profile people and investigate their immigration status. The governor of Texas has gone further, threatening to defund any non-governmental social service agency that dares to aid perfectly legal Syrian refugees. Not only can state funds not be used for such people, but state funds are denied to any agency that offers them aid out of other funds. Hence we have a fourth counter-compassionate dynamic: Compassion by some becomes a crime against all. One is reminded of the young Virginian, George Thomas—later a very effective Union general—who taught the slaves his family owned to read and write so that they could read the Bible; he knew full well it was against the law and that he was liable to criminal prosecution had he been discovered!

This catalog of dynamics of counter-compassionate contrivances is by no means exhaustive. The point, however, has been made: Life with and feeling with people come naturally; it takes effort to stifle life and feeling. To live un-compassionately is a sin of commission, not a matter of negligence, omission, or invincible unawareness.

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**Complicity**

Anthony J. Blasi

Some years ago I joined a local Pax Christi chapter that participated frequently in demonstrations against the Second Gulf War. That was my first involvement in Pax Christi since the days of the predecessor to Pax Christi USA, the Catholic Peace Fellowship. In the local chapter I met a gentleman who had quit a financially lucrative job in the nuclear bomb industry, doing so as a matter of conscience. He had become an employee, at a much reduced level of financial compensation, of a Catholic diocese. As his conscience developed through the years, he could no longer be an accomplice to committing evil. Nuclear weapons of mass destruction could not be used in a way that distinguished between combatants and non-combatants. And especially if used against a nation having an undemocratic government, such a weapon would unavoidably murder the innocent on account of rulers believed to be guilty. Any such use of a nuclear weapon of mass destruction would be properly deemed a war crime and a crime against humanity.

This acquaintance of years past comes to mind today because some people want to exempt themselves from governmental mandates that would involve them, they believe, as accomplices in evil acts. They do not want to contribute to medical insurance plans that cover contraception, to handle licenses for same-sex marriages, to be required to not discriminate as photographers or pastry chefs on the occasion of such marriages, etc. Some of these objections do not appear to be as serious as complicity in potential war crimes, but the reasoning involved has similarities to abstention from the latter. There are also the cases of depositing money in a financial institution that invests in oil pipelines that are potential threats to the drinking water of Native American nations, working in or managing a company that sells lethal drugs to state governments for use in executions, leasing buildings to entities that offer on-demand abortion or to retailers that promote almost exclusively war toys to children, and patronizing retail chains that engage in unfair labor practices or sell to the general public what are, in effect, guns meant to be converted into machine guns.

All of these, and many more, are cases of *co-operation in evil*. Traditionally, “formal” co-operation in evil and “material” co-operation in evil are treated differently. Formal co-operation is sharing in the perverse frame of mind of someone who is engaging in an evil act. Someone who does not actually rob a bank but willingly and knowingly drives a get-away car for someone who actually does rob it is formally cooperating in evil. Formally co-operating in evil is never morally acceptable, absent duress. The moral status of *material* co-operation in evil, in contrast, depends on circumstances. Baking and selling a wedding cake on the occasion of a marriage to which one has an objection—for example, the marriage of a divorced person—is an instance of material co-operating in the wedding, but it does not appear to be sharing in the perceived evil intent of the wedding, even if the baker does not believe in divorce and remarriage. One does not hear of commercial bakers boycotting marriages of divorced people, but some are demanding the prerogative to boycott same-sex weddings. From a theological perspective, this is quite anomalous since a marriage of divorced people can be construed as an attack on a sacrament while a same-sex marriage cannot.

One of the circumstances that is relevant to the culpability or non-culpability of material co-operation in evil is the proximity or remoteness of the activity of the would-be accomplice to the activity that is objected to. With a remote linkage it is more likely than with a proximate one that the would-be accomplice’s activity could be involved in benign as well as malign actions. A merchant who sells paper to a marriage license office that licenses post-divorce marriages is “cooperating” in too remote a manner to be burdened in conscience about the sale and delivery of the paper, even if the merchant does not approve of divorce and remarriage. The paper could be used for any number of purposes, many of them even commendable. The problem faced by my acquaintance who quit the nuclear weapons industry was that constructing and delivering the weapons could be for no morally defensible purpose, to his way of thinking.

A second circumstance is the likelihood that an objectionable deed would not be committed if the individual did not engage in the material co-operation. The greater the likelihood that one’s not co-operating materially would prevent the action, the greater is the moral imperative not to co-operate. This would come into play where a gun dealer declines to sell a gun to someone manifestly suicidal, angry, aggressive, or “unhinged.” The circumstance appears to be most relevant in proximate as opposed to remote connections between the material co-operating and the objectionable action. One would not withhold a paycheck from a depressed employee on the theory that the pay could conceivably be used to purchase some means of committing suicide, quite apart from the injustice involved in withholding pay from a worker.

Third, more heinous deeds call more urgently for not materially co-operating than do less heinous deeds. There is a considerable difference between working for a manufacturer of nuclear weapons of mass destruction and renting space to a retailer who exaggerates in advertising.

These traditional principles pertaining to co-operation in evil are limited to matters of guilt or innocence on the part of the actual or potential accomplice. They have led to individuals quitting the military in unjustifiable wars, quitting the nuclear weapons industry and declining to retail items as diverse as drugs used in executions, cigarettes, soft-drinks, abortifacients, guns, pornography, and substandard construction material. There is more to consider, however, than not being guilty. People have been known to decline materially co-operating in evil to make a point, even when the not co-operating will not prevent the evil in any direct way, when the connection between one’s co-operation would only remotely connect to the evil in question, or when the evil is not as heinous as, for example, manufacturing and selling nuclear weapons of mass destruction.

Where material co-operation in evil is coerced and formal co-operation is absent, the person co-operating is not morally accountable for the objectionable deed. A bank teller, for example, who hands over money to an armed and threatening robber is not a genuine accomplice in the robbery. A tax-payer who pays taxes that go for the support of an immoral war is not necessarily a willing material co-operator, since non-payment of taxes can occasion prosecution, and moreover non-payment of the taxes will not stop the war—and some of taxes may even be used for benign purposes. A tax resister in such a case is commendably making a point, not simply avoiding co-operating in evil. In Austria, Franz Jägerstätter, for example, went so far as to reduce his income so that less Nazi taxes could be demanded from him during World War II.

**178.**

**Contributing to Peace as a Moral Issue**

Anthony J. Blasi

The narrative in the *New Testament* about Jesus going into the desert for forty days and, at the end, debating with the tempter reveals that even the devil can quote scripture. There are peace passages in the Bible, but there are also war passages. Consequently, as with many moral issues, it is not enough to simply open the Good Book and find answers. Rather it is necessary to look to the Creator God who made all things good and endowed humans with the power to contemplate creation and develop a moral conscience, in the manner of reasoning persons who can strive toward ethical conduct on the basis of observation and logic. This is to say that sometimes scripture provides questions rather than answers and that the prospects of war and peace bring us to one of the times that it is necessary to observe and reason. In fact, the development of nuclear weapons in the hands of a seemingly belligerent dictator in North Korea has led to a serious discussion of a “preventive strike,” which would mean a “preventive war.”

Obviously important values are at stake in the matter of war and peace. One such value, in the forefront so to speak, is life. In the political theatre around the controversy over the legalization of abortion, pro-life intellectuals have tended to absolutize life as a value. Caught in a dilemma between absolutizing life in discussions of abortion (a “conservative” stand) and relativizing life in discussions of the death penalty (another “conservative” stand), the pro-life intellectuals have come around to adopting a “liberal” stand by opposing capital punishment. I personally believe it is a positive development that more intellectuals oppose the death penalty than in the past, but I also believe that absolutizing life as a value was the wrong way to arrive at the conclusion that the death penalty should be abolished.

Life is not an absolute value. One of my elders, for example, told me about her father losing his life in the course of saving his fellow workers in an industrial accident. He deliberately risked and lost his life for the sake of other lives. What about slaves who risked and lost their lives by running away? Was it wrong to make life secondary to freedom? What about a medical situation in which a fortune could be spent on treatments that would only extend a patient’s life by a day or so? What about refusing medical treatment that would simply prolong the dying process? Should heroic efforts always be made in medicine rather than let nature takes its course? I ask this last question as someone who had to make a decision about “pulling the plug” on someone who was unconscious in a hospital.

The reality is that no value is an absolute, and that “higher” values do not always take precedence over “lower” ones when it comes to practical decision-making. Life is a higher value than financial resources, but wasting a fortune for a trivial extension of life would be far from wise. Augustine of Hippo argued that truth as a spiritual value is higher than a material treasure could ever be and that therefore a thief who ties you up, grabs objects of value in your home, and asks you if here was anything else of value must be told the truth about anything of value that had been missed. That is silly! The “height” of a value does not translate into an action priority in every instance. Decisions on war and peace similarly do not follow in a simplistic manner from values. So to say that life is a value obviously at stake in matters of war and peace is something to begin with in a discussion of war and peace, but that is only a beginning.

Peace is more than the absence of war and life more than the absence of death. Peace is a community among nations just as life flourishes in processes of mutual material and cultural involvement. Peace happens when nations engage one another in constructive ways, just as there is a social dimension of life. A nation that remains in a persistent isolation is merely a tribe, just as a human kept from the moment of birth in isolation is only an unrealized potential.

A minimal condition necessary for peace is law. Consider the sad situation in which an industrial society encounters a pre-industrial one, as occurred when settlers in North America of European ancestry encountered native American nations. Leaders negotiated treaties numerous times, but neither the “whites” nor the “Indians” could maintain a permanent commitment to the treaties on the part of the two populations. Law is not merely legislation and treaties but a widespread acceptance of order. Without law in that sense, wars can break out readily. It is fashionable in some circles to vilify government and governmental officials, but people should think twice before fomenting anti-government hostility. People should also think twice before demanding unenforceable laws and laws likely to elicit resentment, for unenforceable and unfair or overly intrusive laws lead to the downfall of lawful order and sometimes to riot and revolution.

The oppressive British colonial governance over the thirteen American colonies led not only to a revolution but hostility on the part of many toward government per se. The longer term result was an inability to resolve problems through negotiation and legislation, thereby causing a civil war conducted with a level of savagery and bloodshed that the world had not seen before and would not see again until World War I. Some would idealize the nonviolent tactic of violating unjust laws and being arrested, tried, and convicted as a form of protest. Granted that the tactic is useful at times, but I would caution against doing that as a first rather than a much later resort, lest government per se and the order of law per se be jeopardized. The order of law is a minimal condition of peace. It is necessary for peace both to refrain from enacting unenforceable, unfair, and intrusive laws that deserve resentment, and to minimize the deliberate flouting of law as a form of protest. At the present time, I believe laws that arbitrarily keep people from living and working where they want, i.e. arbitrary restrictions on migration, are sufficiently unenforceable, unfair, intrusive, and deserving of resentment as to constitute a threat to the order of law in our country.

An additional contribution to peace is international activity. Two nations that have absolutely nothing to do with one another are at “peace” only in the sense of not being at war. This is practically impossible in the contemporary world; only North Korea comes close to being only not at war with much of the world today, and I fear that may end in the future with an outbreak of a war. In contrast, most of the nations of the world engage in trade with one another, exchange students, host one another’s musical performance organizations, and assist one another in times of disaster. The Western European nations ended their history of warfare and established an infrastructure of peace by constituting themselves as a European Union. “Populists” who want to disestablish that infrastructure lack a historical memory.

A third contributor to peace is a national self-understanding. The idea of a “pure race” is a myth. People have been migrating and inter-marrying for millennia. I have been told that 95% or so of the human race is “descended” somehow from King David of ancient Israel. If true, it would also be the case that the troublesome biblical promise of specific Middle Eastern lands to Israel of old was not made specifically to people who today call themselves “Israelis,” since today’s Israelis are descended from non-Israelis as much as from ancient Israelis and today’s non-Israelis are descended as much from Israelis of old as are today’s Israelis. Moreover, many modern nations are blends of multiple immigrant streams. I, for example, have an Italian surname, itself probably adapted from the surname of a migrant German-speaking Swiss clock-maker who settled in Calabria well before there was a nation called “Italy”; but my ancestors include as well seventeenth century Huguenot, Scot-Irish, and English migrants to Virginia, some of whose spouses were probably Native Americans. Experience rather than ancestry, however, is more influential on who a person is. My most influential high school mentor was of Basque ancestry; my two most influential college mentors had Irish and German names, my graduate school mentors included a Brazilian of Sephardic Jewish ancestry, an American of German ancestry, and a Canadian Hungarian. The professional colleague who exerted most influence on me was an African American. My extended American family includes members of Hawaiian and Chinese ancestry as well. And I am not unique in this respect. To predicate politics, business, and culture on a myth of some “pure” nationality that is to be placed “first” is tantamount to depriving America of its history, a theft of a nation!

A national self-understanding is not genealogy per se but a recognition of a nation in interaction with other nations—in the past, present, and future. We could not in the past delete three branches described by Montesquieu from our government, the radio developed by Marconi from our electronics, the marches composed by Sousa from our holidays, or the physics discovered by Madam Curie from our science; and now we cannot delete the contribution of Palestinian, Taiwanese, and Indians from our medicine and IT technology. A realistic rather than mythic self-understanding is foundational to domestic and, ultimately, international peace.

Who knows what the future will feature and from whom civilizational advances will come? When I began my practice teaching in an Austin, Texas, high school in 1968, the co-operating teacher informed me that the students seated in the back of the classroom included some who knew no English, and that he did not want to see, talk to, or hear from the students he put in the back of the room! I could only think of my father, born in New York but taken to Rome as an infant as world War I was breaking out, having returned to New York after the war to begin first grade, never having heart the English language. He would become one of the persons responsible for the development of the early American satellites. Who knows what those youngsters in the back of the classroom in 1968 set about doing in the years following? And the lively little ones in my neighborhood today excitedly calling to one another in Spanish…. We just may need what they will have to offer in future years. Why the mania to deport people? Why denature and circumscribe what our nation is—or any other nation for that matter? Such delimitations are mythic, based on the strange notion of a “pure’ race. It reminds me of the Nazi endeavor to eliminate not only Jewish people along with other pre-determined categories, but to eliminate as well “Jewish” philosophy and music from Germany—no Husserl, no Mendelssohn. I would maintain that it was no coincidence that a World War came out of such “populism.”

A fourth contributor to peace is a concern over consequences. By accident I heard a misguided sermon fragment on the television one Sunday morning. A televangelist was promoting a theology of *conviction*. Conviction, he said, was so strong a belief that something is right that one will stick to it no matter the consequences. He went on to refer to commandments and statutes in the historical books of the Bible. I would maintain that morality is built upon a concern with consequences, and that peace cannot prevail when people and their nations pursue their ideologies, even if they think they find them in the Bible, without regard for the consequences for others. It is not enough to keep one’s own actions in line with a preferred legal code while ignoring the greater commandment of loving one’s neighbor as oneself. That greater commandment—not really a command or statue but rather a statement of the obvious—leads unavoidably to a concern with consequences. This applies to nations, societies, as well as to individuals.

No doubt there are other contributors to the establishment and maintenance of peace, but the point has been made. Without an orderliness based on law, a mutually constructive interaction among nations, national self-understandings based on contextualized national histories rather than myths of pure nationalities, and a concern over consequences, there will be no peace.

**179.**

**Death Penalty: A Consideration**

Anthony J. Blasi

In the two thousand years of Christian controversy over capital punishment, a distinction has often been made between the authority of the state to impose the death penalty and the prudence or lack of prudence in actually resorting to it. In order to argue that the state has the authority to execute wrongdoers, proponents of capital punishment cite the *Letter of Paul to the Romans* 13:1-4:

Let every soul be subject to the authorities in power. For there is no authority except from God, and those that there are have been appointed by God. Consequently one resisting an authority is opposing God’s institution, and those opposing will bring judgment upon themselves. For rulers are not a fear when conduct is good but when it is evil. Now do you wish not to fear the authority? Do what is good and you will have approval from it. For authority is a servant of God for your good. But if you should do evil, be afraid; for it does not wear the short sword for no purpose; it is God’s servant, an avenger for the wrath against the one who does evil.

A cursory reading of the passage suggests that the proponents of capital punishment have a point on scriptural grounds. However, granting that the state has the authority to do something is not to say that it would be right or guiltless in actually doing it. In the very next verse Paul himself distinguishes between the state’s wrath against a wrongdoer and a troubled or untroubled conscience.

5Therefore it is necessary to be subject, not only because of the wrath but also because of conscience.

One should not, of course, simply cite biblical words out of the social and historical context that helped give rise to them. The people in Palestine were soon to rise up in revolt against the Roman Empire; whether to respect Roman law was very much at issue in the world of the first century Jews and Christians. That is why Paul counsels against resisting authority.

The Hebrew scriptural tradition had already begun to question capital punishment well before Paul’s time. The prophet Ezekiel, using death as a reference to eternal or ultimate condemnation, says this:

But if a wicked man turns away from all his sins which he has committed and keeps all my statutes and does what is lawful and right, he shall surely live; he shall not die. None of the transgressions which he has committed shall be remembered against him; for the righteousness which he has done he shall live. Have I any pleasure in the death of the wicked, says the Lord God, and not rather that he should turn from his way and live? (Ezekiel 18:21-23 RSV)

The implication is that doers of evil should be given the opportunity for moral conversions. This stands in contrast to other passages in the Hebrew scriptures that prescribe the death penalty (along with sanctuary cities) for a variety of offenses.

In the pre-Constantinian era, government was pagan. It undertook acts in its moral ignorance that would be sinful if perpetrated by Christians. One might draw a parallel between pre-Constantinian government and our contemporary economic market; both are powerful, likely to create both beneficial and harmful consequences, and lacking in conscience. Once Christians became part of the established powers in the post-Constantinian era, matters became quite different. The imperial government endured, working both good and evil without conscience, but the officials who staffed it were no longer uniformly pagan. The solution of the Christian thinkers was to distinguish between first class Christians—the clergy—and a second class of lay people. Lay people could do what the pagan governors once did, though motivated not by revenge but by a desire to protect society. The clergy were responsible for attempting to convert criminals and represent the mercy of God on their behalf.

But does the state have the right to execute people? It is one thing to recognize that in fact a government exercises the authority to execute, but it remains an open question whether it arrogated such authority to itself without justification. A government is able to grant numerous benefits—freedom, rations, holidays, licenses, office. But no government has given life. Even when Christians do not read *Genesis* as a historical account, they still affirm that life is divinely given. The state cannot by right take away what it has not given, except what it must do under coercion when, for example, its police kill a terrorist or madman who is killing members of the public. What the police may do on such occasions, however, is no more than what anyone can do in a circumstance of genuine self-defense. But when someone has been accused of even the most horrendous crime has been arrested and is under the powers of the state, that person is no longer a threat. To step beyond holding the accused and subsequently the convicted in custody in no manner protects the public. If killing an accused cannot be a right prior to sentencing, it cannot become a right at the time of sentencing on the basis of protecting the public.

Examining the causes for which the death penalty might be imposed can be instructive. First there are crimes against the state. A foreign power or a domestic faction might attack the officials and citizens of the state, and the government is required to meet force with force—assuming, of course, that the state is not at fault and should grant concessions to the foreign power or the domestic faction. This is evidently what Thomas Aquinas had in mind in part of a famous passage in his *Summa Theologiae* (II-II, q 67, a 7), when he cites a judicial decree, “vim vi repellere licet cum moderamine inculpatae tutelagae”—it is licet to repel force with force under the guidance of blameless protection. He cautions, however, that the force employed must not exceed what is necessary to secure the protective effect. (He uses a weak analogy elsewhere to argue for judicial killing.) Similar to the killing of an imminent threat to the public such as the terrorist or madman threat cited above, this would not appear to apply to a prisoner brought before a court where a death penalty could be imposed. This extends to treason; once the accused is under restraint, it is not necessary to kill for purposes of defending the state.

Second, there are crimes against persons. In modern circumstances, the state intervenes rather than stand by while running feuds of blood vengeance occur between families or other groups. The very rationale for the state to provide uninvolved prosecutors, judges, and juries is to avoid the exercise of vengeance. Without such state intervention, repeat offenders would select the most non-vengeful and merciful people to victimize. In principle, a fairly-arrived at verdict should be followed by a sentence that fits the crime. “Fitting” can take into account restitution, deterrence, and rehabilitation. Restitution involves returning something to victims and society. Deterrence occurs when the likelihood of perpetrators being caught and penalized is high. Studies uniformly find that deterrence does not result from death sentences. Rehabilitation, of course, cannot occur after an execution.

Third, there are crimes of heresy. Such are rare today, especially in western societies, where theocracy is not the norm. Historically, however, heresy charges were important in leading authorities to impose the death penalty. Christian theocracy, while real in history, is inherently contradictory because the Christ took on the persona of a condemned person, not a condemner. Christian theology also calls for a conversion of the heart, not an acquiescence to the power of a state (“Therefore it is necessary to be subject, not only because of the wrath but also because of conscience”). The political disestablishment of religion that has come with modernity has given Christian tradition a gift whereby it can return to its original intent.

In the modern framework, the state should not enact laws, the violation of which could lead to capital punishment. There is no longer the burden of constructing prisons without benefit of modern machines for excavation and transportation of material. The ancients were not consistent insofar as they constructed huge tombs, castles, and cathedrals, but burdening society with the construction of sufficiently large and plentiful dungeons for all perpetrators deserving incarceration could be conceived of as grounds for alternative penalties—seizure of property, flogging, enslavement, and (some would argue) death. But modernity has no such excuse; it can handle imprisonment, education, and re-entry programs.

It is worthwhile to consider what the problem is with willful killing in the first place. Unlike other animals, humans are moved by more than instinctual urges; they have informed will. They imagine themselves in the standpoint of others and look back on themselves, and they make comparisons between other humans and themselves. Any annihilation of another human blocks an avenue toward oneself. Self and other are so intertwined that a decimation of the other makes a decimation of the self part of the act. One can be irritated with oneself and with another and not thereby be diminished, but one cannot eliminate without some lessening of worth. The perpetrator of death needs to realize this experientially in a rehabilitative process. This is the way the Creator created our sector of creation.

**180.**

**Dimensions of Social Responsibility**

Anthony J. Blasi

Social responsibility is in the first instance responsive; it is a propensity toward action. As a propensity of that nature, it presupposes a level of confidence in one’s ability to act. It is also social—less a personal virtue and more a motivating grasp onto the realities of life together.

Social responsibility does not resemble elements such as hydrogen and carbon but is more like a construct of differing elements, where there are emergent properties. So the saltiness and relative non-reactiveness of table salt is not found in the two elements from which table salt is made—the two poisons sodium and chlorine. To understand social responsibility, we need to see it as an emergent phenomenon. It is not only emergent in the sense of not being reducible to whatever may help comprise it, but also in the sense of developing over time. One is not born with social responsibility, nor is one simply infused with it at some moment in time.

One element and beginning point for social responsibility is a secure point of departure. This is both individual and communal. An individual who has been treated as someone worthwhile early on in life has an easier time developing and maintaining the confidence needed for a propensity toward action. While such a life course is individual, it is also communal insofar as others are involved in treating the individual as someone who is worthwhile. Social responsibility is also communal; it is emergent in a way that goes beyond interpersonal relations and into the interplay of collectivities of people. It develops more easily where there is a community of empowered sub-communities, where no category of people is left out. That way what emerges is more likely to be responsibility, as opposed to mere resentment.

A second element of social responsibility is altruism. Rather than being a feature that focuses on the self, as in the case of confidence, altruism focuses on the other. Self and other exist at all together, never in isolation from one another, because there is no self but in contrast to what is not the self, and no other but in contrast to what is oneself. The two are in a relation of mutual implication. In order to activate an interest on the part of the self in the other, to have an altruism and not simply an alter, one imagines oneself as if one were in the situation of the other. This can begin with the simple activity of talking to another, for in talking one must ask oneself what the other would understand by a word or sentence that one would say. However, this becomes more developed and interesting when one learns to listen, to imagine what oneself would mean by a word or sentence, or a longer discourse for that matter, if one were in the position of the other talking to oneself. Another important development is the activity of introducing some other to one’s own community, especially inducing one’s community to recognize and value someone.

A third element of social responsibility is curiosity. One does not simply have a memory of experiences. There are animals that have extraordinary memories by human standards, but never develop a curiosity, let alone a propensity to act for others. Rather than a memorized reaction to experience, one reaches out to factual reality. Moreover, the curiosity is predicated not only on what would be of interest to oneself but also on what would be of interest to others. One does not engage in simple exploratory behavior, as an infant crawls into new locations, but comes to import into one’s own imagination the perspectives and interests of a whole society; one imports as much of a civilization as possible into one’s own imagination.

A fourth element of social responsibility is suspicion. Once one has developed a sense of confidence, one may well suffer at the hands or one may witness one or more others suffering at the hands of others. This can lead to displeasure at ignorance, where the suffering of others is ignored, and a similar displeasure at lies that would cover up deeds that made others suffer.

Once some degree of social responsibility is in place, there is the question of assets to be employed in action. Among such assets are wealth, skills, and influence—items that religious organizations often have.

**181.**

**Estate Taxes as a Moral Issue**

Anthony J. Blasi

When I was a child, large inheritances were taxed up to 90%. Extraordinarily wealthy families established charitable foundations to circumvent that tax; the proceeds from the foundation investments went to charitable and scientific works while the families—wealthy enough not to need incomes from 90% of the earlier generation’s holdings—could still control the investments through the foundation boards. Thus people became accustomed to the projects of the Carnegie, Ford, Rockefeller, and other foundations.

In subsequent years, in the eyes of many, selfishness became a virtue—provided that it was practiced on a large scale. So the estate tax, dubbed with the negative sounding name “death tax,” was diminished by stages until it was no longer a real factor. I think this change was a moral error.

There are property rights. It is simply reasonable that people own things rather than depend on potentates for food, shelter, and other life requisites. However, the right to have property is defeated rather than maintained when ownership by some is tantamount to a denial of ownership by the many. Consequently, it has long been recognized that anti-monopoly legislation is reasonable. Similarly, where the support of government through taxation would leave lower-income people in a deprived condition, progressive tax schedules have long been deemed reasonable. [Politicians who want to “simplify” the income tax code by eliminating its progressive nature and resorting to a “flat tax” never seem to address the really complicated portion of the tax code—that dealing with dividend and capital gains income. It is simply not all that complicated to locate one’s “taxable income” total on the graduated rate schedule, but complex dividend and capital gains income usually require professional accountants.]

Property rights pertain to live persons, not to estates. The disposal of estates is subject to just debts being paid and respecting the will of a decedent, as allowed by law. A will represents a velleity, not a right. Thus estate taxes have priority over such velleities.

I would distinguish between keepsakes in estates and assets. One may want to place a monetary ceiling on what can be considered a keepsake, while assets are funds, stocks, bonds, and non-keepsake property. In general, I would argue for a 100% estate tax on assets except for spousal common property and provisions for the maintenance and education of minor dependents. Spousal common property rights would not transfer to a spouse of the spouse by a subsequent marriage; provisions for children would end at the age of majority, allowing for a lump-sum set aside for undergraduate education. One might argue that spousal claims and those of children should be implemented in ways that differ from my proposal in details, but the principal moral argument here is that at some point estate assets should be taxed away. Here are my reasons:

1) Making one’s way in the world builds character; it prevents feelings of entitlement and superiority. Just as it is immoral to spoil a child so thoroughly that the child develops no consideration for others, so is it immoral to allow an inheritance to do the same.

a) This is a matter of the moral character of the heir(s).

b) This is a matter of the effects of the actions of heirs on others in society.

2) Taxes on low income people would drive them into states of deprivation wherein they could not afford necessities to which they have a right. Not having a sufficient tax base to provide reasonably for law enforcement, communication, transportation, health, and especially education affects the low income stratum of society more than others, since the low-income stratum relies on government for these services. Estate taxes, along with progressive income and wealth taxes, are instrumental in supporting vital government services, absent taxes on the poor. The tendency in Texas at the present time is to diminish services, though there are still sales taxes that affect the poor.

3) The political rights of the non-wealthy in a democracy depend on a circulation of elites. Elites form through means other than inherited wealth as well as through inherited wealth itself—e.g., talent, political organization, and celebrity. Elites have access to holders of high government office. It would be utopian to envision a society not having such elites. However, the good of the society depends on a circulation of elites, wherein at any one moment in time a substantial portion of such influential elites have experienced an ordinary person’s life. The political rights of the non-elite entail more than an occasional exercise of the vote; the worldviews of the non-elites need to enter into the operative channels of influence. For example, consider a situation where all the elite spoke one language and had one religion while all the non-elite spoke a different language and had a different religion.

4) An adage that found its way into *Second Thessalonians* holds that one who will not work should not eat. The practical morality of a society is maintained better when work is rewarded and idleness not. It was a departure on the part of early Christianity from the slave society of the Roman Empire for work to be considered honorable. This is a moral stance that has had positive consequences in the history of Western society. The would-be inheritors of wealth should need to work.

Is it unusual to argue for death and taxes?

**182.**

**Free Trade as a Moral Issue**

Anthony J. Blasi

More often than we care to admit, when religious inspiration drives us into everyday realities, we find ourselves in the realm of economics, of buying and selling, of working and consuming, of supply and demand. And in the economic exchange between labor and corporate owners, we rightly tend to sympathize with labor because the laborer is the productive party and therefore worthy of being paid while the large corporations for whom many workers work are not comparably worthy of being paid a profit. That is because profit, especially when based on inherited assets, is derived from others’ work. This does not mean, however, that every economic claim verbalized by people who are workers is objectively right. Here I do not have in mind a claim made in the course of a contract negotiation but one made when the subject of free trade arises. Recently, many religious leaders provided quotations for a media campaign against the Trans-Pacific Partnership proposal that is before Congress, but none of their quotations really get into the economic reasoning for or against the TPP. In entering into such reasoning, and therefore into the attendant moral evaluations, I will be presenting a minority view among progressives. I encourage those who view the matter differently to formulate a comparable, not merely opposed, statement.

Many American workers exhibit an automatic reaction against international trade treaties, a reaction that comes from xenophobia, a palpable fear of the foreign, rather than an insight into their own best economic interests. In our own time this has occurred in the context of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), whereby Canada, Mexico, and the United States agreed not to tax the importation of one another’s products. Recitations of “jobs lost to Mexico” proliferate, though the United States did not have tariffs against Mexican manufactures in the first place; companies had feared locating production facilities in Mexico in previous decades more for reasons of political instability than American tariffs. The negative reaction has occurred again in connection with the Trans-Pacific Partnership trade treaty. One may indeed find a detail not to one’s liking in any complex trade agreement; it is not such that I want to discuss. Rather, I want a serious consideration of free trade, based on the premise that the worker is indeed worthy of being paid for productive work.

Trade is genuinely free when there are no contrivances, whether imposed by governments or devised by monopolies, militating against the buying and selling of the goods that workers create. There may certainly be government-imposed safety requirements, worker protections, and environmental safeguards; these are not artificial contrivances to the buying and selling of goods. In fact, trade agreements sometimes require all the signatory nations to have such reasonable regulations that enable people to work, buy, and sell with confidence. Free trade means that no signatory nation will block the importation of a good from being sold within its borders simply because workers in another signatory nation produced it, or add a tax (“tariff”) simply because workers in another signatory nation worked to produce it. Most often unfree trade is a matter of such taxes.

To appreciate the morally positive character of free trade, it is helpful to understand the morally objectionable nature of tariffs and unfree trade:

1) A tariff is a sales tax, a regressive form of taxation. It is imposed at the wholesale level rather than at the retail level, but it is still a sales tax. Sales taxes take proportionately more of the income and savings of the poor, compared to the rich. Ethicists have long favored progressive income taxes because that kind of tax has those pay more who are better able to pay, who do not need the funds for necessities, and who benefit more from governmental protection of property. Sales taxes such as tariffs hit hardest those less able to pay, those who need the funds for food, shelter, health, clothing and other necessities to which they have a right, and who have less that is protected by government anyway.

2) A tariff causes the prices of a product to rise so that less efficient producers can stay in business. This amounts to an un-level playing field on which ordinary people subsidize inefficiency as consumers even as other people are drawn into stoop labor in economies that fail to diversify and grow. This has occurred most dramatically in agriculture, where tariffs against American mechanized agriculture have kept food prices artificially high so that farms worked by stoop labor in other lands can stay in business. Just as it was wrong for slaves to be required to work at stoop labor in American agriculture in the nineteenth century rather than be allowed to migrate to urban America for better working conditions, so it is also wrong for people outside the U.S. to be kept in a condition of inefficient stoop labor by a system of international taxation artificially making such labor advantageous to corporate farms in the short term. The rural-to-urban migration should be allowed to flow naturally between diversifying nations and within diversifying nations. It is a form of subtle prejudice to maintain that the opportunity to live and work where one chooses pertains to one population but not to another.

3) The rise in consumer prices behind tariff barriers is analogous to the rises in consumer prices that result from monopolistic business practices. The enhanced gross receipts that corporations obtain do not go to their workers but rather add to their profit margins. This is because the high level of automated and computerized production in the advanced economies, which develops whether or not there is free trade, makes the corporations less dependent on labor and makes organized labor less able to exert leverage. The rhetorical critique of NAFTA and similar agreements has ignored the fact that the real problem for the union movement is mechanization and computerization, not workers in other nations. Simply because the gap between rich and poor has increased *after* NAFTA and other free trade agreements does not mean that this happened *because of* those agreements. That gap resulted when and because a large portion of the American workforce was misled into favoring the “Reagan Democrat” program of tax incentives for the corporations, much to workers’ disadvantage. The tax incentives for mechanized and computerized production had the effect of subsidizing manufacturing procedures that put people out of work. It is one thing to replace inefficiency with efficiency, but quite another to give a percentage advantage to mechanization whether or not it would be genuinely more efficient. Then there were also the tax breaks to the kinds of income (dividends, capital gains, inheritances) people who are already wealthy receive but which most other people do not receive.

4) The regressive taxes that tariffs represent and the high consumer prices enabled by tariffs contract the size of the total consumer market. This has the effect of reducing the total amount of the nation’s business, thereby reducing the number of jobs available inside the nation, even in those industries not directly affected by (i.e., “protected” by) the tariffs. The result of this is an economic slow-down accompanied by inflation (something some economists claimed could not occur). This hurts the worker/consumer before it hurts corporations, because corporations continue to collect their profit through scarcity and high prices even as they lay workers off and buy less raw material. It must be remembered that profits come from margins of gross income over expenses, not the simple quantity of products sold. It is only when economic contraction spirals down, as it did in the 1930s after the Hawley-Smoot Tariff (1930), that the corporations suffer too. It is in the long-term interest even of big business to have a vibrant domestic consumer base of well-paid workers, though business-supported political action committees are often too short-sighted to appreciate that fact.

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When NAFTA first came to the attention of Congress, labor economists and pro-labor members of Congress knew enough to support it and endorse the principles of free trade. However, there was a spontaneous reaction from the ranks of labor, not unlike the spontaneous reaction in favor of the populist rhetoric of Ronald Reagan. The labor economists then went silent and pro-labor members of Congress voiced opposition instead of support. Let us not be misdirected by a chorus of the uninformed. The laborer is worthy of being paid, but the laborer is also worthy of being informed.

The enhancement of free trade will require some adjustments. First, education for the “information economy,” or more accurately put, a *learned economy*, needs to be more accessible. The cutbacks in education made by many states in the past decade are not only ill-advised, “penny wise and dollar foolish,” but they are unjust to the ordinary young citizen and are immoral. So is the reduction of education to trivial “learning objectives” that can be “measured” by multiple-choice tests. There is simply no economic advantage, let alone improvement of the quality of life, to less education and education that is superficial. Second, minimum wages should be increased; a healthy consumer market is the best protection for jobs in an economy, and more socially just as well. Third, monopolies need to be broken up; tariffs are not the only way that consumer prices rise without economic demand rising. Fourth, the tax code should not make mechanization more advantageous than any inherent efficiencies on its part would make it. Fifth, profit, capital gains, and inheritance income should be treated no more generously than salaries, wages, tips, and self-employment business income; there should be no different treatment of income that people do *not* work for than there is for income people *do* work for.

*Second Thessalonians* says that a person who does not work should not eat. This was not said of the poor. The poor in antiquity were slaves, and slaves worked. It was said of hangers-on in the courtyards of the rich and powerful. The Christian ethic disapproves not of those under the control of oppressors but of the “wannabes” who help oppression operate. The worker is worthy of being paid. Someone like Paul of Tarsus is worthy of being allowed to make his tents and sell them wherever he could.

**183.**

**Freedom of Movement and U.S. Law**

Anthony J. Blasi

In the course of fourteen decades from 1776, the United States became one of the major powers of the world. It did so in part because it respected the freedom of people to live where they wished. In 1790, Congress required a two-year period of residence before naturalization, but otherwise the founders of the republic made no effort to control who may and who may not enter the nation. It was not until 1875 that it even decided to exclude prostitutes and convicts. In 1882 Chinese were excluded, as were people convicted of political offenses, lunatics, idiots, and people likely to become public charges. In 1903 polygamists and political radicals were added to the list. During World War I, in 1917, the list of those to be excluded specified illiterates, persons of psychopathic inferiority, people entering for immoral purposes, stowaways, and vagrants. In general, apart from the embarrassing race-based exclusion of Chinese, the nation grew and strengthened because of relatively open borders.

It should be noted that peak European immigration into the United States occurred in the 1901-1910 decade, and that the bulk of European immigrants had already arrived prior to the imposition of quantitative limits. The first such limits, with quotas by nationality, were established in 1921; and a Border Patrol was established in 1924. By 1943, the new approach had contributed to a shortage of workers; so Congress set up a program for the importation of agricultural workers from the Americas and repealed the Chinese exclusion. At the end of the Second World War there was a concern that the national quotas system was causing separations of the families of members of the armed forces; new procedures provided for the acceptance of their fiancés, spouses, and children. And because of the disgraceful refusal to admit Jewish people who had been fleeing the Nazi government in Germany, a provision admitting refugees was passed in 1948.

A hysteria over leftists was growing at that time, and in 1950 the exclusion and deportation of subversives was legislated, and “aliens” were required to register their residence addresses annually. The entire immigration code was consolidated in 1952, with no quantitative limit on Western Hemispheric nations. The important 1965 reform eliminated the national origin quota system, but set a quantitative limit of 20,000 per year for migrants from the Eastern Hemisphere. A 1976 law created a similar quantitative limited for the Western Hemisphere. The result of the quantitative limits was a huge bureaucratic task that was out of control. To solve the problem, Congress passed an amnesty for undocumented aliens in 1986 and created sanctions against employers who knowingly employed undocumented workers, in the hope that the Immigration and Naturalization Service could thereby keep up with the work created by the quantitative limits. It couldn’t.

There are some conclusions to be drawn from this historical sketch. First, the founders of the republic believed in the free movement of people. Second, there are different standards for pre-1921 and post-1921 immigrants, with the latter being more stringent (with the exception of the 1881 exclusion of Chinese). Third, the ancestors of the bulk of Americans of European ancestry did not wait at the back of any “line.” And fourth, the establishment of limits on the free movement of people from 1921 onward created a bureaucratic nightmare.

It is a methodological principal of ethics that the relevant facts that would be relevant to a proposed action need to be established before rendering a judgment. There has been a great deal of excitement over immigration into the United States, with claims of unfairness toward descendants of people who “waited in line” and of an imperative to “defend our borders.” That excitement is predicated on unfactual claims.

**184.**

**Half-Staff Flag, Bent Knee**

Anthony J. Blasi

The flag at half-staff: Is it not a symbol of a union hurt but not divided? We lose one of our own but not the oneness of our own. Someone who had become a figure in our collective lives dies, either naturally or at the hand of an assassin. We are united in mourning the loss together. True, the flag flies lower than it usually does, but it is not as if someone lacked the will to have it unfurled for all to see. It is not stopped half way up out of shame or weakness. It is meant to call to mind the breadth of the connection among the living, with the fallen one.

The sound of the break, the imperfection, at the crescendo of *Taps* is not an assault on the marking of an internment but an expression of sadness over who is no longer vibrant and what is no longer pulsing, a sadness on the part of precisely those who are still vibrant and whose blood still pulses. The paradox of death and life takes the form of a note broken but held.

We lower the flag at dawn and allow a bugle to haunt us at dusk when we lose one of us but continue to feel that it is still a we that we still, in fact, are. We affirm, in more than a verbal formula, that we are indeed one nation in God’s regard, indivisible, with liberty for all and with social justice.

The days will come—whether during my own life or not, I do not know—when the flag will be lowered for Jimmy Carter, George H.W. Bush, Bill Clinton, and George W. Bush. It would be outrageous to lower it for Jimmy Carter and Bill Clinton, but not for George H.W. Bush and George W. Bush, as it would be outrageous to lower it for the two President Bush and not for Presidents Carter and Clinton. The We who will mourn is not a partisan issue, albeit comprised of partisan groups and individuals. A great people does not diminish itself when it raises its symbol either at full or half height. So it must be when the time comes, as it surely will, for the flag to be lowered for Barak Obama, and I dare say for Donald Trump. But the point is made by the case of Barak Obama. President Obama, whom some dismissed as a minority and “not really an American,” is ever as much a part of the American story and the American We as any other president.

Those who are choosing to fall to one knee during the national anthem are performing a gesture that parallels flying the flag at half-staff. That was in fact the explicit original intent of the gesture when it was first performed in 2016. It says that those who die because of the malfeasant exercise of the police power are part of the American We ever as much as presidents and Americans killed by attacks from abroad. The victims of the malfeasant exercise of police power are to be mourned. The We is hurt but not dissolved when we acknowledge them, mourn them, and rise again to embrace one another. It is telling that an equivalent to falling to one knee during our anthem has emerged—black, brown, and white players, coaches, and team owners locking arms as the *Star Spangled Banner* leads us all into the experience of its tempo together.

**185.**

**How a Newspaper Edits the Pope’s Message**

Anthony J. Blasi

Last December 27 (2015), the San Antonio *Express-News* published an article on page K3, “Listening to Pope Francis, thinking about mercy.” The news story was purportedly authored by our friends Bob and Jo Anne Comeaux, who had joined a pilgrimage to St. Peter’s Square December 8 for Pope Francis’ Mass of Jubilee of Mercy on the fiftieth anniversary of the conclusion of the Second Vatican Council. Was the *Express-News* really listening to Pope Francis? Let’s see how they edited what Bob and Jo Anne had sent to the paper.

Some of the editing was non-substantive. For example, where Bob and Jo Anne wrote, “On March 13th, the Pope issued a Papal Bull announcing the Year of Mercy,” the paper said the pope announced the Year of Mercy. No problem, that kind of change falls within editors’ prerogatives. As an editor of an academic journal several years back, I made such changes routinely. However, other changes appear to change the kind of message Bob, Jo Anne, and Pope Francis were conveying.

For example, the published article continues the sentence about the Year of Mercy with a quotation from the papal bull or announcement: “Let us open our eyes and see the misery of the world, the wounds of our brothers and sisters who are denied their dignity, and let us recognize that we are compelled to heed their cry for help! …And let us not forget the spiritual works of mercy: to counsel the doubtful, instruct the ignorant, admonish sinners, comfort the afflicted, forgive offenses, bear patiently those who do us ill, and pray for the living and the dead.” The editor had deleted the following sentence: “Let us rediscover these corporal works of mercy: to feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, clothe the naked, welcome the stranger, heal the sick, visit the imprisoned, and bury the dead.” This was at the very time that the Pope had been encouraging parishes in Europe to feed Syrian and other refugees, to give them drink, clothing, and shelter, and to welcome them. I cannot help but see this as a substantive change, not an editorial refinement.

Another example follows the same pattern. The published article reads, “When he travels, the pope is true to his charge to us—visiting prisons, hospitals and soup kitchens where prisoners, patients and the hungry experience mercy.” The paper deleted the next sentence: “Pope Francis called on governments to put the needs and rights of their people first, and he called on Catholics to bend down with love and care to help society’s most needy and defenseless members.” The paper would seem to have it that it is all right for church officials to visit prisons, hospitals and soup kitchens, but not that governments put the needs and rights of people first.

And again, the paper reads, “The Holy Father is serious about this message of mercy; he expects Catholics to ‘bring the Gospel to mercy to each person.’ He didn’t say ‘each Catholic’ or ‘each Christian.’ He said ‘each person.’” The editor deleted this gem: “We must dispel fear, reach out to those with different beliefs or backgrounds, and truly welcome the stranger, mindful that if our faith is in God, the 365 biblical references to ‘Fear Not’ are sufficient.”

Everybody in San Antonio knows that the *Express-News* has a political and philosophical preference. That it would make substantive changes in what writers and a pope cited by writers try to say is a shame. What is instructive is what the substance of those changes themselves convey—it is nice for faith to promote spiritual attitudes, but don’t let those attitudes lead to assisting the poor or welcoming people at the margins of society. And surely, do not let government cease being small, lest it put the needs and rights of people first.

**186.**

**An Interfaith Ethic**

Anthony J. Blasi

At the beginning of the American republic many of the founders prized religion but not denominations. George Washington worshiped regularly but famously refrained from taking communion in his local church. John Adams rejected the doctrines of New England Calvinism but considered the Sermon on the Mount a perfect code coming from more than a mortal human. Thomas Jefferson believed in a provident Deity and in life after death, but was suspicious of clergy in general though having particular clergy friends and an admiration for Catholic education. James Madison held that religion was of continuing importance; he favored a freedom of religion that was not a mere toleration but expressed appreciation for that which inspired the Jewish patriot Haym Salomon and the Catholic patriot Charles Carroll of Carrolton. Benjamin Franklin believed in a universal Creator and reasoned that while earth had its own author of reason, i.e. a lesser deity compared to the universal Creator, other worlds orbiting other stars also have their own divine authors of other systems of reason. All these people had a religious inner compass that guided their public lives, whatever faults they may have had in their private lives.

There is a spontaneous religiosity, similar to that of these founders, in many humans, a dimension of the very fact of having been created, or more precisely, a dimension of their *consciousness* of having been created. There are two directions in such a consciousness—one oriented toward origin and the other oriented toward destiny. Without explicitly stating or even accepting an “argument from design,” many people sense that they did not come to be by accident. Nature, though extravagant of plant and animal life and even species of life in the course of evolution, deploys itself in an orderly fashion to suit the needs of humanity. Even the vagaries of our individual lives contribute to coherent biographies. Consequently we think of a Creator, often without being particularly anthropomorphic in depicting that Creator.

Design and origin have implications beyond what is relevant to the past. Origin as a moment of a trajectory implies a future. Design similarly implies a purposeful outcome. Since the entire category of future things does not consist of things in view, such things do not lend themselves to empirical discovery. Nevertheless people sense the probability of life after death, if not a probable perfect replication of present life; they sense the likelihood of such a future life as much as they sense the probability of creation and hence of a Creator.

These musings of what some would call a “soft Deism” bring to the fore the basic suppositions of multiple religions, perhaps of religion as such. Faith traditions and denominations can and do differ in their interim responses to the suspending of humanity between origin and destiny even as they share the sense of each of the two directions of the spontaneous religiosity that underlies them. Thus it is more than a Platonic exercise to speak of an essence of religion that provides particular religions with a general form.

In this essential religiosity that underlies one’s own particular religion, one can understand the faith of people who themselves differ from oneself greatly. Their faiths are analogous to one’s own faith, even as one appreciates the very lives of other people as analogous to one’s own life. To bring oneself to detest, deprecate, or dismiss a faith that is essentially analogous to one’s own would be to diminish one’s own faith.

Nevertheless, one’s consciousness of origin and destiny intrudes upon one’s thoughts as the workings of a particular consciousness, one’s own and not another’s. This is true both at the personal level and at the level of one’s faith community. One does not derive insight, especially moral insight, from an analogous biography but from one’s own. One may benefit from another’s biography only if one shares in it. In such sharing of lives the other’s life becomes at least in part one’s own and is hence no longer an analogy. Consequently appreciation and even conversions do occur, but these are far from expressing an indifferentism.

It is readily understandable why faith traditions differ when they derive from different religious geniuses. But why are there different denominations within any one given faith tradition? A religious genius may remain within a tradition; Martin Luther and Ignatius of Loyola, for example, both remained within the Christian trajectory. Beyond that, however, there are differences in people’s propensity to depict creation and destiny in anthropomorphisms. Some would have the Creator be very much like a human gardener while others would avoid humans projecting their own image and likeness onto the Creator. Some would have destiny be very much a welcome party held by a human-like host while others would see all such depictions as mythic. In today’s world, I see much more tension between the more and the less anthropomorphic denominations than between those deriving from different religious geniuses. The interfaith ethic rests more comfortably with the less than with the more anthropomorphic.

**187.**

**Labor Day in America: Born and Co-opted**

Tom Keene

 A slim, wiry Texan stood on the gallows’ trap door. The hangman’s noose circled his throat as he shouted, “Will I be allowed to speak, O Men of America! Let me speak Sheriff Matson! Let the voice of the people be heard!”

Albert Parsons tried to go on, but the trap door sprung.

On May 4, 1886, the bomb that exploded in Chicago’s Haymarket Square propelled Albert Parsons to the gallows and into history. In character with his Texas heritage, Parsons was a fighter, ready to defend with his fists his rights and dignity.

Born in Alabama, he settled on his older brother’s ranch on the Brazos at age five. At 14, he joined the Confederate Army. Three years later, he was still fighting in one last skirmish of the Civil War.

Parsons came home from the war, an expert horseman and a crack shot. He also came home confused. Like combat veterans, before and since, he questioned the cause for which he had fought.

The Parsons family “Aunt Esther” was now free. Parsons could not look the former slave in the eyes. “She had been my constant companion and had always given me a mother’s love,” he said later.

They had a long talk. Parsons said it changed his life.  He decided to publish a newspaper to fight for the rights of liberated slaves. His fellow veterans told him if he did he would not live two weeks.

Parsons published *The Spectator* at Waco until he ran out of money. He met a beautiful Mexican-Indian woman named Lucy Eldine Gonzales. They fell in love, married and moved to Chicago. Parsons was 25, just months before the depression of 1873 and 13 years before the fateful Haymarket explosion.

With the closing of Chicago’s banks and factories, the Parsons witnessed worker layoffs, wage cuts, strikes, and evictions. With Chicago’s winters they saw homelessness, hunger and cold.

From sidewalks, Albert and Lucy watched workers demonstrate. At the lake front they listened to labor speeches until police pulled down and clubbed the speakers. Newspapers called the speakers anarchists, socialists and communists. The Parsons wondered what those were and puzzled about free speech in America.

After three years of observing, listening and questioning, Parsons joined the Social Democrat Party, which advocated socialism. Between that act and the gallows lay 10 years of union organizing.

Organized labor’s organized opponents were the Chicago Board of Trade, backed by the corporate might of Pullman, Armour, Swift, Field and McCormick. At issue was labor’s struggle for the eight-hour working day.

May 1, 1886 and the Haymarket bomb that followed, became the fated day for Parsons and the American labor movement. May 1 was the date, set by national labor leaders, for a nation-wide strike by workers to demonstrate for the eight-hour working day.

The times were primed for confrontation. The press had, for years, labeled labor organizers as foreigners and socialists, as many of them were. The labels, however, were designed to induce hate.

In commenting on a meeting of 50 unemployed workers, protesting dole distribution policies, the Nov. 23, 1875 Chicago *Tribune* suggested lynching: “Every lamppost in Chicago will be decorated with a communistic carcass if necessary to prevent wholesale incendiarism or prevent any attempt at it.”

Chicago’s major employers had long since secured the police department as a private force in their service. Most police officials and many patrolmen drew extra pay from the corporations.

In the two months before May 1, labor disturbances were common events. Patrol wagons, loaded with armed police, clattered over Chicago’s cobbled streets.

On May 1, across the United States, 340,000 workers paraded and 190,000 struck for the eight-hour day. In Chicago, 80,000 struck and paraded down to the lake front to hear speeches in English, German, Bohemian and Polish.

Adjacent to the parade route, companies of armed police gathered in case of trouble. Police and Pinkerton sharpshooters stationed themselves on rooftops.

No trouble occurred as tens of thousands of workers, their spouses and children paraded happily, exuberantly and peacefully. But trouble was to come.

On May 3, police shot down striking workers at the McCormack Harvester Works. Parsons’ partner, August Speis, who witnessed the shooting, called for a rally to protest police brutality. It was set for the next day at Haymarket Square.

If trouble would come, it would surely come then.

A cold wet wind cut into the square. The crowd of 3,000 dwindled to 200. Among those leaving was Chicago Mayor Carter Harrison. He walked to the nearby police station and told Capt. John Bonfield the meeting was peaceful and to dismiss mobilized patrolmen.

Bonfield, known to labor as “Black Jack” and “Clubber,” was fiercely anti-labor. After the mayor left, Bonfield marched his troop of 180 men into the rally. He ordered the small crowd to disperse.

Parsons, now finished speaking, had joined his family and some friends in a corner saloon. Someone shouted, “Look! The police!” Before Parsons could rejoin the rally, a powerful bomb exploded among police ranks. Stunned police fired revolvers at random, hitting some of their own. Armed workers returned fire.

When the smoke cleared, 60 policemen were injured, seven lay dead or dying. Four workers were dead.

Parsons figured the bomb was thrown by an agent provocateur hired by employers. Anticipating a police roundup and framing of labor leaders, he went into hiding.

Public opinion blazed against labor. The sentiment, “Hang them first, try them later,” circulated through Chicago. The nation’s newspapers declared it made no difference whether Parsons or his partners threw the bomb. They should be hanged for their political views.

Chicago’s prosecuting attorney told police, “Make the raids first and look up the law afterwards.” Police rounded up hundreds of labor activists. Workers who knew nothing of anarchism or socialism found themselves tortured by police or bribed to testify for the state.

Within days, Parsons and seven others were indicted for conspiracy to murder. On the trial’s first day, Parsons came out of hiding. Walking into the courtroom he said to the surprised judge, “I have come to stand trial, your Honor, with my innocent comrades.”

Parsons knew he faced a packed jury, perjured testimony and a hanging judge. He told a friend, “I know what I have done. They will kill me. But I couldn’t bear to be at liberty, knowing that my comrades were to suffer for a crime for which they were as innocent as I.”

The case became a trial of ideas instead of acts and persons. Political platforms, resolutions and statements were entered into evidence not to prove the defendants conspired to kill, but that they intended to radically to change the institutions and government of the United States.

Years later, after the hanging deaths of Parsons and three other defendants, Illinois Governor John Altgelt reviewed the trial. At the cost of his political career, he decided the judge prejudiced, the jury rigged and the evidence fabricated.

Novelist William Dean Howells wrote, “The historical perspective is that this free republic has killed four men for their opinions. All is over now, except the judgment that begins at once for every unjust and evil deed and goes on forever.”

Now, one hundred and forty-one years later, Howells’ reference to a judgment on America is reflected in the fact that, except for the United States and Canada, most nations celebrate May 1 as Labor Day. Continuing the struggle for the eight-hour day, the American Federation of Labor set May 1, 1890, as a day of demonstrations. International socialists, meeting in Paris, called for worldwide demonstrations that day in solidarity with American labor. Thus, May 1, as international Labor Day was born in America out of the struggle for the eight-hour day.

In America, May 1 became Loyalty Day, “a day to re-affirm loyalty to the United States.” This was initiated in 1947 by the Veterans of Foreign Wars with support from civic organizations, churches and the armed forces. It was intended as a “direct positive weapon” against communism, especially the American Communist Party, which passed out literature at May Day rallies in the United States.

In 1950, May 1 became Law Day, “to point up the contrast between freedom under law in the United States and governmental tyranny under communism.”

After the Haymarket bomb, the socialist traditions of the American Labor movement burned out under decades-long attack by corporate and government forces. From 1886, with 700,000 in the Knights of Labor alone, total membership in all unions fell to 440,000 by 1897.

One socialist tradition remains. Peter J. McGuire, a founder of the AFL and the man credited by historians for suggesting, in 1882, the first Monday in September as Labor Day, was also a founder of the Socialist Labor Party. Parsons, who had greater hopes for socialism and the “voice of the people,” would be disappointed.

**188.**

**Meditation on Empathy and Conflict**

Anthony J. Blasi

We reasonably consider empathy a good and conflict an evil, but conflict does not develop in the absence of empathy. Consequently empathy is not always an indicator of a salutary circumstance. People who have no empathy for one another do not go to war against one another; they are hardly aware of one another. If they are greatly distant from one another and consequently cannot begin to understand one another they have no rationale for endangering themselves by engaging in war against one another.

The focus here is not on the continuation of hostilities, which is a dynamic that has a force of its own and is unlikely to be stopped by empathy. Rather the focus is the decision to begin hostilities, the going to war. When it comes to making such a decision, it is not a question of mercenaries who simply hire on as warriors, nor of professional military personnel, who have taken on the morally questionable obligation of following orders or “just doing a job” when hostilities break out. Rather it is the leaders and publics who hire the mercenaries or commit the professional militaries to engage in conflict with an “enemy.” These—leaders and publics—not mercenaries and military professionals, have enough understanding of some other to perceive the other as an “enemy.” There is sufficient interpenetration of consciousness on the part of the self-group (a “we”) and some other group (a “they”) to provoke anger and hostility. Where such is lacking, there is neither empathy nor conflict.

Conflict should not be confounded with competition. Conflict is a form of interchange that goes well beyond competition. Competition occurs within the limits of rules and custom. Athletes who compete with one another have more in common with one another than they do with their fans. Similarly business entrepreneurs who compete in a market have much in common with one another and may even be members of the same trade organization; they have much less in common with their employees and customers. Well beyond any goals of a competition, combatants in conflict seek to disable or terminate one another.

Where there is too much empathy for conflict to occur, the Golden Rule comes to be as much a description as a mandate. Disabling or terminating the other would be to almost blank out one’s self, since one would be treating the other as one treats oneself. Where there is that high a degree of empathy, each perceives interests that are held in common. Competition could occur under such a circumstance since competitors have much in common. As noted, one thinks of the fellowship of competing athletes and entrepreneurs.

However, where there is only a moderate level of empathy, conflict could occur. The parties know enough to be angry at one another. The other is known to want what is one’s own or “ours,” and I or we similarly want what is the other’s. Lest too much commonality occur, the parties de-humanize one another. It is only then that genocide and euthanasia could occur. One can more readily empathize at so limited a level with a dog than with another who is known to be fully human. For that reason de-humanizing racist discourse occurs in conflict-related propaganda.

There are two alternative conditions in the situation of moderate empathy. First there can be unshared means and shared goals. Rich and poor, for example, may coexist in the competitive market; they do not have the same access to means of obtaining their objectives, but they may well have the same objectives. Second, there can be unshared goals but shared means. One thinks of uncivil politics and war.

One way to prevent conflict is to promote competition. Competition involves people in a common set of rules and customs. It is important, however, that the competitors share the same goals and equivalent means for obtaining those goals. One kind of justice has such a sharing of goals and equivalent means as its theme. A second stratagem for preventing conflict is to promote appreciation. A problem to be overcome is the limitedness of people’s perspectives. It is in this light that interfaith events take on significance. Similarly, rational debate, as a form of competition, promotes a sharing in rationales so that people have more in common than would be the case in too limited a degree of empathy.

It has often been noted that peace is not the mere absence of war. Where there is a maximization of empathy, peace is not in danger. However, where there is a mere modicum of empathy, the danger of conflict is present and peace-making stratagems are needed.

**189.**

**A Mexico/United States Travel, Work, and Residence Treaty**

Anthony J. Blasi

San Fernando Cathedral in San Antonio is the oldest Catholic cathedral in the United States, but it was not the first. This is explained by the fact that when it opened in 1750 there was no United States of America or Mexico. San Fernando was the architectural center of the religion of people who were neither Americans nor Mexicans, and not even completely “indigenous people.” Today it is the architectural center of a religion of all these. The United States and Mexico fought their ways to independence because their respective colonial powers denied them the basic right to engage in free economic action and to maintain functioning local governments responsible to their respective citizens.

Today an impediment to free economic activity remains in both countries, and it weighs particularly heavily in South Texas. People are not free to travel where family ties and work opportunities would lead them, without encountering prohibitive bureaucratic artifices from the modern nation-state. This kind of impediment is far greater a burden than that, for example, of the mercantile Stamp Act of old. Under present U.S. law, Alexander Hamilton, whose portrait is displayed on our ten dollar bill, would have been guilty of over-staying a student visa when he dropped out of what is now Columbia University and joined a military that was led by George Washington.

Strangely, it is the very people who advocate “smaller government” and a “less intrusive state” who want to “seal the border” and “build a wall” to keep people from traveling across the Mexico/United States boundary for purposes of obtaining gainful employment and establishing residence. One can only suspect that racial and ethnic prejudice lies behind the contemporary hysteria over “illegals.”

The right to economic initiative requires that people be allowed to go where work is to be found and leave from where it is not to be found. In such cases the right to economic initiative entails a consequent prerogative to migrate. The right to economic initiative is recognized in general moral teaching and Catholic social teaching in particular. In the Catholic tradition it appears in the 1994 *Catechism of the Catholic Church*:

Everyone has the *right of economic initiative*; everyone should make legitimate use of his talents to contribute to the abundance that will benefit all and to harvest the just fruits of his labor. (#2429)

Or, as Saint and Pope John XXIII put it:

…precautionary activities of public authorities in the economic field, although widespread and penetrating, should be such that they not only avoid restricting the freedom of private citizens, but also increase it, so long as the basic rights of each individual person are preserved inviolate. Included among these is the right and duty of each individual normally to provide the necessities of life for himself and his dependents. This implies that whatever be the economic system, it allow and facilitate for every individual the opportunity to engage in productive activity. (*Mater et Magistra* #55)

It is a simple and straightforward application of this principle to allow for and facilitate economic migration throughout an economic area in which currencies are exchangeable, trade occurs, and a border is shared.

Consequently I propose a Mexico/United States treaty that would accord the citizens of the two nations a greater freedom and ability to engage in economic activity and that would remove artificial impediments to travel, work, and residence in the two nations.

1) Natural born citizens of either nation would have the prerogative to travel, work, and reside in either nation.

2) Dual citizenship would be granted upon request after a five-year residency in the nation in which one was not born.

3) A holder of dual citizenship would vote in the nation of residence.

4) Comparable compulsory education laws and child-labor laws would be set forth.

5) Children in both nations would be educated in the languages, histories, literatures, art, and music of both nations.

6) Comparable minimum wage levels would be set forth every fifth year.

7) Comparable passport systems would be established so that visas would not be required for travel in either nation; there would be no other proof of native-born citizenship required for any purpose other than a designation in a passport.

8) Agricultural worker protections that are part of existing guest-worker programs would continue.

**190.**

**Muhammad Ali—War Resister**

Anthony J. Blasi

A month ago many mourned the death of the famous boxer Muhammad Ali. He famously converted to Islam, which he knew as represented by the teachings of the Nation of Islam, before that religious organization was deemed to be an orthodox Sunni group. Ali was already a media figure, but his refusal on religious grounds to be drafted into the military made him a larger than life war resister. As a consequence of his refusal, his world championship boxing title was taken away from him, and he was banned from boxing. His stand cost him the opportunity to earn millions more dollars during his prime years.

Mr. Ali—born Cassius Clay—had barely made it through high school. The education that was afforded him never succeeded in instilling in him the rudiments of arithmetic. When he was first required to report for military service—prior to his conversion—he was deemed unfit for military service because of his intellectual deficiency, as evidenced by his inability to perform the math problems that were included in his intelligence test. But as the Vietnam War dragged on and the military became more desperate for personnel, the intellectual standards for service were lowered. So Mohammad Ali was retroactively drafted two years after he had been turned down. The sports writers immediately hounded him for a reaction; indeed he learned he was drafted from them. He *sensed* that something was wrong with what had happened to him, but he had not yet reasoned out *why* it was wrong.

In due time, as he articulated his appeal of the decision to draft him, he had worked out his reasons. His mentors in the Nation of Islam told him he should not take the side of non-Muslims in war. He had already felt that the Viet Cong—the official enemy in South Vietnam—was not *his* enemy, and he reasoned that many white Americans hated him because of his race and religion but that no one in Vietnam seemed to hate him, least of all for such prejudicial reasons.

A hearing officer, who was a retired Kentucky judge, recommended that the appeal be accepted, but the Justice Department rejected Ali’s appeal anyway. Mr. Ali had changed his legal residence to Houston; so it was there that a federal district court rejected his next appeal. He appeared for induction into the military but would not step forward when his name was called. For that, he was indicted, tried, and convicted in Houston in 1967, and the court of appeals upheld the conviction the following year. When the case went to the Supreme Court, Justice Thurgood Marshall recused himself because he had been Solicitor General of the United States when the case began. The remaining eight justices voted initially 5 to 3 to uphold the conviction, but when Justice John Marshall Harlan began writing the majority opinion he became convinced that the conviction should be overturned, creating a 4-4 tie. To resolve the dilemma, the eight justices unanimously accepted a proposal from Justice Potter Stewart that the conviction be overturned on the technicality that the Kentucky draft board did not inform Ali of the reason why it rejected his original appeal. Neither Justice Harlan nor Justice Stewart was considered a particularly “liberal” justice.

Muhammad Ali’s refusal to go to war is instructive. As with many people who confront moral decisions, he did not have a pre-packaged rationale, some doctrine learned in advance and to which to conform when the occasion for it arose. Rather, he began with an inchoate sensation. He did not yet have reasons not to go to war, but he sensed that there was also an absence of reasons to go to war. When exposed to his religious leaders’ doctrines, he worked out how to apply them, but those teachings strike one as much a matter of technicalities as was the ultimate rationale of the Supreme Court. What he sensed was more fundamental: There is a presumption against going to war until reasons to the contrary are shown to be compelling, and respect is to be accorded individual conscience.

**191.**

**Observations on Science and Religion**

Anthony J. Blasi

There were cases of scientific discovery in pre-modern times, but we know of free-standing science as a peculiarly modern phenomenon. It is separate from religion, with its own personnel, scientists who are not clergy. It is also separate from philosophy, with scientists who are not philosophers. This modern science carries with it its own legitimacy and history of technological applications that few today would give up.

In the Christian historical trajectory, the separation of science from religion was promoted, perhaps unwittingly, by Thomas Aquinas. He never completed the diverging tendencies, but religion became a quest for the will of God in a creation that reflected the mind of the creator. He saw the kind of endeavor that we today call *scientific* as a resource for right thinking. Because the mind of the Creator was partially visible in creation, exploring creation would be in itself a worthwhile endeavor. One could abstract general principles of thought from observing nature, and apply the resultant logic to moral issues; he called that procedure *natural law*.

It is ironic that in later centuries some of the handbooks in moral theology turned *natural* law into natural *law* and sought to impose, by means of ecclesiastical discipline, conclusions to which some thinkers arrived. Consequently in the contraception controversy of the last century a prominent moral theologian was fired from the Catholic University of America, and when he was hired by a state-supported university in Alabama he was pursued even there, eventually ending up at a university that is affiliated with a different Christian church that has its own network of bishops.

A conflict between a moral stance based on the Bible and one based on natural law could not occur, to Aquinas’s way of thinking. Revelation properly understood and right reason would not come into conflict because both reflect the same divine Mind. Aquinas took a line from Augustine—theology is faith seeking understanding—to make a similar statement about faith. Revelation properly understood and right scientific observation would not be in conflict because both proceed from the same Creator. Not to use the best possible understanding of the Bible and the best possible understanding of science would be to offer to God, as one’s faith, something less than one’s best.

Observation and reason became thematic in the Renaissance. The precise observation of the paths of the planets across the sky by Tycho Brahe made Kepler’s astronomy possible. Galileo Galilei developed the experimental method and the use of math in physics—systematic observation and precise reasoning. This affected even art, with the naturalistic masterpieces of Leonardo da Vinci. While such a thinker as Isaac Newton saw nature as a creation of a Creator, it would become increasingly common to see nature simply as nature.

The Enlightenment of the eighteenth century marked the separation of scholarship from religion and universities from church. Global exploration and conquest made western culture and its religion seem provincial. Anticlericalism on the part of many scholars was notable. This reflected an institutional separation more than an intellectual development. There was nothing in science that was actually contrary to religion, nor anything in religion that was actually contrary to science. Even the successors to the ecclesiastics who put Galileo under house arrest do not deny the existence of a planetary system around the sun and the orbit of the earth within that system.

It was in the nineteenth century that science would be defined in opposition to religion and vice-versa by the French thinker Auguste Comte (1798-1857). Comte proposed that human culture developed in stages, with a primitive theological stage coming first, a purely rationalist stage lacking observation coming second, and a scientific (his term was *positive*) stage, based on observation and ratiocination, coming third. He said scientific endeavors that were based on phenomena that were more simply observed would evolve first, and ones based on phenomena that were observed with greater difficulty would evolve later. In elaborating his scheme, he identified the separate sciences that we know of today and described the peculiar logics proper to each field. Across the English Channel John Stuart Mill codified “the” scientific method that Comte had described. Once Comte took the politically embarrassing step of endorsing the imperial claims of Louis Napoleon, Mill continued to promote “positivist” science further without mentioning Comte.

After the era of imperialism, positivist science appears to be as provincial as western religion appeared to the positivists. The science of the nineteenth century was used to justify racism, and much effort was expended even on ascertaining which of the European sub-races was superior to the others. Before our Civil War, defenders of slavery used such positivist science to justify the “peculiar institution” of the American South, citing Comte by name. Comte also thought that women were too emotive to match up to the demands of science, and in practice the scientists of his day agreed insofar as they excluded women from the universities. In the United Kingdom, Herbert Spencer (1820-1903) justified British supremacy and Britain’s class system in terms of the survival of the fittest (articulating his theory before Darwin published *The Origin of Species* in 1859). The eugenics movement thrived around 1900, and in the U.S.A. the Pioneer Fund was established to promote the breeding of superior humans; to this day it funds racist pseudo-science. Fortunately, the larger scientific world has left this kind of positivist scientism behind.

The study of the origins of the biblical books began on a scientific basis in the service of religion by Ferdinand Christian Baur (1792-1860). After Baur, many scripture scholars have used “higher criticism” to reconstruct the process that produced the present biblical books, without abandoning Judaism or Christianity. However, others proceeded with a project of using science to debunk scripture. Baur’s student, David Friedrich Strauss (1808-1874), reconstructed Jesus’ biography as pure myth. Ernest Renan (1823-1892) wrote a life of Jesus that read like a romantic novel with a thoroughly human Jesus seen through scientific lenses. Renan was a pantheist in his thinking, but otherwise accepted the main lines of Comte’s positivism.

The positivist attack on Christianity and religion in general elicited a religious rejection of science in response. Pope Pius IX condemned pantheism and absolute rationalism in his *Syllabus of Errors* (1864). Pius X erroneously cracked down on the Catholic biblical scholar, M.-J. LaGrange (1855-1938), who used higher critical techniques, even though Leo XIII had earlier approved of their use. LaGrange’s commentaries still read well today. Fundamentalism emerged in North American Protestantism. In Texas, a former state school board member is still trying to fit the time-frame of the evolution and extinction of dinosaurs into the biblical narrative by proposing that Noah saved dinosaur eggs for transport in his ark.

If science remains true to its own framework of observation and ratiocination, it can neither deny nor affirm the existence of God, even a Creator God. And if religion remains true to the principle of faith, it will not seek miraculous exceptions to the order of creation that a Creator God would establish. Moreover, biblical scholars have long ago developed a non-fundamentalist hermeneutic for their work, one similar, ironically, to that used prior to the nineteenth century.

One may make a number of observations in light of this brief history. First, we do not know whether nature conforms to our neat rational categories as the positivists thought it did. Chaos theory, for example, emphasizes the imprecision inherent in natural events—they do not obey the laws of nature! Moreover, our observations of natural events are not really *of the events* but of our mental conclusions based on stimulations in our five senses; the blueness of the sky, for example, is not really in the sky but in our minds. Similarly, we cannot force the divine into our convenient thought categories; doing so is traditionally termed *idolatry*. Neither in the case of science nor in the case of religion are our analogous approaches useless, however. It is reasonable to accord our impressions a pragmatic and tentative kind of truth.

Second, miracles are exercises of our wonderment, not necessarily gaps in nature, though we cannot deny the possibility of gaps in nature. There are real miracles everywhere *in* nature.

Third, fundamentalism, whether under the form of biblical inerrancy or Vatican inerrancy, reflects a penchant for certitude rather than faith, and sets up weak forms of pseudo-faith that readily collapse, opening the way to atheism. Consequently, those who value religion should not train the young and impressionable in fundamentalism.

Fourth, Evolution as a biological finding holds no terrors for those who know enough to read the Bible intelligently. The alliance between the exaggerated evolutionism of the nineteenth century and social conservativism, wherein unjust inequalities were justified as the fittest surviving and the unfit not surviving, was appropriately rejected by nineteenth and twentieth century Christianity, but at the risk of being labeled “soft hearted” and “soft headed.” Science has since rejected the reduction of the human to the anatomical. Today, however, genetics threatens to become a new exaggerated Explanation of all explanations.

Fifth, one can hold, as do I, abortion to be an offense against humanity, though it is not indictable as a crime. However, arguing as a matter of faith that life begins at conception may lead to another Galileo Affair. Vatican documents wisely avoid saying in Latin that life is present at the point of conception, but tendentious translations of the phrase *a momento conceptionis* (by virtue of conception) to read “from the moment of conception,” which would be in Latin *de puncto conceptionis*, threaten to lead the faithful into a dogmatic stand that does not hold up under scrutiny. Just consider two rare but real phenomena: twinning from one conception and the merging into one body from separate conceptions.

Sixth, the social sciences are increasingly running away from positivism. Even those who work completely with quantitative modeling concede that humanistic exploratory inquiry is valid and, prior to quantitative survey research, necessary. These sciences have also long ago abandoned both Comte’s positivism and biological reductionism.

Seventh, my field, the sociology of religion, is pursued by believers and non-believers alike, with no debates over theism. Our methodological agnosticism, which neither presupposes nor denies the divine, works both ways, requiring neither theism nor atheism.

Eighth, both religious ethics and the human welfare concerns that lie behind social science are based on the same natural law; they are natural allies in practice, though having no common ground in their theoretical presuppositions.

**192.**

**Pacifism and Just War**

Anthony J. Blasi

There is a long-standing debate among members of Pax Christi over the relative merits of a pacifist stance and the just war approach. I have deliberately written in the title *Pacifism and Just War* rather than *versus* because such simple propositions as “War is never justified” and “War can be justified under given conditions” cannot completely encompass moral truths. I think it is healthy for different but partial grasps of moral truth to coexist, “healthy” in the sense that our association, our churches, and the human world in general are all better off when the different aspects of moral truth are expressed in juxtaposition rather than in opposition.

The dialectic of pacifism and just war theory does not exhaust the theological discussion of war and peace. There is a broader theology of peace-making. At an interpersonal level, one can use the Sermon on the Mount as an inspiration: “You are forcing me to go one mile out of my way—no problem, let me go two or three!” Or one can learn from Thoreau: “Arrest me. Jail me. And do the same with the hundreds of other people with me. Maybe we can even get thousands to be arrested for doing something morally right and proper.” Following in time after peace-*making*, the theory of self-defense articulated by Saint Thomas Aquinas speaks in terms of interpersonal interaction. At a societal level, peace tends to be promoted and violence prevented by justice. If justice characterized relations between nations and among the citizens of every given nation, demagogues who would promote war or mob violence would find few followers. Such considerations are all part of the theology of peace.

The pacifist and just war approaches become particularly salient in the situation in which a government is deciding whether to go to war. In the American system, a president may ask for a declaration of war or similar resolution from Congress, and the members of Congress must decide whether to vote for or against it. Presidents themselves must decide whether to make such requests. If such a request is approved, members of Congress must face the issue again in votes funding military action. Citizens too cast votes to re-elect or turn out the politicians who make such decisions. Similarly, military personnel must decide whether they can morally participate in a war once it has begun. This is the circumstance in which both pacifist stands and just war stands are invoked.

Clearly, war involves intrinsic evils—destroying property and killing people. However, failure to go to war can also occasion evils; President Bill Clinton admitted, for example, that it was a mistake not to intervene militarily in the Ruanda genocide. The study of ethics recognizes moral *dilemmas* and analyzes them by distinguishing among several factors. The first factor is the character of the contemplated activity itself, taken in isolation. Telling lies, aborting a developed unborn, and administering a fatal dose of an anesthetic are disvalues in themselves. The natures of the acts come directly from their immediate result, the “object of action.” Telling lies deceives people. Aborting and administering fatal doses kill. Second, there is the purpose of performing a contemplated action. If a thief, ready to leave with your valuables, asks whether there is anything else to be taken, the purpose of answering in the negative, even though there is something else of value still hidden, is to preserve one’s savings. Such an end is itself good. Or in the case of an abortion, there may be the intended good of saving the life of the mother. Or in the case of administering a fatal dose of anesthetic, the intent may be to prevent excruciating pain. These are the “end of the act.” Third, there are circumstances; the thief’s victim may need valuables to pay a just debt, or the continuation of a pregnancy may be fatal to the mother on whom other family members depend, or the patient will die reasonably soon irrespective of whether or not the anesthetic is administered.

In an ideal world, the intrinsic moral character of a contemplated activity, the purpose for which it would be performed, and the implications of the circumstances are in agreement; the moral quality of the object, end, and circumstances of an action coincide. If they are all disvalues, one knows not to perform the action. If they are all values, one knows that the action is not morally problematic and may even be required. Dilemmas occur when the quality of each of these three factors does not coincide with the others, when one or more is a value and one or more a disvalue.

In the field of ethics, there are two general *systems* for dealing with such moral dilemmas. One, simply termed here “System A,” maintains that one should not do evil to attain good. Citing good intentions and circumstances is simply having a price at which one engages in evil. “The road to hell is paved with good intentions.” One would not lie to a thief; one would not resort to abortion to save the life of the bearing mother; one would insist upon heroic efforts to keep a patient alive, even if it simply means dying with extended agony rather than dying more quickly without agony. Pacifism is the application of System A to a dilemma of going to war. It would simply apply the command “Thou shalt not kill” or apply the understanding, derivable from everyday life through the process of natural law, that others are entitled to continue with their lives when possible.

System B, as I call it here, uses the model of double effect, based on the analysis of self-defense by Thomas Aquinas. In self-defense, the activity involves violence, possibly up to the point of killing, as is also the case with war. The immediate object of the act is thus a disvalue. The intent is saving one’s own life, a value. The presupposed circumstance is that no alternative course of action is available, that refraining from defending oneself would be tantamount to suicide. One may indeed decline to defend oneself in order to make a statement, but one is more likely to have responsibilities that other people depend on, and while the assailant may also have such responsibilities one has one’s own responsibilities as a duty and does not have the assailant’s responsibilities as a duty. Aquinas argued that an act of defending oneself (in his day, using a sword against an assailant who also has a sword) has a two-fold effect: the object of the action (wounding or killing the assailant) and the end of the act (preserving one’s own life). He argued that when there is a dilemma the moral character of the act is taken from the end, not the object; from the preservation of one’s own life, not from the wound or death of the assailant. Generalized, this has been called the doctrine of double effect.

As suggested at the outset, the two systems do not necessarily oppose one another. They can be applied to the decision of a chief of state requesting a declaration of war, a legislator voting for war and war appropriations, a member of the military in time of war, or a taxpayer in time of war. Theoretically, a pacifist may allow for others to go to war while seeing it as a personal calling to protest the very existence of war. More often, however, pacifists have called for all people to oppose war. This is the stand of the historic peace churches. Dorothy Day even resisted participating in bombing raid drills, not because the object of the act of entering a sheltered space would be a disvalue but because doing so was coherent with the general preparation for war.

One who supports the just war theory and even supports a given war may admire the pacifists for having the courage of their convictions. They may acknowledge that the world is certainly better for having the peace churches and prophets such as Dorothy Day speaking out against all aspects of war. A professor who prompted me to participate in an anti-war demonstration for the first time, the late William H. (“Fabius”) Dunn, was someone whose pacifism I never shared, but whom I admired greatly, and I am confident that the world is better off because of his witness than it would have been without. I must admit that non-pacifists are not always appreciative of pacifists. The late Gordon Zahn, whose acquaintance I made in later years, was all but run out of a small Catholic college in Minnesota because as a pacifist he had been opposed to the American involvement in World War II.

The just war theory does not favor war in general; it is not a stratagem for justifying war. Indeed, many of the arguments employed against all wars borrow from its logic, and it would accept war only as a last resort. In the same way that the double-effect approach rejects killing and wounding apart from such a circumstance as an assailant coming after oneself, just war theory begins with a presumption against war. It includes a number of conditions that must be met before that presumption is outweighed. The first required condition is a “just cause,” especially defense. The purpose or end of going to war could be to end slavery or defend a militarily weak nation that has been invaded by a militarily stronger one. Thus it could be argued that the Union military action in the American Civil War or the British and French responses to Germany’s invasion of Poland in 1939 were just causes for going to war. It is not justifiable, on the other hand, to seek a pretext for war that would make a war seem just; one thinks of the search for “weapons of mass destruction” prior to the Second Gulf War when the real intent—whether it was control over petroleum deposits, strategic position, or the like—was masked by a sequence of ever-changing “missions” for that war.

The second required condition under just war theory is that a contemplated belligerent action be one of a legitimate government. The approach does not condone vigilantism. An example where this principle applies is the Second Gulf War; the invasion force led by the United States was a “coalition of the willing” rather than a state that had been attacked by the Saddam regime of Iraq; a coalition of the willing is not such an entity as the United Nations, having some international legitimacy.

A third required condition under just war theory is that there be some likelihood of success. For example, it is immoral to send combatants to death in a hopeless cause. One must also consider a case similar to that of the First Gulf War, where there was no intention of obtaining a complete success because of an absence of an “exit strategy”; I actually predicted at the time that there would be a second Gulf War because no permanent resolution to the territorial ambitions of the Saddam regime had been achieved. Little did I know that the regime’s ambitions would be more a pretext than real occasion of the Second Gulf War.

A fourth required condition is termed *proportionality*. This is sometimes understood in terms of the harm done being less than would be done if the belligerent action were not undertaken. I see this as a misinterpretation, one that requires an impossible calculus of harms. I, for one, do not know how to quantify harms done. Rather, the term *proportionality* seems to be derived from the Latin *proportionatus*, which translates the Greek *analogos*—*ana* meaning “up to” and *logos* meaning “rationale.” Force or violence must somehow attain or help to attain the end sought. Just war theory does not condone inflicting harm beyond or other than what is necessary to achieve the just end.

Just war theorizing does not end with the decision whether or not to go to war; there is also the matter of how to conduct warfare. It calls for respecting the difference between combatants and non-combatants; the latter are not to be targeted directly. This is one rationale for military forces having uniforms. Similarly the use of poison gas threatens non-combatants because it cannot be controlled. Notably, the Italian military, which had been successful against Austria in World War I before the Battle of Caporetto, refused to use poison gas and didn’t even have gas masks capable of protecting soldiers from the kinds of gas the Germans brought to Caporetto, causing a great reversal on the southern front. A second reversal, in which the Italians successfully defended a two-pronged invasion at the end of the war, occurred when they adopted the “storm trooper” tactic (their term was *arditi*) of the Germans but substituted flame throwers for poison gas (as well as adopting improved gas masks). Flame throwers hardly seem more civil than poison gas, but they can target combatants and avoid non-combatants.

Second, “collateral” death, injury, and damage must be limited as much as possible. A valid point, which could lead just war theory to converge with the pacifist stance, is that modern warfare is mass warfare. The Jesuit John Cuthbert Ford argued against the saturation bombing of German cities in World War II on the grounds that the practice did not limit collateral death, injury, and damage. (I think of my friend Horst Helle, a pacifist, who has an early memory of himself and his mother as sole survivors in an air raid shelter that was hit directly by an allied bomb during World War II.) One must also note the potential of nuclear weapons for destroying whole cities; particularly where the enemy government is a dictatorship that is not under the control of a popular electorate, such a weapon would punish the innocent for the misdeeds of a tyrant ruling over them.

Third, just theory requires in the conduct of war the humane treatment of prisoners of war. This principle was violated in the War Against Terror when the George W. Bush administration resorted to torture—specifically “water-boarding.” It was also violated in the Second Gulf War when American prison officials subjected prisoners to humiliation and psychological distress. In the American Civil War, Confederate officials agreed to exchange white Union prisoners of war, but summarily executed African American Union prisoners; this led Union General U.S. Grant to cease permitting prisoner exchanges altogether—a terrible decision to have to make.

Neither pacifism nor just war theory amounts to a full theology of non-violence. As noted at the outset, there is a whole theology of prevention, including a theology of justice, that comes logically before wars occur. Once an arguably “correct” war is proposed, legislators and citizens need a system for addressing a moral dilemma. What system one chooses is a matter of conscience and of what identity one understands oneself to have in society. As a proponent of the just war approach, I have never resented pacifists who marched with me in demonstrations against wars that did not seem just. And I only admire pacifists who speak out against war when one that seems just is in progress (which I take to be the case in the Afghanistan action), for the exercise of conscience itself, the very act of taking life seriously in the face of war rhetoric, is a value, a candle in dark times.

**193.**

**The Poem that is St. Francis of Assisi**

Tom Keene

In his time, St. Francis was a sign of contradiction to those times. By the time he was an adult, the dark spirit of the Crusades had for a hundred years swept over Christian Europe. That spirit beckoned Christians of the West to kill Muslims in the land where Jesus walked and to kill Jews along the way and even to kill Christians of the East. In doing this they proudly wore the banner of Jesus and sincerely believed they were honoring God.

During the Fifth Crusade, Francis did two things we know of to contradict that Crusading spirit. He asked for and got from the pope the granting of an indulgence to Christians who made pilgrimage to the church at Assisi. Thus, was offered to pilgrims a peaceful alternative to that indulgence offered for pilgrimage on Crusade. Francis also made a peaceful pilgrimage on the Fifth Crusade where, passing through battlefield lines, he met with Egypt’s Sultan al-Kamil. They engaged in an inter-faith conversation and parted in mutual appreciation.

This time of Francis was also a time of growing wealth for society and the church.  The Dark Ages of Europe were over. A relative stability had begun which enabled crafts and trade to prosper as it did for the family of Francis. More and more, people discovered that it felt good to be rich, and to have things. But Francis, with his religious brothers and sisters, discovered a contradiction: that poverty, which Francis called Lady Poverty, when freely chosen was a way to the treasures of God.

          How do we explain this extraordinary man and the revolution of consciousness he brought to his world? There are of course many ways, and one way is to see Francis as a poet who made of his life one great poem and offered it to God.

          To grasp this metaphor, we could try to understand the difference between a mere chore and the doing of a work of art, or a work of love. A chore is a task required by practical necessity, such as taking out the garbage, sweeping the floor, or something assigned from a job description. Such tasks are good and holy in the divine economy when done in the spirit of love. But there is a different kind of doing that flows from our very being when we do out of the quest for truth, love, goodness or beauty. There are no wages for such doing. Rather the doing is such that it redounds back to our being to enhance who and what we are. That is wage enough. Such was the life Francis lived.

That life was a response to God’s call. We name that call a vocation.

*Vocations*

Are they calls

to take up careers, to market ourselves,

or to give flesh to the body becoming,

to begin a telling of who we are?

What Who, what What calls?

Some angel we wrestled in soul’s

dark midnight before first light ever?

Some sketch we roughed out on a scroll?

What signs can tell if we heard the call?

What scars bear witness that we answered?

It is clear that the mystery of the Incarnation rested at the center of Francis’ grasp of the gospel. We see this in the story of Francis creating the first nativity scene. He brought together an ox, a donkey, a baby and several villagers to portray Joseph, Mary, shepherds and magi. He did this to bring home to people who could not read how the gospels of Matthew and Luke imaged the meanings of God’s eternal Word becoming here and now flesh.

          That is what poets do. They attend to mystery and celebrate it in the sacramental media of words, sounds, symbols and images. Poets expect to be surprised by mystery. James Joyce called these surprises epiphanies. Epiphanies are the stuff of poetry and the grail of poets. Christian custom gives the name epiphany to the showing forth of Jesus to the magi and the gentile world.

*Epiphany*

Did the Eternal Word that Judean night

leap down from bright celestial height

collapsing the light years of distance

into the micro-measurement of presence?

Or like the shapeless zygote, from which we rose,

did Eternal Form reach itself into toes

and teeth, eyes, ears, fingerprints and face

to drink the mother-milk of our race?

Or like the reverse of the universe's primordial explosion

into space and time, did Utter Extension find implosion

in an infant dropped from ancestor's dreams of destiny

down a maiden's womb into Bethlehem's epiphany?

What Patient Force sought to sire in minds the inconceivable,

that our hungry, death-strewn world now holds the unreachable,

that the fat and strong are cast down from their heights

and the frail and afraid rise in the Wind like kites?

For Francis, all creation and everything created was an epiphany, a revelation of God. In his *Canticle of the Sun*, originally called *Canticle of the Creatures*, Francis praises God for sun, moon, stars, sister water, brother fire and sister earth, “brother wind and air, fair and stormy, all weather moods.” Francis saw how in the good news of the Incarnation our blessings include the very stuff of our being.

*What We Are*

Material is what we are,

immersed in a universe of stuff,

each thing in its own moment

momentous:

          each flower,

          every single baby

          in its cry for milk,

          every tart taste,

          each twinge of yearning,

          every jazz beat,

          each aesthetic hunger.

Yet each bit of stuff tells

of some Awe-breathing All,

some Ultimate Other:

          the More that is beyond,

          the More that we become

          when we know

we be.

          For all the joy Francis took in the wonders of creation he did not shrink from the facts of suffering and death in this world. His embrace of all realities, whether painful or joyful, showed an intuitive grasp of the creative tension of opposites coming together to transcend their particular limitations. The famous *Prayer of St. Francis* has the lover comforting the hater, the joyful embracing the sad, the hopeful assuring the despairing. This creative tension can even be found in kites and poems.

*Kites and Poems*

Bound to strings and words

they strain for range.

Cut the string,

the kite falls.

Stop the words,

the poem remains a ghost.

But bound:

see them soar, dip, dive,

wind scooping,

testing the tension,

riding it.

Be wind to my kite

that we be poem:

bound, yet free.

In his understanding of the gospel stories, Francis was clear about this creative tension of opposites. He could see that Jesus’ “good news for the poor” was not likely to be heard as good news by the rich. Luke tells of Jesus coming out of the desert to the synagogue of Nazareth and announcing the time has come “to proclaim liberty to the captives” and “to set the downtrodden free.” His listeners were hardly delighted at this “good news.” They promptly tried to throw him off a cliff. Luke also has Mary nnouncing that God is pulling down princes from their thrones and exalting the lowly, filling the hungry with good things and sending the rich away empty. Proclaiming such a “good news” is not for sissies afraid to take up their cross and follow Jesus to Calvary.

As a poet, and as one who understood persecution, Francis must have appreciated the irony of being marginalized by his own community over issues about living the gospel in real life. Had Francis read Plato’s Republic he might have mused over Plato wishing to banish poets from the state.

*Beware the Poets*

Prophetic spies,

they see light before dawn,

dark before dusk.

Treacherous informers,

they tell tales of phoenix rising,

of wisdom claimed at beauty beheld.

Rude arousers,

they blast scales from our eyes,

coax us from our infirmary beds,

erase denials of who we are,

affirm the truths we fear.

Hence,

let us banish them from our republic

lest the blind see,

the deaf hear,

the cripples dance,

the possessed be freed,

and the services of our dominion

be required no longer.

          In his meditations and communing with nature Francis understood, as few have before or since, the intimate connection between life and death. While most of us live out our lives in fear and denial of death, Francis embraced it, calling it Sister Death. To Francis, death may have seemed utterly natural. Possibly he meditated on how animals and vegetables give their lives for us. If the creatures we kill by eating them so that we may live could speak to us, what might they say?

*Volunteer Tomato*

I create my color

as a call to consume.

So when you see me,

see me with hungry eyes.

When you tear my skin between your teeth

and hear my lush guts burst,

feel with me my spurt-squirt gush,

enter my joy in surrender.

When you taste my rendering

of sun, earth, air and rain,

make in your mouth a mix

of your juices and mine.

As I become you

celebrate my becoming

that when we die

we can show

death how to do it.

          In the poem that is the life of St. Francis of Assisi, there runs the theme and reality of life/death/resurrection. Every Easter/Springtime, Christians celebrate how after the dead of winter, life leaps forth renewed. For many of us that celebration is a one-day event. For Francis, it was a lifetime affair.

*Hymeneal for Francis*

In his unsealed celibacy

Francis did not deny love

or try to force it,

but let it squeeze itself

into all forms and beyond.

The wet dream from which he woke,

in red stained stigma,

promised the consummation

his hungry heart had courted.

A lover’s juice

oozed from his hands,

feet and side,

a once invisible ink

legible at last.

Ultimately,

Sister Death and Francis,

engaged since birth,

completed kept love.

Like a Jewish groom’s

crystal crushing step,

they shattered the glass

that separates.

At Death’s patient urging

Francis broke her bloody seal,

bled himself into the waiting womb

of the Universe.

**194.**

**Post Conciliar Clericalism**

Anthony J. Blasi

*Clericalism*

In a general way, any look at Catholicism is a look at clericalism. The Catholic churches, and the Roman communion in particular, are distinct from the rest of Christianity precisely by virtue of their having priests ordered under episcopal hierarchies. The more or less monarchical bishops govern the lower clergy, and the latter in some sense govern a laity. One can speak of rich Catholic lay traditions of piety, theology, social ethics, art, etc., but these have existed in association with and sometimes even in a counterpoint dialectic against the Catholic clerical apparatus. The intent in this essay is not to treat clericalism as a mere aspect to be taken into account when looking at something else Catholic, but to thematize it in the context of the post-conciliar Church. The thesis is that the Vatican II itself, and the dynamics that came after it, were to a great extent about clericalism and certain tensions endemic to clericalism. In order to pursue such an analysis, clericalism *per se* is conceptualized in terms of a clergy/lay dialectic, since in essence there can be no clergy without a laity and vice-versa.

Clericalism implies more than the fact of there being religious specialists in a society, and even more than the approval of the fact of religion being pursued in a specialized and professional manner. In clericalism the fact of religious specialists is coupled to that of religious non-specialists, and the approval of the specialized and professional pursuit of religion is joined to a paradoxical disapproval of a specialist’s self-sufficiency and of non-specialists encroaching upon the set-aside terrain of the clergy. Indeed, the clergy is set apart to perform some religious service for the laity which the laity is not to do for itself; the clergy is a contrived separate ministerial stratum. Hence in the clericalist ethic it is deemed right and proper for a laity to be religious partly in a second-hand fashion, settling for a vicarious religiosity provided by a clergy. This not only affects the character of “lay religion” but also that of the clerics’ religion, for the latter becomes at least in part a commodity to be made available to a clientele of religious consumers. Clericalism should be seen, then, as a social and cultural system wherein there is not only a bifurcation of the religious community into two status groups but also a commodification of a religious tradition.

We need to understand clericalism as a subculture, a world view of a kind of institution-wide religious movement, rather than as an individual attitude or occupational discipline that happens to turn up frequently among clerics. Watch repair specialists, writers, and musical soloists all need to observe a disciplined solitude in order to pursue their work, for example, but they do so as individuals maintaining a personal line of activity rather than a collective effort. Clergy too may develop individual attitudes and disciplines in the course of their work, but these are not the same thing as a collective subculture of clericalism. In fact, clericalism may be shared well beyond the ranks of the clergy. Clericalism is a shared subculture, shared not only in the sense of being common to a number of people but also shared in the sense of being imparted, supported, expected, and valued. It is not conditioned but promoted, not a reinforced habit but an encouraged ethic, not deemed only useful but right. Approaching it differently, we can observe that there are ministers in non-clericalist denominations who themselves are not committed to clericalism. As with any subculture, clericalism needs the support of a social stratum which has a collective identity in order to survive as a coherent system of meanings, values, and norms, but it need not be unique to that stratum. Such symbolic vehicles as may be peculiar to the stratum, such as ritual performances, a distinctive life style, and status-specific cognitive systems, may help maintain the collective identity of the central clerical stratum, and thereby help maintain clericalism, but clericalism itself may be embodied in beliefs and practices other than such stratum-specific supports. It helps for purposes of clarity, to distinguish between a clericalist ethic and its expression on the one hand, and supportive practices of the clergy on the other.

Supportive symbol systems, such as ritual, distinctive life styles, and socially unique cognitive systems, can help separate a clergy from a laity, but these can lead to a clericalist *esprit de corps* only indirectly. They set the clergy off but do not unite it into a social unit. The latter is accomplished by creating formal organizations with budgets, boards, internal newsletters, leadership structures, and—most importantly—politics. If the clerical formal organization can make life difficult in some way for the individual clergy, the latter become united into differing political factions in order to protect themselves. This development of a political forum not only involves coalition formation, wherein informal friendship networks and alliances of the like-minded emerge, but also increased interactions with enemies, neutrals, and potentially threatening personages for the purpose of collecting politically important information. The inadvertent product of all this is a separate clerical world of intrigue, surveillance, and opinion formation. This separate world is the social basis of the clericalist *esprit de corps*. It follows that clericalism allows for competition and even conflict within such a world, but not disinterest. One who is apathetic about the special politics of the religious institution is simply, from the clericalist perspective, a bad corporate citizen. The pressures for boundary maintenance are exerted as much about being a partisan as about what kind of partisan to be.

*Vatican II and Clericalism*

In one sense the Second Vatican Council was a result of a history of clericalism. The Council of Trent, repeating and going beyond a pattern set by a previous church reform from the age of the Cluniac movement, had set about correcting abuses by strengthening the clerical aspect of the Church. Bishops were to be churchmen named by churchmen; specifically, they were to be named by the pope and his advisors, not by secular rulers. These same bishops were to be present in their dioceses, preaching, making visitations, providing for the training of the clergy, and guarding orthodoxy. The clergy were to be trained in isolation from the wider world, have a distinctive life style instilled into them, and be thoroughly educated in a specialized system of knowledge. This Tridentine program not only succeeded in reforming the Catholic Church, it also determined the form of irreligion. If the Church government became more genuinely religious, the rival secular governments became more genuinely secular. The First Vatican Council reaffirmed the cultural reality of Catholicism in response, by identifying a deposit of doctrine from the past as the Church’s, and it reaffirmed the structural reality of the Church by identifying the papacy as the most doctrinally important entity. The result was an even more self-contained province of meaning than that produced by Trent, for now not only was the Church distinct from the rest of the world by virtue of its religiosity but also by virtue of its doctrinal stands. As masters of doctrinal analysis, the new clergy were specialists in a way they had not been before, and in the manner of all specialists they would be discontent with the world when they found it interfering with their prerogatives.

Think for a moment of the Church between the two Vatican Councils. Matters of doctrine and scripture were decided by curial committees, not by the local bishops and clergy. Matters of cult were decided in Rome—even down to such matters as the shape of chasubles. The clerical orders, along with the non-clerical religious orders, were subject to cardinals who were themselves usually not members of religious orders. While Pope Leo XIII encouraged remarkable revivals of neo-Thomism and social ethics, both of which embodied a local clericalist professionalism throughout the world, limits were simultaneously being set by an increasingly centralized Roman administration. There were new developments in philosophy with which the neo-Thomists found much in common, but the Roman authorities discouraged any explorations into that potential common ground. And Social Catholicism had first to work its way around formulae left over from the vagaries of Italian politics and the matter of the Papal States, and then contend with corporatist notions that were akin to certain management stratagems in the Turin auto plants. The Vatican, at first reluctant to get into the matter of therapeutic abortion, began to overrule the moral theologians in the latter’s specialized area—double effect in medical ethics. And if that was not bad enough, local customs were to be repealed in 1917 by a codified canon law, unless one could keep a practice out of Rome’s sight for forty years. The clerical role had been subjected to modern management, and the clerics would not like it. When the Second Vatican Council was called, there was no shortage of periti whose clerical expertise had been trampled upon, whose careers had been marked by organizational oppression, and whose reputations had been maligned. Now the clergy were to have their say.

It is instructive to examine the Second Vatican Council’s decrees from this perspective. The *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* focuses on the very intersection of the clerical and lay roles; it says that the Church desires the faithful to be led to full, conscious, and active participation in the liturgy (#14). This can be seen as a non-clericalist initiative in the sense that lay participation is to be encouraged and subjectively enriched, but in fact clericalism does not entail lay non-participation and non-consciousness but rather a lay involvement in the religiosity given-off by the clergy. For a religiosity to be second hand and commodity-like is not for it to approximate a sleep walk but for it to be a different but related religiosity vis-à-vis that of the cleric. The initiative and spontaneity is that of the priest; the lay person has a share in what the priest generates. Thus, the faithful are to *be led* to their richer participation. Moreover, the Council goes on in the same section to point out that the clergy itself needed to be trained in liturgy so that *they* could realize the enriched participation among the faithful. The process of liturgical change set in motion by the Council heightened the role of the clergy.

This liturgical re-emphasis of clericalism may have raised the quality of lay religiosity at the expense of both lay trust and clerical interiority. The lay Catholic adherent who was not particularly “religiously musical” before the Council trusted the priest to do the praying; the model was quasi-monastic in that clergy and lay inhabited different worlds and that the function of prayer was carried out, as it were, in a cloister. But after the Council the lay person had to share not in the automatic favor of God brought down by means of prayer, but participate in the prayer effort itself. With sociological hindsight, we might anticipate that a decline in Sunday mass attendance would accompany such an increase in full, conscious, and active participation, since many people preferred to be inactive but “saved.” But what about the priest? After the Council his religiosity could not be simply one appropriate for a spiritually inclined individual who had dedicated his life to God, but one that could be put across successfully to a gathering of people with many other matters on their minds. The requisite second hand nature of the lay religiosity under the clericalist regime may impoverish the religiosity of the cleric, and replace what was lost with the imperative to encourage a sense of community within the parish (*Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* #42).

The Council not only promoted clericalism in a practical way in its liturgical reforms, but it made clericalism a matter of theology as well. According to the *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church*, the clergy not only specialized in the same religion as the laity had but had a religious status that was *essentially* different from that of the laity:

Though they differ essentially and not only in degree, the common priesthood of the faithful and the ministerial or hierarchical priesthood are none the less ordered one to another; each in its own proper way shares in the one priesthood of Christ. (#10)

Notice the ordering of the two to one another, which is the dialectical center of clericalism. The Council gives theological legitimacy to this by linking both to the priesthood of Christ. The maintenance of two subcultural systems to support the two theological legitimations requires two social systems. The lay system is evidently to take the form of a parish life, in turn encouraged by the sense of community developed at mass. The clerical system requires a comparable social system, and hence it should be no surprise that the Council was concerned with the quality of collective life available to the clergy. No doubt pre-Council clericalist wisdom had informed the drafting of the relevant conciliar passages. The theological statement on the Church describes a unique college of priests united with a bishop, a brotherhood whose members provide mutual help spontaneously (*Dogmatic Constitution on the Church* #10; see also *Decree on the Ministry and Life of Priests* #8). And the Council left no doubt that this brotherhood was ordered to this clericalist function as a collectivity, not as a set of parallel individuals:

As the laity through the divine choice have Christ as their brother, who, though Lord of all, came not to be served but to serve (cf. Mt. 20:28), they also have as brothers those in the sacred ministry who by teaching, by sanctifying and by ruling with the authority of Christ so nourish the family of God that the new commandment of love may be fulfilled by all. (*Dogmatic Constitution on the Church* #32).

Moreover, the Council decreed that this clericalist stance was not only to be supported by the priestly brotherhood but that it was to take up their whole life (*Decree on the Ministry and Life of Priests* #2).

Clericalism not only makes demands on the clergy, entailing difficult dilemmas for its own religiosity, but presents the laity too with a peculiar dilemma. When the clergy are convinced of their particular kind of religion—and they must be to succeed in attracting its clientele—they face the inevitable dilemma of leading that clientele to a mere complement religiosity. The client is not to do precisely the same thing as the cleric. Moreover, the client is not encouraged to go to a competing kind of religion—say, in another denomination. Thus, the client is to acquiesce to the cleric’s activity, but not acquiesce to the competitor’s activity. This amounts to a selective acquiescence, selectivity itself, of course, entailing a degree of inacquiescent conduct. If the client were purchasing something having a utilitarian value—e.g., a computer or an automobile—it would be possible to select a product in terms of what it can do, without knowing how it does it. However, when selecting a religion one cannot make a simple utilitarian decision, and one would need to know as much or more about religion as the cleric to make the selection of one kind of religion over another. If one were actually to learn that much about religion, one would be too involved to make a good client; one would not be sufficiently passive. This dilemma predisposes clericalism to associate ethnic, class life style, community, and other emblem-generating identities with a particular religious identity as short-cuts to achieving a religious identity at all. This enables the client to acquiesce to a particular religion on some non-religious ground, and thereby be committed to a particular religion without being too religious. In the era of the pluralist nation state, where the dynamics of national life overcome more local commitments, the opportunity for religion itself to become the basis for a religious choice becomes more critical than such secondary correlates of denominational identities. The result is that religious adherence becomes volatile, and much more dependent on religiosity itself.

*Post-Conciliar Developments*

It would be impossible to survey all of the important post-conciliar developments and to interpret them within the framework of clericalism. However, a few illustrative cases may offer some insight. The liturgy changed from Latin to the vernacular languages and church altars faced the people; these were changes that emphasized worship being a joint effort of priest and people. In this joint effort, preaching was to be a central part of the worship activity. What would appear to make the priests’ role more important and meaningful, however, turned out to be the occasion of lower recruitment rates into the ministry, higher rates of resignation from the clerical ranks, and a general clergy identity crisis. The changes drew the clergy into a contested accommodation, accommodation being both a rapprochement with a surrounding culture and a maintenance of a separateness from it. Accommodation entails an internal conflict, in this case an internal institutional conflict. Clergy “progressives” wanted to begin facing the people, communicating with them, and preaching effectively to them because they wanted to put across a religiosity. The opponents to change were willing to engage in conflict for a significant reason; while they may have liked Latin, preferred facing walls and candle stocks during mass, and disliked serious preaching, the real objection was that the religiosity which could be put across to people was not the religiosity that had personally moved them in their own lives. The commodification of religion left them dissatisfied, and they treasured precisely those traditional practices that made commodification difficult. The dilemma was that what made commodification difficult also made successful ministry difficult for them.

A review of the questionnaire studies of Catholic priests that sociologists undertook in the years immediately following the Council showed that age was an important factor consistently. The older age cohorts tended to hold “pre-Vatican” views and the younger ones more “progressive” views. To ascertain what the pre- and post-Council stances were with respect to the ministerial role, we can turn to a few of those studies. One 1971 study of an international mission society of priests, the Society of the Divine Word, whose members were largely born in Europe, asked the respondents to select one of the following three statements as the one with which they could most agree:

A Christian minister is someone…

a. ordained to the priesthood and thereby authorized to celebrate the Eucharist and administer the sacraments of Penance and Anointing the Sick.

b. whose fundamental obligation is to spread Christ’s Gospel and to administer the sacraments to the faithful.

c. who has been authorized by the people of God to build Christian community, lead it in its celebration of God’s grace and inspire it to share actively in the world’s concerns.

Those over age 65 tended to choose “a” and “b”; those aged 56-65 tended to choose “b,” as did those aged 46-55. The 36-45 age group favored “b” and “c,” while the 25-35 age group chose “c,” as did those under age 25. Similar results turned up in a study of English Roman Catholic priests and another study of delegates to the Jesuit General Congregation (international council). Responses “a” and “b,” favored by the older clergy, speak of activity on the part of the minister while “c,” favored by the younger clergy, speaks about effects in the lives of non-ministers brought about in part by the ministers. The post-conciliar stance seems to make the identity of the minister depend on the responsiveness of the faithful, thereby putting the clergy identities at risk.

Another 1971 study, in the U.S.A., sponsored by the National Federation of Priests’ Councils (fearful that the American bishops would not release the findings of the study the bishops had commissioned), the priests were asked to rate various activities as more or less valuable ideally, and then actually. Offering daily mass ranked high, both ideally and actually. “Working to make the liturgy more meaningful to people” ranked very high ideally but middling in actuality. Being a man of prayer ranked high ideally but not so high actually. We might see this in the context of what was said above—that priests could have treasured the kind of religiosity that was not readily commodified. The mass occasioned something meaningful, but putting it over to people was not so satisfying and perhaps seemed somehow to undercut being a man of prayer.

Studies of American seminarians in 1966 and 1984 both show the respondents identifying “holiness” as the most important quality of priests. There can, of course, be many kinds of holiness. If the seminarians meant “piety,” and if the clergy role tended to undermine that, one could anticipate mass resignations from the priesthood represented by these cohorts of seminarians. However, when asked what the most important qualities of seminarians were, piety was ranked first by only 14% in 1966 and 18% in 1984; responsibility was ranked first by 34% and 33%, and apostolic zeal by 38% and 25%. Maybe the seminarians understood the religious leadership (clericalist) function as constitutive of holiness, or maybe they idealized the priest role and responded to their own role in more practical terms; it is hard to say. In any event, the respondents seemed to be preparing to be the responsible parties in religious matters, thereby placing a great weight upon themselves.

As the clergy role became more clericalist, the brotherhood of priests seems to have become more a system of social support for the occupation of putting religion over to the laity, and less a system of social support for the traditional and hierarchically endorsed attributes of the priesthood. In another part of the American study commissioned by the National Federation of Priests’ Councils, the respondents were asked whether they would be supported by their fellow clergy and by their church authorities if they were to take certain actions. The researchers focused on the percentage differences between those reporting the two kinds of support. For example, if respondents were to involve themselves personally in civil rights activities, only 15% reported a difference between the reactions of their bishops and their clerical colleagues. Also low was a 21% difference for resigning from the active ministry. Some other possible actions of parish clergy would elicit a more widely anticipated disagreement—participating in the anti-war movement (33%) and going out socially with a woman friend (36%). However, dramatically higher differences in anticipated reactions occurred with speaking out against the Church’s position on clerical celibacy (55%) and counselling couples that they may follow their own consciences in the use of contraceptives (59%). To go out with a woman friend and to resign from the ministry was not as controversial in the sense of pitting priest colleagues against bishops, as speaking out against celibacy or counselling couples to follow their own consciences in the use of contraceptives. The priests’ colleagues seemed to the respondents as most distinctively supportive of what they might do in their roles oriented to lay people. In all these cases, bishops were less supportive than other priests.

Post-conciliar clericalism appears to have created a dilemma for the non-parish clergy as well. While pre-conciliar clerical life made being a priest meaningful apart from the function of putting religiosity over to the faithful, post-conciliar clericalism places a normative burden of sorts on the priest to perform a particular pastoral role. The Catholic clergy, especially that part of it in teaching and scholarly pursuits, is segmented into a variety of non-parish roles. While clericalism places strain upon the religious interiority of the parish priest by virtue of placing too much religious value on his work, it may deprive the life of the non-parish priest by placing too little religious value on his work. An extreme case was that of the Jesuit “special students”, who had been selected for graduate study, often in secular universities, in order to create a new kind of scholarly elite. Since the selectees’ special contributions were often specific to secular disciplines, the problem emerged when they began to serve other than specifically church functions. The elite ended up “representing” the Church, in something of a token manner, in the context of an external secular environment rather than directly functioning in the distinctively religious realm.

The paradoxes and dilemmas of clericalism are not limited to the clergy. As the clerical role becomes increasingly identified with a clericalist religiosity, and theologically legitimated for being so, the influence of the clergy outside the distinctly religious setting comes to be deemed less legitimate. Thus, clericalist religiosity seems to be compatible with a secularization process in which religion and other institutions become increasingly differentiated from one another. An earlier embodiment of clericalism, wherein clergy held power in non-religious contexts, would be, of course, incompatible with such a secularization process. Thus, secularization may not entail the fall of religion as much as the clericalization of it. In this context, it is interesting to review a study of Irish university students and worker night school enrollees, conducted in 1967 as the conciliar changes were beginning to have their effect. High percentages agreed with the statement, “There is too much uncritical obedience to the clergy in non-religious affairs.” The percentages suggest that the respondents knew of clergy “meddling” too far afield in the past and a desire that they not do so in the future, and notably the clergy themselves concurred in this (67% of priest students). Such attitudes seem fully compatible with the contemporary form of clericalism.

The heightened clericalist hew of religiosity not only implies a clergy retreat from non-clericalist religiosity and from the non-religious in general, but also a lay involvement in the clericalist religiosity. In receiving even a second-hand religiosity, as it were, the laity comes to share a cognitive horizon with the clergy. That which is relevant to the priest’s religiosity is also relevant to the laity’s religiosity, when that religiosity is shared, albeit through different roles. Numerous church issues—e.g., whether divorce should keep one from the full sacramental life, whether birth control interferes with the matter of matrimony, whether marriage should prevent priests from presiding at mass, whether women should preside at mass—suddenly come to be seen as properly lay issues. In the U.S.A., the 1987 survey of lay Catholics conducted by William V. D’Antonio and colleagues showed a widespread belief that the laity should participate in setting policy on such matters as divorce, birth control, priestly celibacy, and female ordination, as well as on such an issue as the morality of homosexual behavior. Percentages holding such views tend to be higher for the young than for the old, and for the more educated than for the less educated. It should be noted that clericalism cannot be expected to persist without meeting countervailing forces. A notable limit upon it comes from the hierarchy. Even though the bishops have clericalist tendencies themselves, they are selected to be bishops on grounds other than that of being attitudinally typical of the lower clergy. In order to appreciate this, it is useful to contrast two kinds of mobility into elite status—contest mobility and sponsored mobility. In contest mobility, lagging candidates for elite status as well as successful ones are kept in contention until a climax. In an organizational framework, a system of contest mobility makes mobility contingent on demonstrated performance; for example, successful pastors in parishes would be candidates for the episcopacy. In sponsored mobility systems, potential candidates for elite status are noted early in their careers, prior to performance, on the basis of the impression they make at that early time, and then are recruited into the elite in a special track to which potential rivals do not have access. In an organizational framework, a system of sponsored mobility makes entry into the elite contingent upon having an informal bond of friendship or trust with someone about to become a member of the elite himself. For example, a young cleric who had been a trusted assistant to a bishop who himself has a relationship with a particularly powerful Vatican official, may well be sponsored successfully for an important future appointment. In the process, the upwardly mobile cleric may have the hierarchy rather than his lower clergy colleagues as his reference group. A study of the French hierarchy described this as recruitment through co-optation. This is not the place to describe or explain the agendas of the Vatican and the bishops, but the fact that the agendas may not be clericalist ones can set limits on the clericalism of the lower clergy by means of the ecclesiastical controls of the higher clergy over the lower and by means of the application of the same recruitment process to the selection even of the lower clergy. In this context, it may be useful to recall the late John Seidler’s description of the Catholic Church as a “lazy monopoly,” in which the responsible executives fail to respond to criticism but instead allow clerical critics to depart. This failure to respond may persist until the shortage of clergy becomes too great a problem to ignore.

The ability of the hierarchy to set limits on the clericalism of the lower clergy is related to its ability to embody the Catholic tradition in non-ministerial structures. We have seen that clerical orders can no longer do this because the conciliar theology has rendered their non-ministerial specialties religiously meaningless. The clerical orders have adapted by making theological education less intellectual and more ministerial, and by replacing a clerical privatized spirituality with a service-oriented, lay-centered spirituality. The female orders have responded differently to this same dynamic, so that female religious have begun to take on the functions of spiritual direction and liturgical leadership. The imperative to clericalize one’s religious involvement led many of these women to advocate the expansion of female involvement to all ministerial roles except the priesthood, and others to advocate the ordination of women to the priesthood as well.

*Conclusion*

In a 1968/9 essay that was clearly out of step with the times, the late Jesuit Joseph Fichter pointed out the untenable quandary into which the Council’s ethic was placing the priest. He argued that it is “necessary to deny the notions that priests can do only what lay people cannot do, and that priests must do only what bishops do” (Fichter, “The myth of the hyphenated clergy,” in *Organization Man in the Church*, 1974). The Council had theologically legitimated a circumscribed clerical space, outside of which the laity was to take the Church into the modern world, and inside of which the priest was to be a specialist in partaking in his bishop’s fullness of the priesthood. Fichter termed this a “myth,” which stood quite in contrast with the real world of the clergy. He argued that the point should not be identity, a full time description of activity; even the parish priest is not leading cultic activities most of the time. The point should be service. Any valid service done by an ordained person should be deemed, he argued, fully legitimate and doctrinally encouraged. The priest can be one among many servants of the poor, a scholar, a social conscience. Was this, in 1968, already an agenda for Vatican III?

**195.**

**Post-Election Unity?**

Anthony J. Blasi

After a rancorous election season, many religious leaders are calling upon their followers to pray for unity. One must ask, however, for what kind of unity should one pray? I recall a similarly rancorous election in 1968, followed by an inaugural address by an entirely untrustworthy president calling upon people to speak more softly and listen to one another. What he really wanted, it turned out, was for the 40% of the nation that vociferously opposed an unjustified overseas war to become a silent minority so that he could expand that war without objection. We do not have that kind of war at the present time; there are two wars in progress, one in Afghanistan that began as a defensive action and has continued as an effort to support responsible government, and one in a response to a request by the government of Iraq, again to support responsible government (not to be confused with the earlier “Second Gulf War,” which ended when the United States and some allies withdrew in accord with a treaty with the newly established Iraqi government). What we do have is vociferous objection not to an overseas war but to the very campaign and rhetoric of a new president. And it is not a minority that is being asked to be silent but a numerical majority, in the sense that the new president received the most votes in the antiquated Electoral College but not at the polls.

The peaceful transition of power at the national level is undoubtedly a genuine civilizational achievement. We usually feel good about it, even when we wish the transition to a new head of state is not to the person we would prefer. The new voice and face of the nation should be able to expect a respectful recognition on the part of all citizens. Yes, for sure. But something has gone awry this time. Last November, somehow, it did not seem to be a People that had spoken. It is not that a majority did not get its way; that has happened before. That a candidate not earning the most votes was nevertheless still declared the “winner” because of an archaic constitutional quirk is itself undesirable, but there also seemed to be something qualitatively rather than quantitatively wrong.

As the inauguration of a new presidency was taking place, I wanted to put on the mind of a good citizen, but somehow having *that* voice and face emerge through *that* process seemed incompatible with good citizenship. I do not know how many people felt as I did, but I sense there were many, and the post-election polls revealed widespread disapproval of the new regime. “We observe today not a victory of party but a celebration of freedom…,” said John Kennedy in the beginning of his inaugural address. Would that ring true in 2017?

The underlying issue is the formation and maintenance of a “we.” The kind of “we” that emerges in hotly contested political campaigns is the *crowd*. Crowds develop at sport and entertainment spectacles, riots, and mass meetings. There is a momentary fusion into a sweeping state of mind in which people’s senses of individuality and responsibility are set aside. A crowd will turn against anyone who stands in its way, and those who are swept up into a crowd may engage in lines of conduct they could regret later. In a celebrated criminal case arising in the 1992 Los Angeles riot, a teenager who slammed a cinder block over a hapless truck driver’s head was found innocent on the grounds of temporary insanity.

A kind of fusion into a “we” that is as strong but is more long-lasting emerges in families and small friendship groups. People are motivated spontaneously in such groups, out of regard for the other members. That very consciousness of membership implies a sense of oneself being a member too, and hence entails some degree of individuality and responsibility. Any state of mind analogous to “temporary insanity” occurs not when the “we” is strong but rather when the “we” is breaking down and the individual feels a sense of betrayal. It would be as inappropriate to demand that citizens accept a regime out of a sense of this kind of “we” as it would be to see citizenship as a crowd phenomenon.

Citizenship involves a sense of being a “we,” and that sensation is long-term rather than fleeting; however, it involves a stronger consciousness of others and oneself as members having rights and duties. One’s actions as a citizen are not spontaneous but deliberate and sometimes even legislated. The citizen mentality is not limited to nation states and other political entities; one could be a good citizen of a company, hospital, church, military unit, or educational institution. Rather than intolerance toward difference or deviation, as occurs in crowds, citizenship involves differences in the kinds of contribution each can make to the whole, so that the whole is greater than the mere juxtaposition of members. We commonly term this kind of “we” a *community*.

A political campaign entails an inevitable and maybe even necessary crowd element, but it also needs to establish the candidate as a genuine member of the community, alongside other and differing members. If the crowd-like quality of the campaign is so pronounced that it turns on opponents as non-members, it undermines the sense of community that is essential for a governable society. The practice of dismissing whole sectors of our population as nonmembers undermines that same “we” sensation that is the basis of any mandate to govern. The logic of our democracy tied to a community psychological awareness mandated that we had to overcome slavery, accord immigrants full standing, and extend full citizenship to women. It took about one and three quarters of a century before a descendent of a non-colonial nationality (Dwight Eisenhower) would be elected president. It was only after that election that a member of a religious minority was accepted as a president (John Kennedy). It took about two and a third centuries after independence for a member of a racial minority to be elected president, and we have yet to have a female president. The logic of our democratic “we” demands that the “we” ceases to have exceptions.

One dimension of the present absence of any clear mandate for Mr. Trump to lead is his history of denying a full inclusion of large sectors of society into the American “we.” He denied that Barak Obama was even a citizen. Those of us who included and still include African Americans in our “we the people” feel ourselves excluded from Mr. Trump’s “we” as well. He also declared Latinos criminal and socially denigrated individual women. Those who see ourselves in the same “we” as African Americans, Latinos, and women have little reason to believe that Mr. Trump sees us as members of the community in full standing. He seems caught up in a crowd mentality that brooks no difference or deviation.

Immediately after the November election, many people demonstrated in our cities, shouting “Not my president!” To the extent that Mr. Trump dissolved the community sense of “we,” they were right. Does he have a mandate to rule? The situation is comparable to “care-taker governments” in nations that have the parliamentary form of government; the care-taker prime minister holds the office technically, but has no mandate.

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**Prayer and the Power of Consciousness**

By Tom Keene

 Here are some reflections on prayer using life and light as metaphors for insight into how prayer may work.

 Life begins with light. Light and matter meet and interact. Together they transform themselves into life. It is as if life is the blossom flowing from the seed-stuff that is the material universe. The nature of light is such that it can be focused, as with lenses. It can be reflected, as with mirrors.

 So too, the ***powers of consciousness*** can be focused and reflected by prayer. We can explore our ability in prayer to focus and reflect the movement of life along the path of healing. (By healing, we mean the enabling of wholeness, furthering the fullness of what is.) Life, by its nature, seems impelled to heal itself, to make itself whole. Prayer can facilitate that, make it happen more easily.

 As a lens can focus light, prayer can focus the powers of consciousness, in any of its life forms to heal itself, make itself whole, evolve in the directions that will express and celebrate its potentials for a growing wholeness. What enables prayer is the fact that it flows from our conscious ***intent*** to express something. In prayer, our personal consciousness connects with the general consciousness that pervades all life and all matter, the whole universe. (In any case, though it may manifest itself at various levels, universal consciousness is all one.) Conscious, intent prayer can re-direct, as a mirror reflects. It can strengthen and intensify itself, as does a laser. As all life supports all other life, all that is conscious supports all else that is conscious.

 We can view our lives as a creative opportunity to work and play with our consciousness so that it more creatively focuses and reflects the holistic consciousness of the universe. To see ourselves as conscious and creative beings empowers us to of work ***in tune*** with the creativity of the universe. That is a choice we can make. The alternative is to let our choices be driven by our separate egos into a life ***at discord*** with the consciousness of the universe.

 To be in tune with the universe requires that we listen to its vibrations and blend in. Listening to the universe is what we do in ***meditation***: the receptive side of prayer. If we think of prayer as a working with and a playing with the powers of consciousness we open ourselves to new experiences of empowerment.

Such work/play experiences can occur in quiet, or even hectic, moments if we take the time to look within and reflect. They can also happen as we connect with others who share our intent to live consciously and meaningfully. At a greater level of consciousness, praying together with others could become an art form as expressive and evolving as are jazz quartets in music and ballet in dance. Such prayer, as in all cooperative art forms, allows us to sublimate our separate egos in favor of something greater and more satisfying than can our egos acting alone.

Here are some basic intentions that may initiate our desires to pray.

Need or Want: From the time we are conceived and born to the time we die and get buried we feel needs and wants in body and mind. We need courage. We want to find a parking place. We need food. We want health for our loved ones. Expressing such needs and wants in prayer can be an affirmation of the power within the universe and particularly within ourselves to realize them. At some basic level, to affirm is to realize.

Gratitude: Sometimes we experience a desire to say thank you for life itself, for just being here and now, for a particular beauty, for discovering a truth. To utter, “Thank you,” at such moments re-connects our consciousness with that of the Universe.  As one mystic put it, “If our only prayer is ‘Thank you,’ that is quite sufficient.”

Regret: Every so often we realize that our intentional self centeredness or even our unthinking mistakes have hurt others and our selves. Even though we express our regret to those we harmed we may still feel a need to do something more: to acknowledge our responsibility to the Whole, to the Universal Consciousness. We may feel a need to say, “I’m sorry,” and find a sense of completion and resolution so we can move on.

Love: Deep within us we may feel a presence of love and a desire to express love, as in saying, “I love you.” It is as essential as our need to say, “Thank you,” “I’m sorry,” and “Please.” All such gestures affirm our connections with the Universe and its Source. It is in making these connections that we grow in awareness and experience of life in its fullness. To whom do we direct our expressions of love? Some of us simply call that “whom” God. Some of us shy away from that word because others load it with meanings that put us off. For others, silent reflection is sufficient. For the time being, I’m content with “Source” as in “Source from which we come and to which we return.” Ultimately, no one word or set of words can capture the totality of all that we feel immersed in and gratitude toward. In the face of that, simple expressions, such as “I love,” “ We love,” may be enough.

**197.**

**The Prejudiced Mind**

Anthony J. Blasi

Joseph W. Vance, called as a Southern Baptist minister in his youth, joined a volunteer infantry regiment of the Union Army in the Civil War. The war had broken out when one of the southern states that were seceding from the Union out of fear that people in the North would try to abolish slavery, aimed and fired cannon at Fort Sumter near Charleston, South Carolina.[[13]](#footnote-13) One cannot ascertain almost a century and a half later, whether young Preacher Vance was motivated by a rejection of slavery and sympathy for African Americans, by loyalty to the United States of America, or even by a desire for adventure. But his granddaughter, my Kentucky grandmother, told me she had no reason to hate or fear African Americans. Moreover, she married a World War I veteran who had been named for the Union General Lew Wallace. Lew Wallace Marshall, whose elders were known locally as “Union people,” liked to be around people, engaged in local politics in the Happy Chandler organization, and hired African Americans who worked alongside his children to take in the harvest of his farm. Happy (Albert Benjamin) Chandler would, as baseball commissioner, later approve the integration of major league baseball and, in one of his terms as governor of Kentucky, enforce the racial integration of the Commonwealth’s public schools—even going so far as personally welcoming the African American children into one of the schools. However, in old age he drew criticism for using racist language.

The lives of Preacher Vance, his granddaughter, and her husband point to the difference between ending the unjust institution of slavery and the underlying motivations at work in the way people from different ancestries treat one another. To end slavery is to end an extreme form of discrimination—second only to genocide in severity; but that does not mark the end of the underling state of mind behind discrimination, *prejudice*. Similarly, for judges and politicians to end segregation in the schools is not the same thing as ending the prejudice that led people to segregate in the first place. Was Joseph Vance motivated to attach himself to the Union Army out of a sense of adventure or a desire to go along with an inevitable change, or was it an aspect of his Christian commitment? No doubt his volunteering was a miniscule episode in a grand institutional change, but was it a free act of one not chained to a cultural drag-anchor of prejudice? Was Lew Wallace Marshall hiring African Americans to work beside his own children to take in the harvest *despite* the prevailing discriminatory hiring practices of the day and because, despite his low educational attainment, he could see through the prejudicial opinions that would justify discrimination? Or would a complex culture, full of contradictions, be imported into the minds and actions of these modest people, contradictions and all, just as seemed to be the case with Happy Chandler?

Because prejudice can continue without being supported by discrimination, discrimination and even racist violence can be born again in a society and can reoccur. And the problem is not unique to relations between African Americans and the residual category that people call *white*. There is antisemitism, for example, an inaccurate term insofar as it refers to hostility toward Jews, not all speakers of Semitic languages. Immigrant Jewish social psychologists in America after World War II, led by Theodor Adorno, feared that the Nazis’ genocidal efforts that they fled would emerge in the United States, the presumed land of the free. They developed a survey measure, the F-Scale (F for *Fascist*), in an effort to find how prevalent the propensity toward prejudice was in America; it turned out to be quite prevalent.[[14]](#footnote-14) They had reason to be fearful; the sociologists Charles Y. Glock and Rodney Stark found anti-Jewish attitudes still widespread in the 1960s, in the purportedly “liberal” San Francisco Bay Area where I lived in my early teens.[[15]](#footnote-15) This was in a decade that began with resistance against the racial integration of schools and retail establishments and resistance against the election of a Catholic as president of the United States.

Now today we have Islamophobia mixed into our politics. While it was a social milestone in American history for the son of an African immigrant to be elected President, a large portion of the population maintained, contrary to factual evidence, that he was not eligible to be a president, that he was not “really” American, and that he was a Muslim. Throughout his presidency, they maintained that everything the government did, no matter how consistent with previous foreign and domestic policies, was jeopardizing the national security. The state government in Texas even accepted the rumors that under President Obama the United States military was massing troops to occupy and “take over” Texas and other “red” states.

Is the culture of prejudice, capable of being imported into people’s minds, a distant historical phenomenon, a thing of the past? I do not think so. There is racial gerrymandering in American politics. Hostile graffiti occasionally appear on synagogue walls. Some local politicians try to prevent mosques from being built. And at the time of this writing a firebomb had recently been thrown at a California mosque. In north Texas, people have shown up outside another mosque brandishing guns and carrying hostile placards. Irrationally, national politicians, in the wake of violence on the part of Belgian and French people aligned with an Iraqi prison gang that turned itself into an “Islamic state,” are trying to block the settling in America, not of Belgian and French ISIL allies, but of Syrian refugees fleeing the “Islamic State.” They want to exclude refugees, who are vetted more thoroughly than any other entering group, but not tourists, foreign students, and foreign business people. Some of the politicians say they want to admit Christians only from Syria, while others threaten to keep Muslims from entering the country and require special identity cards, and they want to monitor Muslims in America. I suppose the next step is to force Muslim Americans to wear a yellow crescent on their clothing, the way the Nazis made Jews wear yellow stars.

This is not entirely surprising. When Central American child refugees, sometimes with their mothers, sought out our border officials the past few summers to file for refugee status, the very same political demagogues, especially in Texas, began demanding that the border be “sealed.” The State of Texas spent large sums of money to “enhance law enforcement” along that border. Even the federal authorities, claiming the children were a threat to national security, illegally imprisoned would-be refugees for long periods of time, until a federal judge intervened. There is a pattern here, not disparate anecdotal information. There is a prejudicial culture at work, and it is being imported into individuals’ stances toward perceived out groups.

Culture is an activity of creating signs, symbols, stereotypes, and other embodiments of meaning. Culture happens; it is not a thing. People do not acquire culture the way a table surface collects dust; they engage in it for reasons. I have used the expression “importing culture into the mind” to get at what happens when individuals’ thinking replicates cultural patterns. This importation is not random or passive, but structured and motivated. I want to describe the resultant prejudicial mind that I find commonplace in present-day America.

\* \* \*

The first thing to be noticed about the prejudicial mind is an inchoate sense of deprivation. There is a discourse of victimhood, of not being as well off as one should be. Any sign of advancement by an out group is spoken of as somehow undeserved. Thus one speaks of a job as a rightful possession that supposedly teeming throngs of children at the border are coming to “take away.” Along with the sense of being deprived, there is a quest for honorifics, such as the exotic titles claimed by KKK leaders. Those who might feel silly claiming such honors include themselves in a category of the “right kind of people,” setting themselves in contrast to a “wrong kind of people.” The evidence that this is about the purportedly deprived self and not really about the out group is that the “right kind of people” is demarcated specifically while a congeries of diverse people are carelessly swept together in the “wrong” category. The “we” does not consist of minorities, while the “they” may include not only Muslims but also Sikhs, Hindus, Yazidis, and other “different” peoples. Similarly, the demagogues who want to prevent Muslims from coming to the United States fail to specify how airport and border security officers are to ascertain who is and who is not a Muslim. It does not matter, as I suggested above, because it is not really about Muslims at all but about those who are of a mind to express a hostile attitude about Muslims.

A second feature of the prejudicial mind is an insistence on clear-cut dichotomies. There are “legals” and “illegals,” with no tolerance for, say, people whose status is pending. There are terrorists and harmless people, and the terrorists may be infiltrating the population of the harmless people; it does not seem that a one-time harmless person can become a terrorist or that a one-time terrorist could become a harmless person. This kind of thinking has often characterized the public discourse about the people held at the Guantanamo Bay prison. Some prisoners were simply employees of combatants, while others were combatants in a civil war in Afghanistan on a side that was opposed to the NATO forces. A *few* actually had some connection with the attack on the Twin Towers and the Pentagon in 2001. The politics of where to conduct trials to ascertain the facts in individual cases has involved the inclusion of all Guantanamo detainees in the category of *terrorist* and all people in the United States as potential victims of terrorists. The penchant for clear-cut dichotomies might be related to Americans’ socialization into “team spirit” approaches to the world during their teens.

A third feature is mental compartmentalization. People may memorize parts of the Bible and say they adhere to Christian values for some aspects of their lives, but resist what the Christian Bible means to say for other aspects of their lives. Thus, some of us puzzled over a Hungarian politician proclaiming that he was keeping Syrians (presumably Muslim Syrians) out of Hungary lest it lose its Christian character—even as Hungarian church congregations, following Christian teachings, were collecting food and clothing and setting up shelter for those very same Syrian refugees. In another case, people may learn arithmetic at school but think they can balance a governmental budget by cutting taxes and financing the personnel and prisons of a police state. Or again, people may study economics and even earn advanced business degrees, but want to cut taxes when the economy is doing well and cut spending when the economy is doing poorly, as if they had never been exposed to Economics 101. The problem is that the church or religion in general comprise one compartment that has no overlap with an immigration and travel policy compartment, and that arithmetic is a class in the grade school compartment that has no bearing on the politics compartment, and that Economics 101 is in a college days compartment that is kept separate from economic praxis. Again, people may know about the “Bill of Rights” part of the amendments to the *Constitution of the United States of America*, but that too is in a school classroom compartment or perhaps a Fourth of July ceremonial compartment that somehow does not overlap with the compartment that contains attitudes toward an out group’s religion. In the case of prejudice, one may learn not to express hostility toward one group, even while exhibiting hostile expressions toward another group. Thus it is bad form to use the “N word,” but the failure to appreciate why that is so leaves untouched a propensity to brandish guns outside mosques.

A fourth feature that is related to the third is a propensity to substitute stimulus-response learning for understanding. Stimulus-response learning is memorization; it focuses on words rather than what the words are meant to signify. One might memorize lines from a Shakespearean play and be able to recite them in proper order, without comprehending the quality of character, mood, or moral that Shakespeare had in mind. Most often, one simply memorizes phrases in order to distinguish them from other phrases in a multiple-choice test. What one learns is a pattern of symbols, not the point of the symbols. Thus religious and national discourses become mere emblems of identity without any consequential meaning.

A fifth feature of the prejudicial mind is in-group thinking. Networks of people that exclude potential critics can perpetrate gross errors in thinking that would not go very far if tested against contrary views. To avoid this, scientists and policy analysts deliberately engage in debates and establish forums in which contrary views can be engaged. The prejudicial mind does not really engage different views but rather rests satisfied with, at most, hearing a fellow group member criticize some outsider’s discourse.

Islamophobia and other prejudices were shown above to be encased in a discourse of deprivation and victimhood. We maintained that, ironically, the allegedly deprived receive honorific titles or high status group identities. Those openly holding prejudices see themselves in the good side of a simplistic division between good alternatives and evil ones. The inherent unreasonableness of prejudicial views is protected by a dismissal of intelligence and refusal to recognize factual information. Demographically broad but mentally and morally narrow social networks serve as vehicles for prejudicial discourse in a process of group-thought. There are undoubtedly numerous reasons why prejudicial cultures and prejudicial minds with such characteristics develop and persist. Suffice it for present purposes to identify a few:

In our world, we structure into existence experiences of failure, thereby causing a widespread sense of deprivation. A look at the education attainment statistics reveals that while the vast majority of our population does not lack schooling, the vast majority also drops out at some point. A fair number drop out during high school, for whatever reason. Their experience convinces them that staying in school is not for them, and in that sense they “know” that they are educational failures. Another large number do not go on to college, to either two-year or four-year programs. The experiences of these students convince them that they are failures in the sense of “not being college material.” High percentages of those who do go to college fail to complete programs. Moreover, they come to realize that their instructors were “good enough” to earn graduate degrees, and that some of their classmates will not only succeed in graduating but also earn Master’s degrees and doctorates. Even those who do earn Master’s degrees may become aware that nobody is enticing them individually with opportunities to continue study for the doctorate, and even many who enroll in doctoral programs fail to complete dissertations and the like and hence never earn the degree itself. The result is that far more people are convinced they are failures in the educational world than are convinced that they are not failures. The way we have formalized the educational certificate chase certifies far more people as not making some grade or other than as completely succeeding.

Our economic system rewards management rather than productivity, thereby conferring status markers on a limited number of chief executives rather than on good workers. Even university presidents and football coaches are made millionaires so that they can be “competitive” with major corporations. In a process that denatures what should be cherished cultural values, we remake universities, school districts, hospitals, charities, and churches in the pattern of corporations. This corporatization pattern not only produces bad organizational governance by putting too great a distance between decisions and their consequences, but it creates mad scrambles in multiple hierarchies where it is in the interest of the typical underling to create failure and make that failure ostensibly the fault of a superior so that the ambitious underling can ascend the ladder. Thus the incentive system creates a widespread interest in creating failure. Those caught up in the bad consequences of all this see themselves as victims, as unfairly deprived. Just how beside the point much of “management” is can be seen from the fact that despite widespread management failure most of us do not live in abject poverty. Managerial incompetence did create a major economic crisis in 2007, but the crisis was temporarily resolved through massive governmental intervention into the free enterprise system. Unfortunately, we still have the failure engine in place. The result of this entire pattern is an increase in inequality, and a sense of failure—not because poverty is more widespread but because the small number of top executives keep rewarding themselves irrespective of the good or poor quality of their managing. I repeat—management is rewarded in our world, not productivity.

Along with our structuring-in of a sense of failure, we have a star system in the media. The entertainment, sports, and political enterprises feature the ego-centered splashes of “stars.” Non-stars are relegated to spectator status, left to fantasize about what could have been, and, ultimately, entertain themselves within the framework of their failure status.

We have a “well regulated” republic, a society with many rules. The application of rules creates clear categories of rule-violators and an in-group of the “not guilty.” As far as ethical systems go, rule observance is a step above “right” being pleasing a caretaker. Developmental psychologists note the phase at which children concern themselves not only with pleasing a parent but with generalizing right and wrong according to abstract rules. However, legalist ethics represents an inferior stage of development compared to principled ethics. In principle, racial discrimination is unethical, whether or not it is within the law. Similarly, a principled ethics system does not accept the “good Nazi” defense that one merely followed legally issued orders. Nevertheless, much of our public culture is pitched at the level of rule observance and law enforcement. Movies and television shows feature police detectives and prosecutors. Politicians seek to address complex issues with the simplifications of criminal law. Various kinds of law make drug addiction, homelessness, and seeking work in a foreign country “criminal.” Law enforcement officers are often satisfied with being “not indictable” or even the lower standard of “not guilty,” even if they abuse or kill the people they are supposed to protect. “Not indictable” is a low professional standard!

Conflict, especially war, has become the normal state of affairs. Conflict creates a “we” and “they” mentality; something is not quite right unless “we” have an enemy. We have consequent wars of choice, wars prosecuted as a matter of policy rather than genuine defense. Our “defense” establishment engages in offensive wars, seemingly to maintain a cultural readiness to engage in genuine defense, should that ever be needed. Even apart from military endeavors, there is a continuing quest for “moral equivalents of war”—a war on poverty, a war against drugs. It is not surprising that our politics has become increasingly polarized. Interestingly, many of the demagogues who speak so much of wars and moral equivalents of wars have never experienced war or military service. Perhaps they have played with war toys as children! That may or may not suffice for engendering the “we” versus “they” view of the world.

Another contribution to the prejudicial patterns of mind seems to be the foreshortening of genuine educational opportunity. It is more than a fine semantic point that *education* comes from the Latin terminology for “drawing out” an insight. A pupil is presented with a demonstration—for example, how to add and subtract by sliding two rulers next to each other. Then the pupil is informed that adding and subtracting logarithms is the same as multiplying and dividing ordinary numbers. From that, one can draw out from the pupil how a slide rule works. The demonstration and information leads the pupil to an insight. That is education. “Preparing” students for “tests” by getting them to identify “right” rather than “wrong” answers is not education in that sense. People generally agree that there has been too much testing in our educational system, but it is not simply a matter of the *number* of tests. It is rather a matter of the tests focusing on standardized, granular particles of “knowledge.” High culture comes to be reduced to right answers. Genuine education occurs when insights emerge in the interaction between students and teachers and among students. Insight is opportunistic and individual; it has more the quality of spiritual creation than acquisition. The educational establishment *kills* this spirit when it demands that identical test items be used to “evaluate” all classes bearing the same course title. How can identical insights be created between different teachers and different students or among varying students? Apart from basic literacy and numeracy, why should such uniformity be an educational objective at all? Are we not sacrificing genuine education, the creation of intelligence, on an altar of credentialist uniformity? And is this not substituting conformance for intelligence?

The public culture goes well beyond stifling education in the educational establishment; it foments hostility against educated intelligence per se. Intellectuals make good décor on university campuses, but they are not to be taken seriously. Students should not be lured into being influenced by them too much. There is the dismissive expression common in Great Britain: “He has a touch of the brains,” and people often distance themselves from learned intelligence by referring to the “ivory tower.” Is it any surprise that so many people still reject the medical finding that tobacco causes lung cancer and weakens heart muscle? That radio voices having no particular expertise behind them are taken seriously in cultural and economic questions and issues in international relations? And of course, there are the climate change deniers, the evolution deniers, and the vaccination opponents. There is an elective affinity between a stance that denatures education, turning it into a form of social control, and such anti-intellectualism. Such anti-intellectualism can also be associated with the effort, funded by corporate elites, to disestablish the democratic aspects of public education by shifting money away from non-elite schools, separating the non-poor students from the needy ones through a great many of the charter school schemes, and defunding public higher education. “Defunding” sounds like a technical term, but at the practical level it means replacing full-time professors who have to demonstrate expertise in their field through research, performance, or publication (that is how tenure is supposed to be gained). Who are the replacements? There are administrators and ex-administrators who gain tenure through managerial loyalty (not unlike the workings of the old Soviet bureaucracies). Then there are unfortunate scholars, no longer able to be active in their disciplines because they have to commute between four or five adjunct teaching jobs in order to make a modest living. And there are moon-lighting high school teachers, showing up haggard and exhausted to conduct night college-level classes. The United States once had a university system that was the envy of the world, free of political interference because of its legal framework of academic freedom, which was protected by tenure (i.e., a status wherein a professor could not be dismissed without cause). One must question whether this once-envied system will survive the double attack of reduced budgets and bloated corporatization. Tuitions continue to go up, in part because of the budget cuts but to a great degree because state appropriations are diverted from funding real professorships to finance the ever-growing administrations in the universities. As noted above, management, not productivity, is rewarded.

Another contribution to the prejudicial patterns of mind is emphatic verbal repetition. Political advertisements and commercials in general would lead one to equate truth with frequency. If something is said repeatedly, it sticks in the public mind. Consequently, the power of persuasion rests in the hands of those with sufficient money to manufacture ads and pay for their broadcast. The things that are said in the ads are often manifestly silly, false, and illogical, but their verbiage rushes by too quickly for critical analysis and too often for counterclaims to gain a hearing. They have their effect on a basis analogous to that of subliminal messages—visual communications that are flashed across screens too quickly for the viewer to be cognizant of them but quickly enough to register in the memory regions of the brain. The repeated messages of the political ads find hooks in prejudices that would otherwise be suppressed.

One must add to this list of contributions to prejudice absolutist religion. Sometimes this absolutism takes the form of biblical literalism or fundamentalism. The believer is led to words, verbalizations, not to the condition of the soul to which a passage would lead a reader. It takes no little power of concentration to read a biblical passage reflectively and intelligently amidst a world of ranting religious snake oil pitchmen. It strikes one as corporate-funded anti-intellectualism posturing as divine insight. God would be so misanthropic as to make faith so improbable that only crooks and criminals would inflict it on the unsuspecting through the pious ranting that passes for religious discourse.

Equally troubling is religious inaction and quietude in the face of fundamental evils, while much noise is made about tangential matters. A religious priest may be expelled from his order and forbidden to conduct services for opining that women should be ordained, but at least two “Catholic” governors go without reprimand, let alone excommunication, when they try to block the flight of refugees. A mayor wears a cross on a necklace without comment from the clergy, even though she blocks a Catholic Worker house from passing building codes, no matter how closely it conforms to those codes, because it brings homeless people into a neighborhood where the mayor’s family owns rental properties. Are not welcoming refugees and feeding the hungry central religious issues, and quibbles over such matters as gay sex and contraception tangents? One’s being “Catholic” becomes an accident of birth or marriage; the cross becomes an ornament; codes meant for safe housing become goads to force the hungry out of a given neighborhood, and much of the clergy busies itself with straining gnats!

There is hope, despite such props of the prejudiced culture. The moral content of religious texts and secular ethical statements affects minds. The system of controlling the imaginations of children frequently fails before the engines of rebellion. Most important of all, average people become conscious of what is going on around them. Perhaps equally important is the fact that hate and prejudice, no matter how tightly held, fail to bring satisfaction or inward happiness.

**198.**

**Public Morality: The Federal Budget Proposal**

Anthony J. Blasi

The Trump administration has sent to Congress its budget proposal for 2019. While it is only a proposal, it represents the administration’s negotiating position with Congress, with the implication that any legislative package that varies too much from that proposal might be vetoed by the president. It needs to be considered seriously from the perspective of social morality.

First the administration wants to repeal the Affordable Health Care Act (“Obamacare”) and then cut funding for health care programs well below levels that the major repeal bill in Congress, the Cassidy-Graham Bill, would provide. This would involve eliminating the Medicaid expansion and leaving it up to the states to come up with replacement money within two years. It would also mean that federal subsidies for medical insurance would disappear. Financially, this would mean that the tax cuts for corporations and higher income groups that were recently enacted would be paid for by reducing medical expenditures for poor and moderate-income Americans. The administration proposal would provide some block grants to states by way of replacement, but at relatively low levels, with no adjustments for increases in medical service prices and pharmaceutical prices or to accommodate population increases.

Second, the proposal would cap the funding of the prior Medicaid program on a per capita basis. There would be citizenship and immigration requirements for participants in the program, and home-ownership could disqualify people from some coverages.

Third, the proposal would allow states to permit insurance companies to charge higher premiums for people who have pre-existing medical conditions.

Fourth, states would be allowed to reduce the list of core coverages that at present must be included in medical insurance policies.

Fifth, the proposal would reduce funding of SNAP (food stamps) by 30% over a period of ten years. It would also replace the current successful distribution program, which relies on a public-private cooperation, with government-supplied packages of nonperishable foods. Ironically, this seems to be creating a higher degree of socialism in the program, at the cost of flexibility and genuine well-being.

Sixth, the proposal would eliminate vouchers for low income housing and raise rents on low-income tenants who at present receive assistance. It would cut funding for public housing repairs in half. Home energy assistance for low income people would be eliminated.

Seventh, the proposal would cut Social Security Disability Insurance and the Supplement Disability Income benefits.

Eighth, the proposal would reduce funding for Temporary Assistance to Needy Families and the current block grants to states for social services. States would be allowed to eliminate protections that current law requires for the social services block grants.

In general, non-defense funding for education, social services, and transportation infrastructure (including the highway trust fund), the Army Corps of Engineers, water treatment plants, and other items would be reduced by a massive 42%, or calculating for expected inflation 50%.

A budget is not a financial accounting scheme but rather a statement of policy, ultimately an expression of values and symptom of vices and virtues. This budget proposal values the means of war-making, which go uncut, and devalues the well-being of the non-wealthy. It reflects that imaginary world of the now bankrupt ToysRUs stores, which were replete with plastic toy replicas of guns and other weapons. Non-combat concerns are to be out of sight, minimized, devolved onto states, many of which would prefer that real needs would just go away.

Might some realism spoil such an imaginary world? Even in military affairs, who are the people who are sent out to war? Are they not generally from the ranks of the non-wealthy? Do they not include many non-citizens? And who are the productive people who make money for corporations and their wealthy owners? Are they not generally people of modest means? Even well-paid middle management does not really produce. Where does our food come from? Who builds the dwellings we inhabit? Who cares for our toddlers and who teaches our children? Most of what some writers term the “forces of production” depend on current income, and an illness on their part or in their families can make them dependent on public support. And in our civilization we do not let people who are injured in accidents or afflicted by disease to go untreated, and medical treatment will be covered in one way or another, whether a budget foresees it or not. More people will turn up in hospital emergency rooms, the most expensive way of all to provide treatment to patients.

Or do the budget drafters foresee a different society, in which the injured and the ill sit outside hospital doors begging while in their death throes? Or do they envisage a world in which far greater numbers of people go homeless and besiege us on the streets for handouts? Would they have a world in which there are fewer elderly because they die sooner? Is such what they value?

Our constitutional framework, within which we collectively budget, was never perfect; after all, it provided for slavery. However, it did eliminate the distinction between noble and non-noble. Pubic office was not to be inherited or, as frequently occurred in Europe in the early modern period, purchased with inherited funds. All free people in the new American republic were able to go about making their way in the world, without being prohibited from engaging in the occupations of their choice, even as peasants were still disallowed from leaving farms in Europe. The flip-side of the coin is that those born to wealth are not to monopolize the benefits of free productivity. It was entirely in keeping with this approach that the Sixteenth Amendment provided for the income tax. The budget proposal reviewed above would, in contrast, reverse the intent of the elimination of nobility and of the evening out of life chances through the income tax.

**199.**

**Racism**

Anthony J. Blasi

Last December, representatives of the “Alt Right” gave interviews in various news programs saying that they were being criticized as racists for just about everything they said or did. They claimed that the word *racism* had lost its meaning and that they therefore need not worry about allegations of racism. This was not a matter of a few isolated interviews; it had all the marks of a committee “talking points” campaign disseminated in a network of allied “think tanks.” Should the campaign succeed, those with racist inclinations could engage in racist acts and be exposed to no “meaningful” critique.

I can say with certainty that *racism* has a meaning and that furthermore there are realities to which the word refers. Consequently the critique of racism need not be mute. Attacking the word will not make the realities go away. Indeed, the press campaign that claims the word has no meaning is itself likely motivated by racism rather than by any scholarly concern over semantic clarity.

*Racism* refers to an attitude, in the technical sense of a predisposition to act. Action against categories of people is discrimination, often accompanied by violence. Discrimination is according people disadvantages because of their social identity, while violence is perpetrating physical harm on them. The negative prejudice that leads up to discrimination and violence and then reinforces these, causing them to continue, is racism, *lato sensu*. In a more strict sense, the categories that prejudice, discrimination, and violence target are based on physical attributes in the case of racism, on such cultural attributes as language and religious identity in the case of ethnic prejudice, and on sexual orientation and gender identity in the cases of homophobia, hostility toward people with gender dysphoria, and sexism.

Not all racism is the same. People who live in a social setting that is culturally racist may develop a personal racism on the basis of conformity and conventionality. Most people, especially when young and wanting to be accepted by proximate others, fear having views that are contrary to those of the nearby crowd. Therefore, they simply do not question what people around them say about racial and other targets. Such people avoid standing out as individuals. The racism such people have does not stand the test of practical experience when they come to know real people that happen to be members of a targeted category of persons. The effective racial integration of social organizations can break the hold of this kind of racism.

Another kind of racism is cognitive. Movies, television programs, literature, Sunday preaching, and commercials can perpetrate stereotypes, and individuals who simply do not know any better can buy into the stereotypes. The media generally do not portray races, ethnic groups, and other targeted categories with negative stereotypes any more, but the latter can still be found in political discourse and college fraternity antics. Recently the Texas State Board of Education unanimously rejected a Mexican American Studies high school textbook that had been authored by Liberty University professors because, among other things, the book stereotyped ethnic Mexicans as lazy. The text was also riddled with factual errors. Neither feature of the book lends credibility to scholarship at Liberty University. This kind of racism does not stand the test of practical experience and factual information. Again, successful racial integration combats this kind of racism, as does an effective education that empowers students with the skills needed for evaluating information and evidence. Some proposed “reforms” of education appear to be designed to keep majority students away from any practical experience with minorities and to eliminate evaluative powers and evidentiary analysis from education through reducing the latter to rote memorization that can be recognized and rewarded through standardized tests.

A third kind of racism is based on status insecurity. People who are economically marginal, a mere paycheck away from poverty and embarrassment, feel great anxiety when broad economic downturns threaten their standing as competent contributors in society. Thus waves of racism emerge during recessions or among generations of people who had to obtain their first real jobs in times of recession. This kind of racism can be undermined by providing widespread economic security. How to accomplish that is no mystery. A macroeconomic policy of counter-cyclical governmental action can go a long way toward lessening the extremes of the business cycle. When times are good, government should cut spending and raise taxes in order to combat inflation, and the Federal Reserve should raise interest rates. When times are bad, government should increase spending and lower taxes, and the Federal Reserve should cut interest rates. In addition, a minimum wage policy and anti-discrimination legal regimes can help ensure that there is a reliable domestic market so that companies make money by selling their products in large quantities to the whole population rather than by taking advantage of scarcities as opportunities to raise prices to the point that most people cannot afford their products. This, of course, presupposes a competitive rather than monopolistic market. Ironically, people who experience status insecurity are sometimes tempted to scape goat targets of prejudice with the resultant discrimination creating pockets of chronic poverty and thereby undermining any broad-based market recovery. When there is an actual economic recovery after a recession, they often hold onto a fear of a repeated decline in standing and consequently insist upon lower taxes when times are good, i.e. when taxes should be raised to pull money out of an over-heated economy. Consequently status insecurity causes racial scapegoating and “conservative” economic policy errors, both which contribute to a renewed economic downturn.

A fourth kind of racism derives from emotional problems on the part of individuals. Some people go about day to day with a repressed rage. Because of the repression, they appear to be unassuming and meek when present to others as individuals, but they break into a frenzy in mob situations or responding to quasi-mob experiences in media presentations. These are the people who are particularly responsive to the paranoid style in American politics. Because its expression usually requires a collective effort, it leads to the formation of hate groups. The leaders of such groups are not necessarily emotionally racist and repressed in the manner described above, but they take some satisfaction in having a following, even if it is a following of emotionally debilitated individuals.

This complex of conditions is what *racism* refers to. It has a meaning, and realities correspond to that meaning. Racism implies a political stance that would contain the targets of prejudice in separate neighborhoods, occupations, organizations, and especially legislative districts, thereby perpetuating stereotypes in other places. That political stance would minimize the powers of critical thinking in education, cut taxes when they should not be cut, and stifle policies that would otherwise enable those discriminated against to prosper. Moreover, it attracts a following that includes a sector of emotionally troubled people. Not all racists are unthinking conformists, but some are. Not all racists are unknowledgeable, but some are. Not all racists are economically insecure, but some are. Not all racists are emotionally troubled, but some are. And they all are racist, and identifying them as such is not a characterization lacking content.

**200.**

**Reflections on a Massacre**

by Tom Keene

*I am watching my infant grandchild playing in her sandbox. Between putting handfuls of sand to her mouth she looks for bright toys to chew. I keep recalling the priest from Chiapas, Mexico, who told of the massacre of 45 people at the village of Acteal on December 22, 1997. I recall that one of the 45 was an infant. I wonder about the one who killed the baby. I let my imagination flow.*

He is a young man. Late teens. He sits beside his uncle on the bed of the truck as it maneuvers  the curving dusty road following other trucks to the village. He grips the automatic rifle cradled between his knees, muzzle up. It is loaded with the safety on. Sticking out from his belt are four full magazines of ammunition. He has fired the rifle at trees and targets but never at a person. Today will be different. He can feel his heart beat, his blood race. His head feels light.

He has never been to the village, though he has seen some of the villagers at markets in the larger towns. They seemed hard working and confident, but others, his uncles and their friends, made fun of them. Slurs and ridicule ran through their talk. He remembered the phrase, “enemies of the government.” Such gossip does not interest him. What matters is being a man and proving it so others know.

At the village, the men in his truck jump out and run to join the men from the other trucks as they surround the village meeting place. Before he can get there he hears the staccato of automatic rifle fire. Chips of wood and paint fly from the meeting house walls. Screams and shouts. Villagers pour out of the building. Some fall. Others continue to run. Confusion everywhere. His belly tightens into a knot. He follows after his uncle who is chasing someone, a girl. She clutches an infant and runs toward the river. An image of his sister and her child flashes across his vision and is gone. He catches up with his uncle who stands on the river’s bank, aims and fires a burst at the girl. She drops the baby and falls. She lies face down, silent. The baby screams. With his uncle, he walks to the girl’s body. With the toe of his boot, his uncle turns the girl’s body over. She is dead. His uncle motions to the baby. “Kill it.” The young man steps to the screaming baby. He points the rifle at the child and wonders at this tool in his hands, its heft and newness. His head feels lighter than ever. “Kill it,” his uncle says again. The burst startles him. The spray of bullets rips across the baby, peppers the grave strewn turf. “Come on,” says his uncle. After that the surge of noise and confusion settles into a pattern of chase down and shoot, chase down and kill. It becomes a matter of doing what everyone else is doing.

The trucks return the men to their own villages. The young man finds himself with his uncle and other men from the raid. The men pass around bottles of tequila. The young man has never before seen at one time that many opened bottles. He does not follow the talk of the men. He hears someone say that the shooting business took four hours. He cannot remember it, nor imagine how that time could be so short or so long. He still feels light in the head. The tequila does not help. He wants to sleep, but cannot. Later, after enough liquor, he passes out. When he wakes, he looks into the eyes of his sister and her baby staring at him. They both seem different. He knows they will never look the same to him again.

*I am back in the sandbox. I wonder at how this grandchild, that dead child, that young man, the villagers and their killers and those inner forces that urged the killers on, can ever be one, loved by the one God.*

**201.**

**Representation as a Moral Problem**

Anthony J. Blasi

Representation is a tactic that people employ as a collective when they select someone to act on their behalf. A representative acts as if those who are being represented were acting. Political theorists often argue that representative government is superior to direct democracy because it involves deliberation and negotiation by agents over a longer period of time rather than on-the-spot decisions in crowd situations. They also argue for the empowerment of elites who have specialized knowledge and who can act for the best interests of populations that lack such knowledge. The present discussion does not focus on such political theories but on the problem of representation per se.

Representation is a special case of agency. An agent is someone who acts on behalf of another. Someone who needs actions to be taken may not be able to be present for the activity, or the very nature of the activity may require someone with specialized legal or negotiating skills. The executor of a will, for example, is an agent for someone who has died. Someone who owns stock in a corporation may agree to allow an executive committee to vote one’s shares. An attorney may represent a client in a negotiation or in a court proceeding. A labor union and a company management may interact through practiced negotiators.

Sometimes the representative has little latitude of action. If a party to a wedding cannot be present, a stand-in can only agree to matrimony to the intended spouse, not select an alternative. I once represented a former student in executing his withdrawal from university courses; he was a fugitive from the law and had sent me a letter (with no return address) requesting that I do that on his behalf; I did not have the latitude to sign him up for different courses! In presidential elections Texas Electors to the College of Electors by state law cannot vote for anyone but their party’s candidates; in states that do not have such a law, voting for some other candidate would be socially if not legally illegitimate.

At other times, representation may be more broadly structured. When medical personnel consult the family or a designated agent of an unconscious patient about a medical decision, the patient usually has not been able to leave detailed instructions because the nature of the array of decisions that could be made may not be known in advance. Or a company’s management may have great latitude within broad parameters that have been set by the stock holders. When candidates for the U.S. presidency offer detailed policy proposals that require congressional action, we can only read the proposals as examples of the quality of the candidates’ thinking since they can only act within the parameters that Congress sets. In contrast, when it comes to international relations, presidential latitude is usually much wider.

Legislative political representation involves an agent answerable to a general will of a territorial unit rather than the will of a single individual or of a small group. Choosing instead to answer to a special interest is to fail to represent. The general population of a territorial unit may be wrong on a matter and the representative may feel morally bound to vote against the prevailing position of the population, but that is something different from making oneself answerable to a special interest.

The general will of a territorial unit can arise from either a public or from a mass. A mass acts as if it were a crowd assembled in close quarters, readily swayed by the emotions and rhetoric of the moment. The same feeling or opinion is to be found in virtually everyone present. If some few were to get up and oppose the outcry of a mass, it could turn on them savagely. A public, in contrast, enters into a deliberation with different people holding different viewpoints but being open to hearing and even being persuaded by the viewpoints of others. Formally by vote or informally through prior minded discussion in the press or other media, an initial proposal can become amended or nuanced. Representation of publics is more meaningful and answerable to the general will of a collectivity of people than representations of masses, if for no other reason than the common feeling of a mass is subject to change as soon as the short-term feeling has passed.

In matters of agency, morality focuses on honesty, on integrity on the part of the agent, as well as on the part of “outside” parties who might seek to interfere with an agent’s performance of duty. There are a number of moral problems that arise in the representative form of agency:

1) Catering to prejudices and deliberately disseminating misinformation can create conflict and distrust, and thereby dissolve a community and prevent any genuine representation from taking place.

2) The deliberate dilution of communities by drawing representative district lines can create districts that do not genuinely represent communities. This is one of the motives behind gerrymandering. A community is a system of balanced interests; people with different assets and skills live together by contributing distinctive services to the local population. While no sector of a community may get everything it wants, the result has a legitimacy on the basis of the common good. A district that lacks such a community also lacks a balance of interests and lacks the legitimacy attendant upon such a balance. Instead, gerrymandering risks creating masses, which have a lower common denominator on the basis of a narrow commons.

3) There can be restrictions on who can become an agent, eliminating someone whom a public might otherwise select. This takes the form of overt interference in authoritarian nations, but it can also come about because of the expense involved in maintaining a credible electoral campaign. The moral aspect of the problem enters in where there are deliberate efforts to block the public funding of campaigns or other reforms.

4) Office holders may abdicate from making difficult decisions. This is particularly likely to occur where a district is, in effect, a mass rather than a community.

5) Imposing limitations on the latitude of agents’ prerogatives can be a problem. This can happen where agents are disallowed from taking up certain topics; one thinks of former president John Quincy Adams being gaveled out of order for raising the question of slavery in the House of Representatives. Something similar occurs when a chamber’s leadership deliberately sends a bill to a hostile committee, irrespective of whether that committee has the issue at hand within its purview. Again, a chamber’s leadership may simply prevent a bill from coming to a vote. In Texas, incidentally, the Lieutenant Governor in the Senate and the Speaker of the House of Representatives have the power to both assign bills to committees arbitrarily and to keep bills from coming to a vote.

**202.**

**A Saint for the Right Reasons**

**Angelo Giuseppe Roncalli (St. John XXIII)**

Anthony J. Blasi

They couldn’t find the two legally stipulated miracles for him! He would have found humor in that. In 2014 Pope Francis canonized him anyway. So who was this irregularly canonized saint, and what was he about?

When Giuseppe (he went by his middle name) was born, November 25, 1881, the pope was Leo XIII and the King of Italy was Humberto I. Chester Alan Arthur was just beginning his presidency in the United States, after James A. Garfield died from an assassin’s bullet. Nothing about Giuseppe’s origins in in Sotto il Monte, a town in the hills of northern Italy, would suggest that he would become a historical personage. But Giuseppe’s uncle, Zaverino, could read, and Zaverino Roncalli encouraged him to look to the wider world. The local parish priest arranged for Giuseppe’s early education, paying for part of it himself.

The boy Roncalli entered the diocesan seminary at age 12, in 1893, experiencing a strict, almost monastic existence. The bishop, Camillo Guindani, who lived at the seminary, was an advocate of Catholic Action, a movement that sought to make Catholic laypeople active in society; Guindani also wrote a commentary on Pope Leo XIII’s encyclical, *Rerum Novarum*, an encyclical that recognized workers’ rights to organize and to receive sufficient compensation for a decent standard of living.

There were three general philosophies in Roncalli’s environment during his student days. One was that of the anti-clerical Italian government. Roncalli had been exposed to that anti-religious philosophy in his elementary education. The Italian constitutional monarchy, modeled on that of the United Kingdom, included imperialism. Only property owners could vote, though later in 1911 a reform would introduce universal male suffrage in Italy. The economic system in place was laissez-faire capitalism; the masses in Italy lived in poverty.

The second general philosophy of the day was that of the anti-democratic followers of the previous pope, Pius IX. In the era of Pius IX, voting in an Italian national election incurred automatic excommunication. That pope wanted the Papal States to be returned to his rule. His followers’ philosophy was against not only democracy but also “socialism” (i.e., anything that infringed on property claims). In the schools, and especially in the seminaries, they opposed non-scholastic subjects and approaches. Even the natural sciences were not included in the curriculum. In general, religion was seen as something opposed to “the world”—a stance that is given the term *sectarianism* in the sociology of religion.

The third general philosophy in Roncalli’s world was that of the followers of Pope Leo XIII, who reigned into his nineties, from 1878 to 1903. Leo XIII tried to come to an accommodation with the Italian state, but at the time the state was not ready to come to an accommodation with him. Leo’s reign was marked by advocacy for the working classes and unions, and he organized charities for the poor. It is taken for granted today that the Catholic Church runs charities, but in that day it was seen as an affront to the Italian state and its capitalist economic policies. Leo XIII also permitted biblical scholars to use the methods of higher criticism, and he believed the Church should update its theology and express its doctrines in languages and philosophies that made sense to modern people. This was to be justified in terms of the natural reasoning approach of the medieval theologian and saint, Thomas Aquinas.

Roncalli gravitated toward the philosophy of Leo XIII and was trained in that approach. He was sent to study theology in Rome in 1901 at the Lateran Athenaeum, majoring in history. His history professor, Umberto Benigni, would later be hounded out of the Church as a “modernist.” In 1902 Roncalli was drafted into the military for a year, from a sheltered monastic existence into the secularity of the barracks. Meanwhile, Pope Leo XIII died in 1903. The Emperor of Austria interfered in the selection of a new pope; a compromise candidate became Pope Pius X, who turned out to favor the philosophy of Pius IX. By 1904, Roncalli had earned a doctorate in history and was ordained.

Pius X began closing down the pro-worker organizations of the Italian Church. Giacomo Radini-Tedeschi, the chaplain of the Opera dei Congresi, one of those organizations, was appointed to be the new bishop of Bergamo to get him out of the Vatican administration. When Roncalli, just ordained, went to Bergamo to meet his new bishop, Bishop Radini-Tedeschi appointed him his secretary. The bishop proceeded to continue in Bergamo what Pius X had closed down at the national level, organizing workers’ congresses and organizations. He also prescribed that science classes and physical education be introduced into the seminary. Bishop Radini-Tedeschi and Roncalli even went out to picket with striking iron workers, who were not being paid a living wage.

Early on, Roncalli traveled to Milano with his bishop and met Cardinal Andrea Carlo Ferrari, archbishop of Milano and another alleged “modernist.” Roncalli became Ferrari’s confidant until the latter’s death in 1924. Roncalli also went to the Milano Archdiocesan archives and found bound files of St. Charles Borromeo’s visitations to Bergamo, and the archivist, the future Pope Pius XI, encouraged him to begin editing them for publication. It would become an almost lifelong project, six volumes, completed just before Roncalli was himself elected pope in 1958.

Roncalli was soon assigned to teach church history at the Bergamo seminary. It was not an easy time to be a Catholic educator; Pius X had a reign of terror going, over “modernism.” Roncalli gave a public lecture to commemorate the three hundredth anniversary of the death of Cardinal Cesare Baronio (Baronius), a noted innovator in critical historical method and author of a twelve volume ecclesiastical history that was the most accurate of his day. Because Baronius dispelled many pious myths along with anti-Catholic lies, spies began to sit in on that and other lectures Roncalli gave, seeking to have him outed as a “modernist.”

It had been an interesting decade, but in 1914 everything changed. Pope Pius X died. Bishop Radini-Tedeschi also died, and Roncalli would write a biography of him. World War I broke out, and Roncalli was activated by the military to help in a Bergamo hospital. Casualties were massive because the Germans and Austrians were using poison gas. The experience heightened Roncalli’s distaste for war, especially since Italy need not have been in World War I. Proving to be a capable administrator, Roncalli ended up with considerable responsibility in the hospital.

After the War, Roncalli was responsible for a student residence, served as a chaplain to a women’s devotional and charitable organization, and also served as spiritual director in the seminary. In 1920 he was called upon to address a national Eucharistic Congress, and his speech made him a public figure. He spoke in support of the left-of-center Popular Party, which had been founded by the priest-sociologist Luigi Sturzo. Cardinal William Van Rossum, a Vatican official, saw potential talent as a public figure in Roncalli, and persuaded Pope Benedict XV to assign him to raise funds for the papal missionary society, Propaganda Fide. Propaganda was loosely, even chaotically, organized and Roncalli was successful in increasing the funds raised and in centralizing the administration.

In 1922, the Fascist Benito Mussolini pushed his way to power in Italy. Benedict XV died, and Roncalli’s old archivist friend from Milano, Achille Ratti, was elected pope, taking the name Pius XI. Ratti was a compromise candidate between anti-modernists and progressives; he would carry out some of the progressive agenda of the followers of Leo XIII, such as coming to terms with the Italian state and arguing for the recognition of workers’ rights, but he had to mollify Mussolini by ordering Luigi Sturzo to retire from Politics (he would become a refugee in London). Pius XI had a volatile personality and would prove to be difficult to work under. Meanwhile, Georgio Montini, a newspaper editor and Popular Party member of parliament, had to drop out of sight because of the Fascist tyranny. Montini’s son, Giovanni Battista (future Pope Paul VI) was an official in the Vatican Secretary of State office; he and Roncalli became friends and allies in ecclesiastical matters.

In 1924, Roncalli traveled up to Bergamo and delivered a sermon in the Cathedral, lamenting the passing of the Popular Party and pressed the theme of what true love of country was about. Needless to say the Fascists were now after him. He had become a popular lecturer at the Lateran Athanaeum, but his Roman days were numbered. Pius XI sent him to Bulgaria as an apostolic visitor, in order to get him out of Italy.

Bulgaria was a mosaic of different faiths and churches, all mutually hostile. A few small churches were affiliated with Rome. Roncalli spent ten years there, befriending religious and political leaders, often by directing relief services during disasters to everyone. He visited all the Catholic parishes, often in remote areas, often by horse or on foot, despite his rotund physique. And he set about studying the languages and cultures. He wrote a detailed report on his visitation, making numerous recommendations about church organization. Only one recommendation was accepted, the appointment of a bishop, and that left him little to do as a papal visitor. So he wrote numerous articles on the Balkans for Catholic newspapers back in Italy. Then when the Roman Catholic princess of Italy married the Orthodox King of Bulgaria, Roncalli secured a promise that the ceremony would be Roman Catholic and any child reared as a Roman Catholic. The Bulgarian king broke the promise, having a second wedding ceremony. When Roncalli reported back to Rome, Pius XI gave him a public tongue lashing about the matter, making him kneel through it for 45 minutes.

By 1934 the apostolic delegate in Istanbul had proven to be a disaster, and Pius XI sent Roncalli there as a sudden replacement. His term as “interim” representative to Turkey and Greece proved to be not all that interim. He befriended everyone, often visiting Athens and Ankara. During World War II, he expanded a scheme devised originally by some women religious to produce baptismal certificates for Jews who would then be smuggled to Palestine. One might thus consider him the patron of forgers!

In December 1943, the Interim President of France was Charles deGaulle, almost as difficult a person to work with as the late Pope Pius XI. DeGaulle was demanding a new nuncio, rejecting anyone who had any dealing whatever with the Vichy government. And he needed the new nuncio right away; otherwise the Soviet Ambassador would be the senior diplomat in Paris to give a traditional New Year’s speech to wish France a good 1944. All potential nuncios to France were needed where they were or had health issues; the chief staff members in the Secretary of State Office (one Tardini, a conservative, and Montini) were at a loss as to whom they might suggest. (Pius XII, did not delegate responsibility well and thus had no Secretary of State; the two officials handled matters as best they could.) Pius XII himself proposed Roncalli, his one-time student in a canon law class. So in December 1944 Roncalli was abruptly called to Rome, named nuncio to France, and sent on a French plane to Paris.

Matters in France were rocky from the outset. The French government wanted thirty bishops replaced, claiming they had been collaborators with the Nazis. As a historian accustomed to evaluating evidence, Roncalli demanded to see evidence for the alleged collaboration with the Nazis. Going through the files that the government gave him, he concluded that 27 of the bishops were not in fact Nazi collaborators; indeed, one of them had just been released from a Nazi concentration camp. In the end, Roncalli had three bishops removed, gaining much respect for his level-headedness.

The archbishop of Paris, Cardinal Emmanuel Celestin Suhard, had initiated a “worker priest” experiment. Young priests would take factory jobs and get to know their real people and conduct informal masses. Vatican officials did not like the idea at all, and conservative French Catholics denounced a variety of alleged abuses. Through the years, Roncalli declined to implement any crackdown on the experiment. And he befriended all the important personages in Paris, including Communists and Socialists. There was considerable theological ferment in France at the time, but the efforts to crack down on the “new theology” bypassed him since they were directed through the religious orders.

Cardinal Suhard died in 1949, and Roncalli recommended Archbishop Maurice Feltin of Bordeaux to replace him in Paris; Feltin was a noted anti-war figure and President of Pax Christi International. Pius XII, wanting to crack down on the worker priest experiment in 1953, decided to “promote” Roncalli to get him out of the way. Roncalli and Feltin were made cardinals, and Roncalli sent to Venice as the “Patriarch” archbishop at age 71.

In Venice, Cardinal Roncalli had the happiest years of his life. At last he was a pastor. He made numerous visits, erected new parishes, and welcomed everyone, even Communists, to his office. Anyone who wanted to see him, no matter how humble, could simply show up on a publicized day of the week and see him in his office.

Pope Pius XII died in 1958. Never one to delegate much authority, he had failed to appoint many cardinals or, for that matter, create many new dioceses with bishops for the expanding Church. There were only 55 cardinals, two inside the Soviet empire and unavailable to go to Rome. Twenty-four of the cardinals were older than Roncalli. In fact, Pius XII had never convened the cardinals, so that the non-Italians had never met. The obvious choice to be pope, Giovanni Montini, had been sent to Milano as archbishop at the instigation of anti-modernists and was never named a cardinal,. Roncalli was a compromise between the majority of non-Italians, especially the French, and the Vatican curialists. The announcement that he was elected and that he would be called *John* came as a complete surprise. The last Pope John was a pirate anti-pope in the fifteenth century, who had the number XXIII; the historian Roncalli’s selection of that name was something of an inside joke on his part. Always overweight, the new unexpected pope was something of a problem for the papal tailor; there was no white cassock big enough for him. For his first day of appearances and ceremonies, Pope John wore a surplus over safety pins in front that held the a large cassock together.

Almost from the first, though not letting the cardinals know, John wanted a council in order to set policies for the whole Church, not merely the Vatican. He wanted it to prioritize human dignity and social justice over property claims. He wanted to welcome the world and stop condemning everything new as “modernist” and everyone left of center as “communist.” He wanted to make the liturgy accessible to ordinary people. He wanted to de-centralize the governance of the Church. And he wanted friendly interfaith relations. In his brief pontificate and the council that continued after his death, most of these objectives would be met. His 1961 encyclical, *Mater et Magistra*, was a clear continuation of Pope Leo XIII’s approach to social issues.

Vatican officials tried to slow down the preparations for the Council, hoping Pope John would die before it could convene, but the pope pushed the process along. Meanwhile, he appointed a large number of cardinals and bishops, creating a progressive majority for the Council. When the Council convened in October 1962, during the Cuban Missile Crisis, its majority rejected all the schemata (draft documents) that the curialists had proposed, but one, on the liturgy. Amidst the events surrounding the opening of the council and Pope John’s behind-the-scenes efforts to get the Kennedy and Khrushchev governments to negotiate an end to the Cuban Missile Crisis, John was working on his major encyclical, *Pacem in Terris*, on world peace, to be published in April 1963. As it was published, John was working hard, making annotations on a new set of schemata for the next session of the Second Vatican Council.

Montini, now a cardinal, was a leader of the Council majority. After Pope John XXIII died in early June, 1963, the cardinals would elect him pope, and he took the name Paul VI as a reference to the sixteenth century Pope Paul III, who made a decision to continue the Council of Trent. The remaining sessions and much of Paul VI’s papacy were devoted to John’s program.

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**Social Reconstruction for the Twenty-First Century**

Anthony J. Blasi[[16]](#footnote-16)

In 1919, following what was called “The Great War,” the executive committee of the National Catholic Welfare Council (predecessor of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops) issued a *Bishops’ Program of Social Reconstruction*, which had been drafted by Father John A. Ryan. While some in the hierarchy and elsewhere considered it too socialist and radical, it became a highly influential statement that inspired much of the New Deal legislation a quarter of a century later. The statement began:

The ending of the Great War has brought peace. But the only safeguard of peace is social justice and a contented people. The deep unrest so emphatically and so widely voiced throughout the world is the most serious menace to the future peace of every nation and of the entire world. Great problems face us. They cannot be put aside; they must be met and solved with justice to all.

While there is much to be said for the proposals found in the 1919 statement, it was subsequently recognized to comprise only a beginning. Today our emergencies are not attributable to a great war between nations or to a simple struggle between capital and labor, but to injustices within and between nations and threats to the environment, even the global climate. So what would an updated contemporary statement on social reconstruction look like? Here a draft is essayed.

*Income Fairness*

In the post-World War II era, some three decades after the 1919 *Bishops’ Program*, one working person’s income could support a household adequately. Since the 1950s, it is not uncommon that two income streams provide barely enough for a family to get by without governmental assistance. It is not an unreasonable expectation that one person’s full-time employment at useful work support a household adequately. Though we dare not dispense with government programs for the working poor under present circumstances, there should be no need for people working full-time to depend on food stamps, housing assistance, supplements for medical insurance premiums, and the like. Hence people speak of a “living wage.” The term is short-hand not only for the amount of income paid workers but also such benefits as health insurance, retirement, and paid vacations.

One positive social change that has occurred since 1919 is the greater and more equitable access to employment by women. Consequently, a living wage should not be thought of exclusively in terms of one employed person in a household having a job; two people, for example, could each have half-time gainful work. Or one could have a three-quarters job and one a quarter one. For such flexible arrangements to nevertheless bring in a living wage, part-time jobs should be compensated at levels proportionate to the fraction of a full-time job that they represent. This means that a half-time job should be compensated with half the income that a full-time job brings in, with half as much in retirement, paid vacation, and other benefits. The principle calls for pro-rated compensation for pro-rated work.

The problem with the manner in which part-time work is compensated is dramatic in higher education. A clear injustice is perpetrated on part-time adjunct faculty, who conduct one or two courses without “fringe benefits” and at per course pay levels that would add up to far less than a living wage if an adjunct conducted four or five courses per term. Those who are administratively responsible for hiring part-time adjuncts are often embarrassed at what low pay levels the directives from higher administration allow. Of course, it serves the career purposes of higher administration to “reduce costs” and cover more and more courses with such adjuncts than with full-time professors. At the present time, there are more part-time adjuncts than there are full-time professors in American higher education. Not only have our higher administrators thereby succeeded in transforming a higher education system that was once the world’s envy into merely token undergraduate education accompanied by research centers, they have also perpetrated a massive injustice on part-time instructors. This can only be rectified by making it illegal and therefore impossible to “save money” by paying adjuncts at a lower level of compensation per credit hour than full-time professors, where qualifications are roughly equivalent. In other lines of work, it is often young people, either as interns or as casual workers, who are paid at lower rates than full-time workers. Apart from allowances for qualifications and genuine experience, compensation should be pro-rated from that of permanent full-time personnel.

*Labor Rights*

Collective bargaining is an example of engaging in business. Labor as a commodity (i.e., a saleable property) is organized by a collective, much as corporations organize their capital for purposes of engaging in business. It is a fine legal point whether “right to work” laws preventing labor unions from collecting dues from all workers covered by a negotiated contract (in essence, a form of exclusive contract) are constitutional (see Article I Section 10, which says no state shall pass any law impairing the obligation of contracts). Nevertheless, “right to work” laws are infringements on the scope of employees’ prerogative to engage in commerce and are therefore inherently unjust. All such laws should be repealed.

*Automation*

The mechanization of productive work has been responsible for the elimination of many employment opportunities. This has been progressing for quite some time, since the era in which tractors and motor-driven harvesters began to replace animal and human labor in agriculture. Late in the last century robots replaced humans in many of the manufacturing centers. Demagogues in both right-wing and left-wing politics, taking advantage of a general xenophobia, have blamed the loss of jobs on international trade. The fact is that corporations are unwilling to hire teams of human workers to do what a machine can do in a more cost-effective manner.

First, it is reasonable to demand that mechanized manufacturing actually be more efficient than comparable work done by humans. This means that corporations should not be accorded tax breaks for mechanized equipment; whenever the machines are actually more efficient they do not need to be subsidized by tax breaks. Furthermore, the full social costs of mechanized equipment need to be quantified and included in the operating costs of mechanized equipment. Something like that would occur with the “carbon tax” proposal: The cost of taking carbon pollution out of the atmosphere should be assessed from persons or corporations that put the carbon pollution into the atmosphere. A similar approach should be taken toward other kinds of pollution and contamination, such as those produced by “fracking” in the natural gas industry and by cement factories.

*Federal Taxation*

We have at present a federal tax system that taxes income more heavily when people work for it than it does when people do not work for it. The former, technically termed *earned income*, is what is reported as “wages, salaries, tips, etc.” and “business income” on the 1040 form. Business income is net income that someone earns by running a business, usually a small one. Unearned income comes usually in the form of dividends and capital gains. Earned income is taxed on a sliding “graduated” scale. Phony proposals for tax reform frequently call for reducing the number of gradations and lowering the rates on the higher incomes so that the result is less graduated than before. Actually, the complications in the tax code people complain about do not come from the number of gradations in the rate tables but in the special forms used for unearned income. These special forms set tax rates for dividends and capital gains that are lower than the ones applied to middle class people’s earned income (wages, salaries, tips, etc. and business income). A disingenuous argument for the lower tax rate for unearned income is that it spurs business; on the contrary, it would be lower rates on *earned* income that would spur business by expanding the consumer market. Similarly lowering the rates for business income (not to be confused with dividends and capital gains) would allow small businesses to plow more funds back into their enterprises.

One way of enhancing tax fairness is to redirect taxation from corporations to their investors, while forcing corporations to distribute their wealth to taxed investors and not concentrate corporate wealth in the corporations themselves. This necessitates either a regulatory framework that requires corporate funds that are not plowed back into the enterprise to be distributed to stock holders or a heavy tax on funds not plowed back into the enterprise. “Plowing back” must involve some productive use, not, for example, holding stores of valuable metals, art works, or real estate.

Tax fairness would include an estate tax of 100% for estates above some threshold figure (e.g., one million dollars). It is often argued that families would lose businesses under such a regime, thereby contributing to the concentration of business into large corporations. If it were made easy to convert inherited businesses into publically traded corporations, the proceeds could be readily auctioned off as shares, with a limitation on the percentage purchased by any one entity. While we are skittish in the United States about governmental power being inherited, and while our Constitution prohibits the conferral of noble titles, we nevertheless allow for the inheritance of wealth. Wealth is clearly one resource for the exercise of power. In classical economics, profit is justified as an incentive for people to invest their energies and wealth into productive activity, creating goods needed by people and sold in a competitive market. Creating huge accumulations of wealth for purposes of leaving a large estate for descendants who did nothing to earn it provides for no such incentive. While the vast majority of people learn to earn their way in the world and are deemed solid members of society when they do so, there is no reason for the descendants of the wealthy not to follow that same path.

In general, consumption taxes should be minimal; they tax lower and middle income people more heavily than higher income recipients because the former need to spend a larger proportion of their earnings on necessities while the latter can save and accumulate funds. The present federal tax on gasoline is not only such an unjust consumption tax, but it is also failing to finance sufficiently the transportation infrastructure needed by trucks and automobiles. It is therefore failing to serve as a users’ tax. It should be replaced by a mileage fee collected for the support of vehicle-related infrastructure. Moreover, tariffs on imports should be avoided; they comprise a sales tax—albeit at the wholesale rather than retail level—paid for the most part, ultimately, by people in the lower and middle income brackets.

*Property Taxes*

The operation of property tax schemes can be complicated, with multiple ways that injustices can enter in. First, properties need to be classified in such categories as agricultural, residential, commercial, and industrial. It is well known that some residential properties are disguised as agricultural and thus enjoy lower acreage tax rates. Properties need to be large and genuinely operating as agricultural enterprises before being categorized as agricultural. Second, properties need to be assigned values. For the typical residential lot, reasonably accurate market values can be determined by the purchase prices of nearby “comparables.” However, large unique mansions may have no genuine comparables nearby; whatever value is assigned can be contested in the civil legal system by wealthy owners, whose legal teams can be budgeted to outlast the financial resources of evaluation boards, resulting in out-of-court settlements favorable to the owners. A similar problem occurs with large-scale retail properties—malls and big box stores. Moreover, the market value of properties in neighborhoods deemed increasingly desirable increase, rendering the tax assessments a problem for long-term residents. Where local governments impose real estate property taxes, they should do so with a graduated scale by size, not value, so that the rate for a large property would be higher than for a small property; this would have the effect of encouraging small holdings. Moreover, the same rate scale should be applied to all non-agricultural properties in the local governmental jurisdiction.

*Power*

The democratic exercise of power through the franchise within limits delimited by rights is a form of power that respects the dignity of humans. That exercise takes the form not only of casting votes in openly contested elections but of participation through spoken discourse, writing, broadcasting, demonstrating, and campaigning. Because the foundation of a democratic society is the God-given (or an equivalent thereof, for non-believers) dignity of individual human persons, it is the individual citizen who has the right to make financial contributions to political candidates. That is to say, the eligibility for voting and holding office is the same as the eligibility for making financial contributions to candidates. Court precedents to the contrary need to be either re-litigated or reversed through the constitutional amendment process. Moreover, individual campaign contributions below some threshold amount comprise a public good and therefore should be encouraged by restoring their status as income tax deductions.

Some exercises of power pertain not to the state but to crafts and professions. Those who would enter into some lines of work should meet specified criteria as a matter of justice to consumers and others who depend on the craftsmanship and professionalism of those providing services. The standards necessary in a line of work should be set and enforced by those skilled and knowledgeable in the craft or profession in question. The college form of specialists is consequently an important contributor to the quality of life in a society. It needs to be employed in the awarding of research grants, the staffing of educational and medical entities, and the retention of workers in a wide variety of craft occupations.

In many matters, the prerogative of decision-making rightly pertains to the family. Whom to marry, the socialization of the young, the care of the infirm, where to seek employment, and what kind of employment to seek are family or individual family member matters. Ordinarily, neither the state nor employers should be determining who may marry whom, how children are to be reared, what options among medical procedures should be selected, where people live, or what crafts or professions people pursue. No one of these prerogatives is an absolute, however. Laws may prohibit polygamy, require general education, step in where an infirm person is neglected, empower craft and profession colleges to set standards, and prohibit habitation in flood zones and other unsafe places. Respect for the family as a traditional institution should, however, discourage efforts to render same-sex and inter-racial marriages illegal, deny access to quality education to those seeking it, deny medical care to those who need it, set up arbitrary barriers to various kinds of employment, or restrict immigration or emigration.

*Subsidiarity*

The principle of subsidiarity holds that a higher or larger organizational entity should not interfere in the internal life of a lower or smaller organization, depriving the latter of its functions, but rather should support it in case of need and help to co-ordinate its activity with the activities of the rest of society, always with a view to the common good. There is some similarity between subsidiarity and federalism, but federalism does not hold that the higher entity should help lower ones and in general does not extend to occupational groups or to families, and it makes no reference to the common good.

In the American framework, most criminal law, intra-state transportation, and education pertain to the states rather than the federal government. There is no well-worked out framework, however, for identifying what pertains to counties and municipalities. It remains to be established, for example, what falls within the purview of local governments and what pertains to the state. Threats to health and safety that arise from activities at the local level obviously should fall within the purview of local governments. This includes such things as ordinances designed to preserve trees, control emissions of air pollutants, restrict single-use plastic bags, set speed limits on local streets, establish and determine the location of elementary and secondary schools as well as hospitals, and provide for local policing agents and courts. States should be able to do some of these things, but in doing so should not force local standards to be less than state-wide standards. For example, states should be able to set state-wide maximum speed limits, but not thereby prevent municipalities from setting lower city-wide speed limits. States should be able to set automobile efficiency standards, but not thereby prevent counties from setting more stringent ones.

A framework for the respective roles of states, local governments, professions, and families in the education of the young also needs to be worked out. States should provide for the establishment and financing of elementary and secondary schools and require that children be educated. It is not the case, however, that states should make personnel decisions for the schools, assign students to particular classes, or interfere with parents’ efforts to match their children’s needs with appropriate schools.

One source of income for county and municipal governments should be a tax on income earned within the boundaries of a jurisdiction. People who reside outside a city or county but use the city or county roads to reach their workplace and who benefit from police protection within the city or county should pay some tax on the basis of where they work rather than on where they live.

*Education*

Education is a good that both benefits individuals and contributes to the common good. The contemporary world is one in which knowledge and, especially, skills of inquiry and analysis are a valuable form of cultural capital. There is technical knowledge which is task-specific and can serve, usually on a short-term basis, in an employment setting, and there is a general competence that is useful for advancement into decision-making and policy-setting positions. The common good depends on general competence as much as upon task-specific technical knowledge. People suffer when bad decisions are made in either the private or the public sector. Democracy as a form of governance depends on a competent public.

States should fund elementary and secondary education, preferably with an income tax. The traditional reliance on property taxes for education is a vestige of a frontier settlement era in which land was the only significant capital at hand to be taxed for education. There is no rational reason to continue to rely on property taxes in that way. In fact, the concentration of people having similar income levels in the same areas results in the emergence of rich and poor school districts, and this circumstance undermines the very democratizing purpose of public education. Moreover, as property values increase in strategically located neighborhoods in municipalities, the property taxes become insupportable in “gentrifying” areas. That forces often long-term residents to sell their properties and move away, thereby undermining social relationships at the neighborhood level. When states fund education, they can do so by apportioning funds among counties on the basis of the population sizes of school-age children.

Children with special needs and special potential require more funding than most children. Counties are generally sufficiently large to budget for the needs of all categories of student and sufficiently small to make special provisions. Under present practice, geographically-defined school districts—either within counties or corresponding to whole counties—have school boards elected to govern schools. A century ago such geographically-defined districts made sense because children walked to school. Since that is no longer the case, any group of people in a county who wish to organize an elected school board, wherever in a county they live, should be able to hold an election and govern one or more schools. How large such a group needs to be is a practical matter that can be set by a county government. It should not matter whether the school district’s group of citizens agreeing to vote for the board of that district defines itself by residential location, educational philosophy, culture, or religion; so long as it meets state and county standards it should be entitled to receive the state funding through the county, based on the number of students who will be attending the district’s school(s). This would differ from “voucher” schemes insofar as all the schools would be public schools.

To receive public funds, a school must conform to the general state curriculum as set forth on entirely secular grounds. Consultations with professional groups of educators and researchers must be involved in the establishment of state curriculum standards. Moreover, teachers who conduct courses within the framework of the general state curriculum should be paid directly by the county according to a common county-wide compensation framework; no district receiving public money would pay according to a less-generous framework than any other district. The state should license teachers, but counties should be able to add additional local licensing requirements according to local needs. The county should nominate teachers for positions within the districts, and the districts select (or veto) applicants from among the nominees. The selection or non-selection of teachers of subjects within the general state curriculum should not discriminate on the basis of race, national origin, religion, gender, sexual orientation, age, or veteran status. If a district wishes to add a distinctive curriculum to its offerings, it should be able to do so, but not using public funds. A citizen may cast a vote in the school district board election of his or her choice. A parent should expect to be charged additional fees for any added courses in the ethnic or religious school. Parents who do not want their children to attend public schools are responsible for homeschooling or funding private school educations.

*Law Enforcement*

The purpose of criminal statutes and their enforcement is the protection of persons and property from theft, destruction, and violence. The possession and use of such mild drugs as alcohol and marijuana should not be a criminal matter for adults, though operating boats, vehicles, and dangerous machinery and using guns and other weapons “under the influence” should be. Addictive “hard drugs” should be treated as a medical problem for the user, though a criminal matter for the manufacturers and distributors.

The purpose of the penal system is to isolate people prone to dangerous behavior from the general population, to deter violations of criminal law, to make a public statement about unacceptable conduct, and to rehabilitate the convicted. Making it impossible for a convicted person to even be considered for most employment opportunities does not further any of these purposes; that is why people speak of “banning the box,” referring to a check-box about prior convictions that appears on many job application forms. Similarly, the death penalty does not further any of these purposes beyond what life-time incarceration can achieve. The death penalty does render the reversal of wrongful convictions impossible, costs the public vast sums of money that can be put to better public purposes, and lessens the value placed on life.

Prosecutor offices need to be sufficiently staffed to make “speedy trials” a reality. Prison after a conviction, not detention prior to trial, should be the actual punishment.

*Health and Medicine*

There are several different models for the provision of health care. The private practice model emerged in an era in which practitioners often did not complete medical school training and rarely specialized; they carried no great student loan debt such as that which now deters people from entering medical school. Physicians also responded to accidents and bouts of sickness rather than conduct checkups and provide advice for preventing illness. Advances in medicine, especially preventative vaccination regimes, have resulted in longer average life spans and, significantly, longer health spans so that the time spent in bad health at the end of the health span and before death has been shortened; consequently nursing home stays are shortening. The result is that far more medical care is now needed in old age, typically at an age most people did not even reach a century ago. Consequently, the contemporary form of the private medical practice model takes the form of insurance coverage associated with the workplace and for senior citizens socialized insurance (Medicare).

Private insurance for those below age 65 came to be associated with employment entirely by happenstance as a result of wage controls put in place during World War II. The war occasioned a labor shortage, but employers were not allowed to compete for workers by raising wages. So the employers began to offer medical insurance as an inducement for workers to work for them. As the costs of medical treatment and medical insurance increased, employers began to drop or minimize the medical insurance they offered at the workplace. The Affordable Care Act (“Obamacare”) attempted solve a problem of uninsured people obtaining hospital emergency room service, which raised the cost of medical care in general, by mandating health insurance. It also addressed the problem of the high cost of medical insurance by subsidizing it for lower income people through the income tax code. It set up online exchanges so that an actual competitive marketplace for private insurance would operate. As originally conceived, it called for a “public option” insurance plan for people to choose; this would have been to offer public insurance in markets where the private sector did not make insurance available. The program is working in most places, but because Congress deleted the public option provision the program is not working in some markets. Moreover, because of the increasing income gap between the wealthy and a large portion of the public, the plan will require an ever-increasing subsidy through the tax code.

Socialized insurance, with a pubic single payer, is similar to Medicare, Medicaid for the poor, and the Canadian model for medical insurance. While it takes the profit motive out of insurance, it is subject to negotiations between the public insurance sector and the private medical practice sector. When the prices paid providers by the insurance agency do not satisfy the providers, they might drop out of the plan (as many do under Medicare) or even go on strike (as has occurred in Canadian provinces). Some favor a single-payer system for the United States, though they seldom go into detail whether it would be operated by the states that opt into it or by a federal agency.

Socialized medicine, where the government funds medical care and staffs clinics and hospitals, is the British system. The British public appears to be quite satisfied with government medicine. The United States provides socialized medicine for veterans, but it has had mixed results with VA medicine. One might question whether American culture would fit the British model as well as British culture seems to.

It seems most reasonable for the United States to add a “public option” to its present Affordable Care Act, but also to allow states to establish a single payer system for their citizens. But it should not be left at that. There is a shortage of medical personnel, especially physicians. State university medical schools need to be greatly expanded and made more accessible. The entry requirements need to be reviewed to determine whether they actually contribute to the quality of medicine practiced by graduating physicians. At present, the nation is too dependent on immigrant physicians in the sense that other nations are being deprived of their medical doctors and potential U.S. students are being artificially denied access to U.S. medical schools.

*Higher Education*

College and university education furthers the common good by inducing the young to develop a general competence. Anyone who has worked in higher education can notice the difference in competence between the typical first year student and the typical fourth-year student. Such competence develops best when the curriculum is challenging, where reasonability is a virtue, the company is diverse, and administrative control is minimal. Some students begin to thrive by gaining confidence in a non-competitive setting such as the typical community college. Some thrive where there is interaction with professors and among students in the small college setting. Still others respond favorably when they find themselves “at sea” in a large university and begin constructing a coherent intellectual response on their own. None of these kinds of response correspond to income brackets or even intellectual potential.

In general, higher education should be tuition-free. States need to be serious about higher education as a public good to be provided for from public funds. People used to complain about the cost of college-level texts, but technology has greatly changed that. Appropriate materials can be posted online under passwords by libraries now, and texts in the traditional sense can be made available at much lower cost than in hard copy form. This leaves living expenses; it makes sense to direct grant and loan programs to living expenses.

*Pluralism*

Diversity is a demographic juxtaposition of a variety of races, cultures, linguistic groups, religions, and nationalities. A minimal condition for peace and justice in a diverse society is tolerance of difference. However, peace and justice are more likely to prevail where there are not only diversity and tolerance but pluralism, a prevalent attitudinal stance of favoring, relishing, and rejoicing in diversity.

The Fourteenth Amendment to the *Constitution of the United States* marks not only an outcome of the American Civil War but a civilizational achievement. “All persons born or naturalized in the United States, and subject to the jurisdiction thereof, are citizens of the United States and of the State wherein they reside.” The Amendment sets forth a unitary citizenship, not one with more or fewer rights, not one with gradations or legal classes. “No State shall make or enforce any law which shall abridge the privileges or immunities of citizens of the United States; nor shall any State deprive any person of life, liberty, or property, without due process of law; nor deny to any person within its jurisdiction the equal protection of the laws.” While the Amendment set forth a framework for life in a diverse society, it took almost a century for the courts, Congress, and legislatures to apply that framework consistently to interstate commerce and transportation, education, public employment, finance, and the conduct of elections. Resistance to diversity still exists, which is to say that we as a nation have achieved a level of multiculturalism and diversity, but not yet full pluralism. Resistance against diversity is most evident in education and the drawing of the boundaries of legislature and congressional districts. The proposal outlined above to equalize per-student appropriations by states for elementary and secondary education is a step to address this problem. A policy of drawing legislature and congressional district lines so as to maximize an equivalence of population totals represented, contiguity, nearness of fit to equilateral rectangles and to minimize the mix of urban and rural counties would be another way to undermine efforts to dilute the power of minority groups.

*Environment*

Human action on the environment embraces science, conservation, non-pollution, and clean-up. There was a consensus favorable to science for generations; however, when technology has enabled specialists to discover the bad effects of burning coal and petroleum, a well-funded political movement to discredit, ignore, and stifle scientific inquiry has been set in motion. Past efforts to oppose science were funded by the tobacco industry, and the gun lobby promoted federal legislation that is still in effect forbidding researchers from publishing federally-funded data that reveal the dangers associated with the ownership of firearms The current attacks on science argue that specialists have a nefarious agenda of some kind and that they are perpetrating some kind of hoax about the dangers of coal and petroleum. They would have us take the word of high profile politicians who have only a legal training and who receive campaign contributions from coal and petroleum interests, and they would have us not take the word of scientists who dedicate themselves to research, submit their findings to anonymous peer review, and have actual data at hand. There is even an effort to decommission satellites that collect data on the climate. Meanwhile, ice shelfs near the North Pole melt and temperature-sensitive coral reefs in the South Pacific die.

Conservation includes both preserving natural habitat and using fewer resources. Natural habitats work as ecological systems wherein different species depend on one another. Disrupting ecological systems frequently has untoward, sometimes unanticipated consequences, including the endangerment of species that might become extinct. A frequent stratagem for preserving natural habitats is setting geographical areas aside and excluding them from industrial exploitation. The use of fewer resources includes such stratagems as zero- or near-zeroscapes and using more efficient electrical devices. It also involves recycling.

Generating electricity from sunlight or wind rather than from burning fossil fuels and replacing automobile use with mass transit are examples of non-pollution. Chemicals in such varied products as fertilizers, cooling devices, spray cans, and fuels need to be replaced by less harmful substances. Because no satisfactory solution has been found for the problem of radio-active waste having long half-lives, there is a need to phase out nuclear energy. All this has required governmental regulations that vested interests have lobbied against.

Environmental cleanup has tended to focus on dramatic cases of concentrated poisons. There is a “superfund” mechanism for cleaning up industrial sites contaminated with poisons, and much has been done to restore Lake Erie; the Cuyahoga River, which feeds into Lake Erie, occasionally caught on fire. There is yet a need to address the problem of clouds of smoke emanating from clearing land by means of fire in “third world” settings and removing plastic deposits from the oceans, a problem to which the “first world” contributes.

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Surely there are many other aspects of a social reconstruction that could be considered. Those identified above should be seen as a point of departure for further discussion. In general, the endeavor is to maximize individual goods and the common good.

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**Social Science and Well-formed Consciences**

Anthony J. Blasi

Those of us who lived in the last century know that racism was the fundamental social and moral issue of the era. People argued about it under the heading *Colonialism* in much of the world, but the United States had its own vocabulary of *civil rights* and *equality*. A world war was premised on the issue of racism, and in our own nation we witnessed the halting and contested implementation of the Fourteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, which mandated the equal protection of the law at all levels. Today we still encounter racism among gangs inside prisons, among demagogue politicians, and, strangely, among police officers, who target minorities for nuisance traffic stops and occasionally for brutalization, and additionally among Border Patrol agents who destroy water rations in desert locations near the southwestern border. Most of the public, especially among the younger age groups, reject such racism. Even the followers of racist demagogues in our politics include among their number people who inhabit a sub-world of denial and media-promoted delusion that knows of no racism this side of the struggle in the 1960s to end the legislated segregation of schools, theaters, cafes, and water.

Many racists-in-denial are highly churched people. They often belong to the big non-denominational churches where clerical propagandists promote pseudo-biblical campaigns against sexual minorities and for the verbalization of a great number of prayers and god-talk. Many others belong to liturgical churches, including the Catholic Church, where salvation is secured by avoiding or repenting of sexual sin, and where one will find a great number of prayers if not god-talk. The moral scope is narrow; it fails to be proactive or sensitive to large issues. Somehow racism does not really count in the conscience, nor do war, the treatment of migrants, the state’s use of the death penalty, or the ruination of the supportive natural environment that God gave us.

The problem, in traditional terms, is that of an unformed conscience. People’s operative awareness has notable gaps and obscured sectors; it lacks compass. They were taught by their parents to seek truth in the natural sciences and not to lie in interpersonal relations, but their parents were not too keen on history, economics, anthropology, and sociology. They learn not to murder, maim, steal, and rape from the criminal law, as mediated by the entertainment industry; however, they remain morally immune to matters of war, to shortcomings in medical insurance, economic injustice, and human trafficking. Moreover, they hear little if anything about the larger issues in church because their clergy have consciences that differ little from their own.

How is this so? There are surely church teachings about war and peace, about just economic conditions and the rights of migrants and workers. Are the clergy not versed in moral theology? They are, but moral theology without social science in the modern world is a one-ended bridge. The bishops at the Second Vatican Council knew this and called for a new formulation of moral theology, but Catholic Church officials hesitated at the first dilemma where demography and conventional teachings about birth control led in different directions. The scientific conclusion of demography pointed to the impoverishment of individual families, something Christian values would lead one to avoid; the conventional teachings forbad contraception, the most practical form of birth control. The new formulations of moral theology ceased, apart from efforts to repeat old teachings with less unpersuasive arguments. Demography and the other social sciences mentioned so often in the Council documents became taboo. The only genuinely innovative moral theology—liberation theology—was treated like a heresy.

One of the early sociologists, Frederic Le Play (1806-1882), collected a vast amount of empirical data on the working class in Europe; he found that the stability of the family as an institution was vital to the well-being of the people he studied. He also observed that religion was highly important, and toward the end of his life he converted to Catholicism. He had an enormous impact on Catholic intellectual life, but Church interest has not led beyond the conclusion that the family is important. Yes, the family is still important; it is easy to demonstrate that with statistics on economic well-being and educational outcomes, but what about dysfunctional or abusive family situations? What are the effects of second marriage families, blended families, same-sex marriage families? Are religious policies concerning divorce and remarriage supportive of children’s well-being or destructive? There are research reports on such matters, but one will not see them cited in contemporary church documents.

There are areas of inquiry beyond family studies. What are the real effects of minimum wage increases? Do people who can work continue to do so if there is a guaranteed annual income? Are there thresholds of public transit access at which people choose to use public transit rather than private cars? Does single-payer medical insurance work? Is there anything to racialist theories? What impact does the experience of prejudice and discrimination have on subsequent chronic disease? Is religiosity related to positive health outcomes because of stress-buffering? Does the death penalty deter? Church officials and their people have teachings about minimum wages, environmental pollutant reduction, medical insurance, race, prejudice, discrimination, the care for the elderly, and the death penalty, but they seem to be impressively incurious about the relevant social scientific research. Why is this so?

When the American political conservative movement disapproved of the findings of the social sciences, it pressured major universities to eliminate programs in sociology and funded the creation of “entrepreneurship” programs. Most of the major universities declined to bow to the pressure. Something similar happened in Catholic education when bishops no longer wanted to hear about the demographic pressure on the well-being of families and wanted no longer to read about the rejection of their pet theologies by priests and people. Priests were no longer being sent to study sociology and establish pastoral planning offices. Some Catholic colleges eliminated sociology and anthropology and promoted criminal justice departments in their place. At the present, Catholic University of America does not have a credible sociology department, despite the impressive heritage of such figures as William Kerby, Paul Hanly Furfey, Hart Nelson, and Dean Hoge. Most significantly, theology schools, in most cases, lack any courses in “Religion and Society.”

It is standard procedure in moral theology to assemble the facts of a case before applying any value analyses. Knowing the facts cannot be left to happenstance but needs to be pursued in as adequate a manner as possible. It is not simply a procedural nicety of moral theology; it is a moral imperative to be informed factually in matters of moral significance. Moral stands absent a grasp of relevant realities lack moral weight; one should pay no attention to them. So one must ask, how credible can the moral teachings of our clergy be if they have little or no background in the study of the larger questions of our world?

**205.**

**Sport and Paid Patriotism**

Anthony J. Blasi

Athletic teams have long been part of the social scene on college and university campuses. What began as a way to keep male adolescents occupied became in turn entertainment and then a fund-raising venture. Now, big-time sport is all but a requirement in higher education. In some settings it has been a corrupting influence, no longer the occasion for healthy competition that it once was. I myself once faced the wrath of an irate administration when I insisted that members of a high profile football team were to write their own examinations. Elsewhere the next year—that it was elsewhere was no surprise—older professors regaled me with stories of basketball players “practicing” evenings in a certain outdoor location and making their arrangements with bookmakers. Even when coaches and administrations sought to run clean programs that offered student athletes genuine opportunity, the arrangement could result in the exploitation of hapless young adults by multi-million dollar organizations; see the ethnography of a top university basketball team by Patricia and Peter Adler (*Backboards and Blackboards*, 1991). Despite all, many athletes who become professional athletes gain genuine educations in the process.

I worked in a public historically African American university for seventeen years. Its glory days in intercollegiate competition were long in the past. The coaches were interested in placing their most promising players in the professional teams while running clean programs so that the student athletes could acquire an education; the football coach would peer into my classes to make sure his players were where they were supposed to be. The tutors were located down the hall from my office; they were erstwhile and hard working. It was a classy operation. I think what was most important was the compressed schedule of workouts, practices, classes, and games, which demanded a higher level of discipline than most eighteen-year-olds could imagine. I am confident that a good number of athletes who go on to professional leagues do so with solid habits of thinking and analyzing, based in part on their educations and in part on the practice of reading opponents’ plays and articulating their own teams’ plays with situations.

Is it any surprise when members of professional sports teams engage in social protest, and are right on point when they do so? There is no time to do so in the course of the games, and there is not much point in doing so when not in the public limelight. And when their government—national, state, and local—fails to live up to the national ideals, the protest befits the ceremonials performed per custom prior to the games. The athletes, after all, are citizens, not circus animals, and they are often intelligent educated citizens at that. No doubt there are some who are not particularly enlightened, but the person often pointed to, Ty Cobb, was a victim of slander; he was actually supportive of the racial integration of his sport and supportive of education.

Unfortunately, the field of professional athletics has become the occasion for promoting the military. The Pentagon spends millions of dollars to polish the image of the armed forces, if not war itself, with camouflage versions of team jerseys and even warplane flyovers before games. In the past, football teams stayed out of sight during the national anthem, but as soon as the Pentagon money entered the scene the players were trotted out as props in the ceremonies. The Roots Action online organization (endorsed by Jim Hightower, Barbara Ehrenreich, Cornel West, Daniel Ellsberg, Glenn Greenwald, Naomi Klein, Bill Fletcher Jr., Laura Flanders, former U.S. Senator James Abourezk, Frances Fox Piven, Lila Garrett, Phil Donahue, Sonali Kolhatkar, and many others) summarizes the situation this way:

The U.S. military has paid the National Football League many **millions of public dollars** to praise the military. Until 2009 NFL football teams were not even on the field yet when the national anthem was played at games. The militarized culture of permanent wars for "freedom" has been eroding our rights and our freedom of expression steadily for years now -- to the point that when several athletes protested police killings, they were accused of "disrespecting our troops."

Once it is evident that the National Football League—and who knows how many other leagues—is in the pay of the military, the pre-game ceremonials lose their credibility as reflections of genuine and spontaneous loyalty and take on the quality of “paid patriotism,” i.e., propaganda.

Maybe if our governmental apparatus, from the president down to the local police officer, actually respected citizens with liberty and justice for all, patriotism would not have to be a budget item, but might appear spontaneously. And the genuine respect for the ideals expressed in the Declaration of Independence and given legal force in the Fourteenth Amendment would be honored by the national symbols, not the national symbols being given paid-for prominence at the cost of those ideals.

**206.**

**Step Ladder to Peace**

Tom Keene

(St. Mary’s University, San Antonio, 9/21/15)

  Let me begin by telling you a bald faced lie. You and we have no power to do anything about the wars, refugees, violence, hunger, and poverty of the world. There is nothing we can do about it because that is the way things are, the way we are, and we are powerless. Nothing we do will make a difference. All we can do is go along. Real power comes from what is outside us, like money and guns.

In the next few minutes we will unmask that lie and claim for ourselves the truth that we not only ***have*** power but that we ***are*** power.

Picture a step ladder with three steps planted solidly on the ground. The top step is peace, the middle step is justice, the first step is power. With that we consider how we can’t get to peace without first getting to justice. There can be no peace without justice. We see that demonstrated in Ferguson, Missouri.

What is justice? Justice happens when we practice a basic principle of our humanity**: From** **each** according to their ability, **to** each according to their need. Where do we see that kind of justice? If we look carefully, we can find it right under our noses. We **see** it in the family, not all families, but in the families that work as families. Sharing, caring, holding together.

Then there is the first step, power. Justice can never be established without the exercise of power. We are not talking the outside powers of money and guns. We are talking the inside powers that come from our very being. Our Declaration of Independence alludes to these powers when it tells us that governments get ***their*** powers from the **consent of the governed**.

I once told a high school freshman that a certain homework assignment was optional, he didn’t **have** to do it. He replied, “The only thing I **have** to do is die.” He understood and claimed his power.

Then there is the ground on which stands the step ladder. Without being grounded on something **solid** the step ladder doesn’t work. So too with the power that brings justice that brings peace. That power is planted on the solidity of being. Being who we are within ourselves and being what we are with others and on the commonness we share with the universe and all-that-is.

This calls for some thoughtful considerations.

We can start at the bottom: the ground of our being, then to the power that flows from being, then the justice that flows from power, then the peace that flows from justice.

 All being has power, energy. This energy, modern physicists tell us, pervades the universe such that the universe ***is***energy. That includes us, since we are part of this universe. So much for the lie that we are powerless. Indeed, not only do we have power, we ***are*** power.

Let us consider this ground of power that is the universe and that we are. Picture two lines intersecting: one vertical, the other horizontal, a cross. The vertical line represents the **unique** power in which we are grounded as our being the one **particular** person we are. No one else has this particular power. It is unique to us. The ancient Romans called it our genius and understood that each and every one of us has genius and is one.

 The horizontal line is the power we share in common with the universe and with our sisters and brothers in the human family.  We can call that power solidarity.

We can think of the vertical line as Frank Sinatra singing, “I did it my way,” and the horizontal line as Barbara Streisand singing, “People who need people are the luckiest people in the world.”

At the intersection of these lines is the Source empowering both lines. Accessing that Source is the key to finding in ourselves and others the power that generates the justice which generates peace.

There are many ways to access that Source of power. Here are two ways readily available to us: action and meditation.

A religion teacher was asked, “What is meditation?” The question surprised him. He said, “I don’t know. Let me think about it.” Days later his two year old daughter came to him and gestured with her arms she wanted to be picked up. As he held her she laid her head on his shoulder. After a few minutes she wiggled to be let down. As she toddled off, the teacher had his answer….. Meditation is being **quiet** with someone you love…and who loves you. It’s just that simple for kids, but for us adults it takes some thought and then practice.

Let’s put ourselves in the mind and body of that child, her head on her father’s shoulder. She gets energy from him. He from her. Each feeds the other with the energy of their unique being **and** the energy of their **common** being, their community as family. Their solidarity. The same happens in meditation with our Source. Life nourishes life. It is the way of the universe. The way of discovering our completeness, our wholeness, even our holiness.

In meditation we look within ourselves, where lies our deepest being, the **root** of our being, the **ground** of our being, the **Source** of all being. It is all there, within, waiting for us. The elders tell us we should all meditate twenty minutes a day, unless we don’t have time. If we don’t have time we should meditate an hour a day.

Each of us is called to find our own way in meditation. As did the girl who found her father’s shoulder. We do whatever works. We learn from others and from trial and error. Eventually, we get it right. And like the girl, we know and feel we are not alone.

Another way to access the Source of power, along with meditation, is to take action. Action is a measure of commitment. There’s a story of the pig and chicken observing a sign that read BREAKFAST: BACON AND EGGS. The pig said to the chicken. For you, eggs are a generous gift, for me, bacon is commitment.

 Commitment is that to which we give our lives. It’s like choosing a marriage partner, choosing to have or adopt children. In turn, such choosing, such commitment is a measure of our **freedom**. Freedom to expand ourselves, to become more than what we were. Such choices are risky. Anything can go wrong. But we say to ourselves, “Damn the torpedoes. Full speed ahead.”

We learned to swim by getting **in** the water. We learned to ride a bike by getting **on** it. We learn action by getting **into** it. It may seem risky at first, speaking out for justice, joining with justice and peace **action** groups, people who don’t just talk the talk, but walk the walk.

But in taking risks, we experience power, power to choose, power to act. These risky actions transform us. We become more than we were before.

Also, in taking action, we experience not just our power, but also our limitations. That can move us to meditate, to look within, **consider** our weakness, embrace it, let our very weakness become our true power. This may sound paradoxical, but life itself is a paradox. The more we engage each paradox, the more we grow in making our lives a meaningful life.

It helps to understand that life charges us with two basic tasks. The first is to survive. Without survival life is over. [**Pause]** Our other task is to find a **meaning** for our life because survival without meaning is meaningless. It is our commitment to meaning that leads us to discover our inner powers, our power to work for justice, to facilitate peace. With this commitment to meaning, we engage power.

So let’s talk about power as the ladder’s first step to justice.

 It is through meditative action and activist meditation that we discover and realize we not only have power, we **are** power. We actually experienced this at birth: our lungs took in air, our voice broke out in cries, our eyes opened to see, our fingers opened and closed. Soon we crawled, walked, ran. Later we saw other kids riding bikes. We knew if they could do it so could we. After a few falls on our new bike we found that with earth’s gravity and a little forward momentum we could balance and go fast.

We saw other kids swim and believed we could too. With the help of others, we discovered we could float. The water actually held us up. And we swam. Only later did we encounter the lie that we had no power.

 The power we discover is power not **over** others but power **with** others. This ground-of-being-power is the power of love. A love that is organic, in that it grows in height, depth, breadth and length. A love that frees us to be the power we are. And frees us to become co-creative with the creative ground-of-being in evolving a just world at peace with itself.

Now, about Justice.

Only a people who believe we are powerless will take for granted a world that structures its global economy to deliver Coca Cola everywhere while everywhere hundreds of millions go hungry. Silence in the presence of injustice is not power but weakness. Habitual silence is complicity. When in the presence of injustice we declare the truth of justice we add to the tide of critical mass. It is this raising of awareness that inevitably erodes and dismantles injustice, and its many cousins: racism, violence, and poverty, to name just a few. History tells us that the 8,000 year old institution of slavery was outlawed in just 100 years.

The just world and the peace we co-create with the Source begins with us. Like yeast in the dough of the world we initiate words, actions, events that promote justice. But what exactly is justice? It is simply this: the practice of living by one rule. That rule is: From each according to their ability, to each according to their need.

As we mentioned before, justice happens in families, not all but in many. It happens in families that work as functional families, where all commit to care for and support one another. Family and home is where food, shelter, clothing, and comfort abide equally for all. Home is where when we go there they take us in.

There are some among us that would say, “That is fine for some families, but this is a dog-eat-dog, devil take the hindmost world.” We have candidates for president who compete with one another to exclude the needy from the public agenda. One answer to these perspectives is the first sentence in the Constitution:

We the People of the United States, in order to form a more perfect union, establish **Justice**, insure domestic **Tranquility**, provide for the common defense, promote the general **welfare**, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America.

Does that sound a little like, “From each according to their ability, to each according to their need?” Isn’t that a principle of socialism? Consider this: In 1987 our nation celebrated the 200th anniversary of the Constitutional Convention. Hearst newspapers surveyed citizens as to what they understood about the Constitution. One question asked, “Is this in the Constitution? From each according to their ability, to each according to their need.” It is not in the Constitution, yet 46% answered yes. It would seem that the 46% think of our Constitution as an effort to get us, as a people, to work together as a family where we practice from each according to their ability, to each according to their need.

Our first step is to start consciously behaving like family with our own family. Then with friends, neighbors, classmates, and strangers. In doing that we experience our power to instigate justice and facilitate peace right here and now. Each of us alone and all of us together will discover ourselves as family, realize it, become it. For now, we do our part. The rest will follow as sure as dawn follows midnight.

We will become instruments of justice and peace. And what is peace? It is more than the absence of war, violence, and hunger. It is the presence of justice oozing out to all. For us, that presence begins with our own presence whenever and wherever we *be*. We are the yeast that gives new life to the dough of society. We are the spice that flavors conversations that raise awareness, denouncing injustice, advocating justice, offering alternatives to war, violence, and hunger. We are the catalyst that wakens sleeping powers in others, that urges that we not just talk the talk but walk the walk. And because **we** walk the walk, others will take us seriously and consider savoring for themselves the zest and spice of a meaningful life.

 As we reflect on the presence of injustices that breed war and violence, we remember that the lie that we are powerless **is** a lie. We remember that our silence in the presence of injustice is complicity. We consider what we will do about it. We may hear a voice within asking, “What **will** we do about this?” We can answer: Be patient. I’m getting ready. As we go forth, we know that the strength of this powerful universe and its Source go with us.

**207.**

**Sunday Frustration**

Anthony J. Blasi

Frustration. It is not a matter of things simply not being as we would have them be. We can have low expectations so that a bad turn of events is not a genuine disappointment. Frustration comes about when we see that a potential for good, in which we have invested ourselves, is stifled. The gospel has potential for good; it is “good news.” There are many goods in the gospel, some lesser than others. Sunday frustration occurs when we see the lesser goods promoted, even trivial ones, and the greater ones neglected.

To be precise, the gospel and the sacrament unite God’s children into one mystical body. “Mystical” refers to unfolding what is not readily evident; it is a genre of revelation. The mystical body emphasizes a unity among God’s children that the children themselves may not see. We live in a time in which it has become politically correct, in a perverse reversal, to denigrate, dismiss, and distance whole identity groups. Muslims are stereotyped as dangerous, and people who undoubtedly deem themselves brave stealthily vandalize mosques. With equal fear of discovery, self-styled warriors smear swastikas on synagogues. Kukluxers of an electronic age populate “social media.” The governor of Texas even wants police and other law enforcement offers to question “potential illegals” about their immigration status, taking us back to a time when the officers of the law acted as an occupation force lording it over Latinos. The president of the United States, claiming that allowing people from seven nations to travel in our nation is endangering us, has sought to place procedural barriers in the way of thousands of innocent people returning from family visits or uniting their families by crossing international boundaries. And nothing is said about all this in homilies! Is not the good news that God created us with an underlying unity being frustrated? Why must it be the secular courts that first show any interest in basic human rights?

It seems that Jesus knew frustration: “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, because you tithe mint, dill, and cumin, and have abandoned the weightier matters of the law: justice, mercy, and trust; one must do these things and not abandon those. 24Blind guides, straining out a gnat but swallowing a camel” (Matthew 23.23-24).

The usual rationale for clergy not preaching about the persecution of national minorities is that church officials should not engage in politics. Yet so much is being politicized! Is the mere political appeal to the baser propensities of strategically selected sectors of the electorate to be allowed to limit the compass of religious morality? The more totalitarian the regime, the more trivial the faith? There are religious lobbies in Austin and Washington, and these engage in politics, sometimes in the name of worthy causes and sometimes in the name of not so worthy ones. But engage politically they certainly do. Why must the consciences of the general laity be sheltered from such politics?

**208.**

**U.S. Embassy to Jerusalem? Unnecessary, Provocative**

Jacob J. Nammar

Now that [*Donald Trump*](http://www.mysanantonio.com/search/?action=search&channel=opinion%2Fcommentary&inlineLink=1&searchindex=gsa&query=%22Donald+Trump%22) is president of the United States, one of the most contentious foreign policy issues that has come up is moving the [*U.S. Embassy*](http://www.mysanantonio.com/search/?action=search&channel=opinion%2Fcommentary&inlineLink=1&searchindex=gsa&query=%22U.S.+Embassy%22) to Jerusalem.

For me, the question of Jerusalem is a personal one. I am Palestinian, and I was born in Jerusalem long before Israel was established. Mine was one of the city’s leading families, tracing our roots in the Holy Land for centuries. My family owned several tracts of valuable property in the Old City’s Christian Quarter.

In 1948, during what we Palestinians call al-Nakba, or “the great catastrophe,” hundreds of thousands of Palestinians were forced to flee from their land.

My family was walking to the German convent in Jerusalem to seek shelter when my father and oldest brother, Mihran, were abducted and imprisoned by Jewish militias looking to take over the land. My mother and her seven children (we ranged in age from 4 to 16) were placed in a fenced prison zone. There we remained under the gaze of soldiers until the state of Israel was established. There was no school, food was rationed, and the entrances were heavily guarded.

After our release, we tried to return to our home, which was built by my grandfather in the 1880s, but it had been taken over and all our possessions were gone. My brother was released four years later, in 1952, but my father was not sent home until he became ill in 1955 — in the end, his imprisonment led to his untimely death.

We found ourselves living in a segregated society: As Palestinians, we were not allowed to attend Jewish public schools, and jobs were difficult to come by. This lack of opportunity made it impossible to fathom staying in our beloved city. With no viable future, we all migrated to Western countries.

The expulsion of Palestinians continues to this day, even in the city of Jerusalem itself. Recently, emboldened by President Trump’s vocal support and in spite of widespread international condemnation, the Israeli government approved the building of 2,500 new settlement units. Of those, 566 will be in East Jerusalem, where Palestinians have lived under Israeli military occupation for nearly half a century. And recently, they [*added thousands more settlement homes*](http://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/1.768882) to the list.

It is evident that Trump and his advisers do not comprehend the magnitude and the importance of Jerusalem as the Holy City of Peace and a place for all people. Prior to the current crisis and for thousands of years, prophets, scientists, scholars, merchants and poets populated Jerusalem, and it became the religious, cultural and political center of civilization. It is the holiest city for the three Abrahamic religions — Christianity, Islam and Judaism. It is known as the city of miracles — the location of Christ’s resurrection, Muhammad ascension to heaven and Abraham’s near sacrifice. It is a sacred place and deeply significant to many worldwide.

The decision to relocate the U.S. Embassy to Jerusalem would have grave consequences — it is a highly provocative move that flies in the face of longtime U.S. policy and shows little respect for or understanding of the city’s multireligious, multiethnic identity.

Under the Trump administration, I fear any minimal progress that has been made will be rapidly undone. How can we have peace in the Holy Land when the most powerful nation in the world ups its already excessive support for Israel and provocatively threatens to move the embassy to Jerusalem?

President [*Barack Obama*](http://www.mysanantonio.com/search/?action=search&channel=opinion%2Fcommentary&inlineLink=1&searchindex=gsa&query=%22Barack+Obama%22)promised Israel $38 billion over the next 10 years, more than any previous military aid package and more aid than to any other country in the world. With such support, what will motivate Israel to seek peace and share the land?

I can only hope that President Trump will think twice before moving the U.S. Embassy to Jerusalem and standing in the way of Palestinian freedom, so long overdue.

**209.**

**Vatican II as Generational Change**

Anthony J. Blasi

The present intent is not to maintain that Vatican II was nothing but a generational change but that generational change had much to do with what occurred at the Council. A generation has experiences that are widely shared among its members, though, obviously, from different perspectives. Experiences of entry into roles, and hence the allocation of roles in the societal division of labor, are particularly important. And generations do not appear in history *de novo*; they respond to antecedents.

One may point to a number of antecedents to the Council: the largely monastic liturgical movement, higher criticism in biblical studies, and developments in catechetical methodology are examples. These affected selected participants in the Council and those who implemented the conciliar decrees. However, there are other antecedents that affected the two popes of the council era (Angelo Roncalli, John XXIII; and Giovanni Montini, Paul VI) and those around them. The Pontificates of Pope Leo XIII and Pius X and the political career of Don Luigi Sturzo were particularly important antecedents.

The pontificate of Leo XIII can be understood as a reaction against a council that did not really function as a council. Vatican I had the aspect of a meeting where the boss demanded assent to specific pre-determined results. Rather than reconvene Vatican I, Leo XIII sought to be effective through the media (encyclicals) and strategic appointments. His important encyclicals stressed the rights of workers and a genuine albeit limited acceptance of higher criticism in biblical studies. He also endorsed the theology of the medieval genius Thomas Aquinas, who saw reason as a native power for discovering the will of the Creator in the design of creation. Leo XIII also wanted to come to a working relationship with the Italian state, but the latter was not ready for that, and during the next two pontificates when it was ready the Vatican was no longer interested. Pope Pius X, taking the name of a predecessor who condemned everything modern, tried to reverse everything Leo XIII had done; he ignored the rights of workers, silenced the serious scholars in biblical studies, and cultivated a distrust of reason. The result was a division of the clergy into the followers of Leo XIII and the followers of Pius X. It was not until the pontificate of Pius XI that the Vatican made peace with the Italian state, but by then Benito Mussolini had seized power in Italy and had to be mollified by the Vatican withdrawing laborite clergy from political action. Pius XI’s social encyclical, *Quadragesimo Anno*, can be seen as a substitute for the political engagement of such clergy as Luigi Sturzo and Angelo Roncalli. Sturzo ended up as a refugee in London. Rev. Dr. Roncalli, a professor of history in Rome who once joined picket lines with his bishop during a labor strike in his home diocese of Bergamo, made a point of angering the Fascists by going back to Bergamo and endorsing Sturzo’s former Popular Party from the pulpit. Pius XI got him out of the country, and thereby probably saved his life, by appointing him to be a diplomat in Bulgaria.

An important generational change was that after World War II church leaders no longer came from the ranks of the nobility. Pope Pius XII, elected in 1939, was the last pope from a noble family. Talented clergy had often come from the middle class, but they had been in the service of the noble elite or had been elevated by conforming to the elite culture of the nobility. This simply did not work in the modern world, even in the Church. There was a need for clergy with the virtues of professionalism, with a broad education, with an ability to function without being unduly suspicious of people holding various persuasions, and who would be industrious pastors who build up congregations. The Church was no longer maintained on the basis of hereditary clergy who collected rents. Moreover, there were two World Wars in which democratic nations fought authoritarian nations; Italian clergy as young men served in the military in the First World War against the noble-led armies of Austria and Germany, and during the Second World War popular feeling was clearly with the anti-Fascist partisans. The rejection of authoritarianism was also clear in Great Britain, the United States, the regimes in France after both world wars, and even in post-World War II Germany and Austria. The younger hierarchy were advanced on the basis of merit, not noble birth.

Two key figures, followers of the philosophy of Leo XIII, were typical of the new generation. Angelo Roncalli, when newly ordained, was an able assistant to his first bishop. He had earned a Ph.D. in history and spent what free time he had in his busy subsequent life preparing a six-volume critical edition of primary historical materials pertaining to his home diocese. He proved to be a successful fund-raiser, bringing order to the Italian fund-raising system for the foreign missions. In no way had he been sheltered from the wider society, despite the quasi-monastic character of the seminaries he attended; he had served in the Italian army, as did all young men, and during World War I he was activated, taken away from his church duties, and appointed to administer hospitals, proving to be a capable administrator. While some churchmen dismissed him as a peasant, he served as an industrious and capable diplomat in Bulgaria, Istanbul, and Paris. In Paris, he blocked the efforts of Pope Pius XII to crack down on the worker-priest experiment, and after he was reassigned to be archbishop of Venice and made a cardinal, he was an indefatigable builder of buildings and gained the people’s trust. He was particularly at home among the dignitaries of diverse religions, philosophies, and political persuasions, more so than with old-guard bishops from the pre-World War II era.

Giovanni Montini was the son of a politician and newspaper publisher who had been aligned with Luigi Struzzo. Though he was philosophically at odds with Pope Pius XII, he was indispensable to the functioning of the Vatican offices during much of that pope’s pontificate. Pius kept him in the Secretariat of State office, balanced by an equally ranked conservative in the office, rather than appoint a Secretary. Eventually he kicked Montini upstairs to the archbishopric of Milano in order to lessen Montini’s influence. By not making Montini a cardinal, Pius prevented him from being elected pope in 1958. Everyone knew that the way to get something done at the Vatican in the early 1950s was to go to Montini, but tradition reserved the papacy for cardinals. Montini was happy to be an effective administrator in Milano, as Roncalli was in Venice. Both were capable and industrious, and neither fit well within an authoritarian context.

The very opening of the Council witnessed an episcopal revolt against a presiding committee that wanted to be authoritarian. Many of the bishops from overseas resented the centralization of power in the Vatican offices in previous years, and many were Roncalli appointees. The first matter they took up was of an applied nature, the liturgy--they had rejected all the other schemas presented to them. The Council could be criticized for taking up an applied matter before coming to a consensus on first principles, but the liturgical changes they mandated featured themes of the of the new generation. There was professionalism; the worship service was to be well-conducted as something meaningful to the laity, with leeway for regional conferences of bishops to make decisions. There was a requirement for education; the clergy had to have a well-grounded knowledge of the scriptures, on which they were to preach. During the first session, Montini, whom John XXIII had made a cardinal, was the floor manager for the progressives, opposing the schemas that reflected the worldview of Pius X. During the months following the first session, John XXIII made significant changes in the membership of the committees responsible for the schemas and, even as he was dying, wrote comments on new drafts.

Incidentally, the Council opened during the very week that the world approached nuclear war on account of the Cuban Missile Crisis, and John XXIII played a role in getting the Kennedy and Khrushchev governments to talk to one another, even as he was writing his encyclical on world peace, *Pacem in Terris*. One might contrast this with the futile attempts by Pope Benedict XV to negotiate an end to World War I and Pope Pius XII, straining to be neutral in order to negotiate an end to World War II. The warring nations did not take Benedict seriously because he didn’t even have diplomatic relations with Italy, and they had no illusions about the possibility of negotiating with Hitler. The two conciliar popes were much better grounded in the realities of their era.

**210.**

**Vatican II on Education**

Anthony J. Blasi

I was in high school as the Second Vatican Council began. At the time, neither I nor many others realized how significant the Council would be; the forward-looking encyclical of Pope John XXIII, *Mater et Magistra*, seemed more important, and all were distracted by the Cuban Missile Crisis, during which nuclear war almost broke out. The Council would restore Christianity by reaching back into early Christian tradition and inserting the early Christian spirit into modern social concerns. Meanwhile, I had a high school principal who was basically anti-intellectual in outlook but humble enough to accept new ideas with both caution and courage. He would allow the “new theology” to be taught in his school, but he was suspicious of intellectually-inclined students such as me.

Six years and six months later I was sitting through a high school graduation ceremony as a first-year teacher. A sharp student, who had excelled in my government class, made a passing reference to human evolution in his valedictory speech, and the pastor of the parish in which the Catholic high school was located criticized the reference in the course of giving a closing prayer: “I hope you do not really believe that we evolved from monkeys!”

I could go on with more examples, but they do not in themselves comprise the point. The point is that oldest Christian tradition is not hostile toward education. The Second Vatican Council reached back to the early Christian stance and articulated it in the modern context. On October 28, 1965, the Council issued a declaration on education, *Gravissimum Educationis*. The opening paragraph observes that “the education of youth, and indeed a certain continuing education of adults, have been rendered both easier and more necessary by the circumstances of our times.”

The Council was very clear in making its main point concerning education: All people, “of whatever race, condition or age, in virtue of their dignity as human persons, have an inalienable right to education. This education should be suitable to the particular destiny of the individuals, adapted to their ability, sex and national cultural traditions, and should be conducive to fraternal relations with other nations in order to promote true unity and peace in the world.”

This is an important teaching, but in Texas I hear no bishops or even clergy insisting upon it in a time in which the state government has been underfunding education in a way that results in deleterious effects in low-income and minority districts. These deleterious and discriminatory effects are not mysterious or unknowable. They were even acknowledged in a state supreme court decision in which the justices were unwilling to order the legislature to remedy the situation. The lower court had issued such an order on the basis of the evidence, but the supreme court nullified the order even as it accepted the lower court’s finding that increased state funding was needed to compensate for gross inequality among the local resources available to school districts.

The judge in the district court, John Dietz, who is now retired, points out that “the undisputed testimony is that if you didn’t grow up economically disadvantaged, when you arrived at school you had roughly a 1,500-word vocabulary and understood probably another 1,000 words. An economically disadvantaged child shows up knowing 500 words or less” (quoted in the *Texas Observer* of July 2016). “The undisputed testimony is that it takes about time and a half over a period of four to six years to overcome the poverty of their experience. …it’s undisputed, it takes 50 percent more of the resources to educate an economically disadvantaged child; 60 percent of our population in this state is currently economically disadvantaged and it’s only getting worse.” Meanwhile, Judge Deitz noted, Texas fell from 24th in per capita spending on education in 1996 to 43rd a decade later. “So we want to make students career- and college-ready? Look at the number of Texas graduates who have to take remedial English and remedial math in college. Take a look at eighth grade, and the number of students who are still in school in the 12the grade, and you’re missing a whole lot of people. Isn’t that kind of a failure?” “A football coach with this kind of record would’ve been fired and run out of town.” He had to conclude that the legislature is devoid of caring about their educational responsibility.

The Vatican Council not only insisted that education is a right, but it had something to say about how education was conducted. It focused on the role of the family, on the right of parents to be able to select from a variety of educational alternatives. It endorsed sex education, science, and openness to dialogue with others. It spoke of the duty of the state to ensure that all its citizens had access to adequate education and should be “prepared for the proper exercise of their civic rights and duties.”

The Council also recognized the principle of academic freedom in higher education: “The Church likewise devotes considerable care to higher-level education, especially in universities and faculties. Indeed, in the institutions under its control the Church endeavors systematically to ensure that the treatment of the individual disciplines is consonant with their own principles, their own methods, and with a true liberty of scientific enquiry.” One hears nothing from contemporary church officials while politicians try to distort biology by removing evolution from the curriculum, distort history by mislabeling the slave trade as the migration of African laborers and teaching that the American Civil War was not about slavery (despite the secession resolutions being all about preserving slavery).

Maybe this is merely a personal view, but I think it is high time the institutional Church in Texas concern itself with the public neglect of the minds of the underprivileged as much or more as operating charities to feed their bodies.

**211.**

**The Virtue of Nuance in War, Peace, and What Might Come Between.**

Anthony J. Blasi

Last April the United States Navy launched missiles that targeted and damaged a Syrian air base, destroying some war planes and supplies of poison gas agents. The U.S. administration had advised the government of Russia, which had been propping up the Syrian government, of the impending attack, so that the Russians could evacuate their own war planes and personnel from the base. Presumably, the Russians could have advised the Syrians to evacuate too but did not do so. Four members of the Syrian military died.

The Syrian military had used poison gas to subject people in a rebel-occupied town to a tortuous, agonizing death. Poison gas is illegal under international treaties because it does not distinguish in an even approximate way, between combatants and non-combatants, and because it subjects even combatants to pain and injury beyond what is required for conceivable military objectives. One would think that the world had learned not to use such weapons after the unimaginable savagery of World War I a century ago.

Both pacifists and those generally opposed to war condemn the Syrian government’s use of poison gas, and no one, apart from the opportunistic Russian and Iranian administrations, accepts the Syrian government’s rush to arms five years ago when people engaged in peaceful demonstrations and called for democracy in Syria. Meanwhile, most observers do not criticize the governments that are defending their people from the self-proclaimed Islamic State, a criminal gang that originated in an American prison in Iraq during the ill-conceived Second Gulf War; that gang seized people and property in Iraq and Syria and has set about murdering innocent people by the thousands.

A sad history―which featured brutal dictators such as Sadam Hussain and Bashar al-Assad, erring heads of state such as George W. Bush and Nouri al*-*Maliki, the opportunistic legitimate if unprincipled Russian president Vladimir Putin, the spontaneous and admirable activists of the “Arab Spring,” and military officers and underlings ready to follow orders no matter how savage and illegal―this sad history had produced an array of military actions:

1) An asymmetrical military attack on non-military critics who oppose the government of the Syrian Assad administration

2) A revolution in Syria, funded in part by Arab nations

3) Military participation in the Syrian administration’s suppression of revolution by Iran and Russia

4) Seizures of peoples and property in Syria and Iraq by a former prison gang that styles itself a caliphate

5) Military action by Iraq and the U.S. to re-establish legitimate government in part of Iraq and control the related criminal actions across the border in Syria

6) The largely symbolic but nevertheless weaponized attack by the U.S. on a Syrian air base to make a point about the Syrian government using poison gas.

Are all of these uses of armed force morally equivalent? The most doctrinaire of pacifist stands might have them be so. The just war tradition would say they are not. There is room for nuanced positions in between and beyond these two alternatives.

If main stream pacifism opposes war and just war theory maintains that some―probably a small minority―of modern wars are morally defensible, it is necessary for both to specify what is and what is not a war. Deploying forces against a non-governmental entity that victimize people is a police action, even if military forces are involved. The actions taken by the Iraqi government against the criminal gang that declares itself a caliphate do not constitute a “war” in a strict sense. Similarly, the United States’ involvement in the Iraqi action, largely through advisors, drone strikes, and bombing from aircraft, is not exactly war. The U.S. action against the Syrian air base is closer to being “war” insofar as the air base belonged to a legitimate, if distasteful, government. However, the attack was not part of a broader effort to defeat the Syrian military and render it inefficacious or to change the Syrian regime. Even the latter has not declared the attack and act of war.

One can compare the American involvement in Iraq with the Russian and Iranian interventions in Syria; all three interventions are supporting legitimate governments. The trouble with the comparison is that legitimacy is not the same thing as moral defensibility. It is a common good for a government to maintain an order of law, in which people and organizations pursue their reasonable interests in peace. A government that represses people and their organizations is another matter. The question arises of when people have a right to revolution, and when governments and revolutionaries might receive legitimate aid from outside.

Revolutions may or may not be violent. Moreover not all violent changes of government are revolutions; some are mere coups. The violent changes in government in the Peoples Republic of the Congo did not change the structure of the government or either increase or decrease the classes of people who were involved in government; one would not call these “revolutions.” The non-violent change in government in the former East Germany was a bloodless revolution. It hardly behooves one outside an oppressed nation to condemn revolutionaries for resorting to violence if they have no alternative. Even in Ukraine, where the issue was not oppression as much as a government acting directly against the interests and wishes of its own citizenry, it hardly behooves one outside the nation to criticize the rambunctious protests and technically illegal uprising that drove the former government from power.

I think it is time to go beyond both “just war” and pacifist stands. We need nuance in the objects of evaluation: war, police action for order, revolution, coup. We need nuance in who it is that might act―governments, oppressed people, outsiders. We need nuance in the actions that might be taken; not all peaceful revolutions are moral (e.g., the one taking place in Turkey) and not all violent ones immoral, depending on, for example, the violence of a regime to suppress citizens.

**212.**

**What is Law?**

Anthony J. Blasi

At a rally in Austin against Texas Senate Bill 4, a law that would make it illegal for a city and its officials to offer sanctuary to undocumented immigrants, someone handed me a sign that reads, “No human is illegal.” Fundamentally I agree; I have long thought that it is unreasonable for governments, which humans set up, to pick and choose among people. The creature of humans, government, would be acting back on its creators, analogous to a robot getting out of control and driving out the people who engineered it. Declaring people illegal perverts Abraham Lincoln’s “Gettysburg Address”—peoplehood of the government, for the government, and by the government, rather than government of the people, for the people, and by the people.

Is reasonability a criterion of law? I once took a course at the Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies in Toronto, in which I and the other students were expected to prepare statements on the meaning of various sections of the Prima Secundae of the *Summa Theologiae* of Thomas Aquinas, and then debate the differing understandings of that text. As interpretations varied, so too did the ramifications. Aquinas took up the question of law, proposing a method for ethics in the Prima Secundae (first section of the second part) and proposing a content for ethics in a volume concerning virtues, the Secunda Secundae (second section of the second part). I translate:

As Augustine says in *On Free Choice* I, “what would not be just does not seem to be law.” Thus insofar as it holds from justice, to that extent it holds from the strength of law. But in human matters something is said to be just from that which is right according to the rule of reason. For the law of nature is the first rule of reason, as appears from the foregoing (I-II 91, a. 2, ad 2). Thus to the extent any humanly posited law holds from the rationale of the law, it is derived from a law of nature. If it is in discord with natural law in something, it will now not be a law, but a corruption of law.

(Thomas Aquinas, Summa Theologiae I-II, 95, Articulus II)

One can see why course work was needed to get at the meaning. The text of the *Summa Theologiae* was not really a book of prose but at worst student notes and at best Thomas’s lecture notes.

Some background can be helpful. The law of God was the ultimate guide for Thomas, and it could be known, albeit imperfectly, in various ways. One way of knowing eternal law, as he phrased it, was reading scripture, especially the Ten Commandments. However, applying such commands might not be straightforward when dilemmas arise. The divine will, fortunately, could also be seen in nature, for creations reflect the minds of those who create them. By closely observing nature, the human mind can in its thinking reflect the divine reasonability. Hence we have logic and useful intellectuality in general. Thomas called this “natural law.” Natural law can be exercised in problem-solving, or “practical reason” as he called it. It can also be exercised in custom or tradition, wherein thousands upon thousands of human minds arrive at a common conclusion about something. If some legislative act is unreasonable, it is no law at all; right reason and well-founded custom can in effect repeal an unreasonable law.

In the modern era, some ethicists have given natural law a bad reputation by emphasizing the “law” part of the expression and failing to recognize that the “natural” part refers to the use of native or innate reason. Thus the expression becomes natural *LAW* rather than *NATURAL* law. Thomas’s approach to law was controversial in his own day precisely because the second form of the expression, emphasizing the native or innate reason part, was revolutionary.

There is another very important aspect of law that pertains to the criterion of reasonability. Following Aristotle, Thomas recognizes *epikeia*, or equity, as a virtue (Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Secunda Secundae 120, Articulus 1; Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 5, 10). Epikeia is justice, though it is not “legal justice” but a rectification of legal justice. Laws are by necessity general statements that apply only to most cases.

When therefore the law lays down a general rule, and thereafter a case arises which is an exception to the rule, it is then right, where the lawgiver’s pronouncement because of its absoluteness is defective and erroneous, to rectify the defect by deciding as the lawgiver would himself decide if he were present on the occasion, and would have enacted if he had been cognizant of the case in question. (Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* V, x, 5).

Thomas’s comment on this is that to observe the letter of the law where it is not appropriate to do so is corrupt (*vitiosum*). Aquinas and Aristotle differ insofar as Aquinas holds God, the source of reason and reasonability, to be the source of law in the final analysis, while Aristotle has an ideal human legislator in mind.

In applying the principle of *epikeia*, or equity, it can be said that enforcing the letter of a piece of legislation when doing so works an injustice is a corruption of law; justice demands that the law be set aside in such cases. That is why prosecutorial discretion exists. When the federal Department of Justice developed the “DACA” program, under which it deferred action on “illegal” immigrants who were brought to the United States as children, it was formulating a policy for prosecutorial discretion. Using prosecutorial discretion for the purpose of refraining from working injustices was not a failure to faithfully execute the law, as some partisan political rhetoric would have it, but precisely a faithful execution of law according to traditional principles.

At the present time, the federal immigration laws are so impracticable that as general statements they do not seem to apply in a large number of cases. There are kinds of refugees that do not correspond to the refugees typical of the era of the Cold War, and these appear as undocumented migrants within our borders. There are impracticably low quotas. There are complex regulations that are applied to people who have little or no legal representation. There are some officials who exhibit prejudices against the races and ethnic groups of many contemporary immigrants. The imposition of such laws and regulations makes innocent people (yes, innocent, because civil, not criminal law, is at issue) “illegal,” and that is unreasonable in the extreme. Sanctuary cities are simply refuges from statutes that are corrupt in the sense meant by Aquinas, and officials who use their prosecutorial discretion not to impose unreasonable statutes on people are faithfully doing what a just people would have them do.

**213.**

**Editorial: Letter to Attorney General Sessions**

*Over the three-year cycle in which the Third Reading commentaries, poems, and essays were published, the editorial section functioned principally as a table of contents for each issue. A few exceptions were in fact brief essays, and they appear among the essays reproduced above. One particular exception, however, was quite different. It was an open letter to the U.S. Attorney General, who had formulated and implemented a policy of separating parents who arrived at the southern border seeking refugee status from their children.*

Anthony J. Blasi

4531 Briargrove Street

San Antonio, Texas 78217

June 1, 2018

Jefferson Beauregard Sessions III

United States Attorney General

950 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW

Washington, DC 20530

Dear Attorney General Sessions,

I write this appeal to you because of the troubling nature of the official treatment directed at innocent people who seek asylum as refugees to our great nation. Seeking asylum, of course, is not a crime, irrespective of the rhetoric you have directed to the press that would criminalize anyone coming to our border without a prior visa. Such rhetoric tends to lessen any sense of fairness and justice on the part of those who carry out your policy of separating asylum-seeking parents from their children. The policy itself is troubling, both because it imposes a punishment prior to and apart from any finding of guilt though due process of law, and because the punitive break-up of families violates fundamental family values.

Those of us who have formed our consciences with the Christian scriptures sometimes point out that the Gospel of Matthew describes the child Jesus as a refugee whose family sought asylum in a foreign country. While that account may be a literary device, Matthew was making a point with it. He likened Jesus, and those who follow him, to the Hebrews of old, who arrived in Egypt first in the person of a refugee from family violence and later as a group of economic migrants.

However, I prefer as an instructive lesson Matthew’s account of the murder of the Holy Innocents in and around Bethlehem by the agents of King Herod the Great. Herod was moved by fear and jealousy. He was afraid that success on the part of a new king would reflect negatively on the tyranny he was carrying out on behalf of an empire. Punishing families, in advance of and absent any possible legal violation, on the basis of fear and jealousy is a misuse of law, an instance of law without justice. As you are undoubtedly aware, your office is responsible not simply for the administration of law but of justice; the word and concept are enshrined in the very name of your department.

In a way, Herod’s history is our history. We have not had a king since 1781, but the governing sector of our society has known Herod’s kind of fear and jealousy. Fearful and jealous resentment against Native Americans and slaves long dominated our public life. Historians report that this same kind of resentment characterized the treatment of Mexican Americans in Texas and elsewhere in the Southwest. Such resentment is irrational; successful and peaceful lives, made possible by secure family lives and unhindered education, in no way threaten the peace, prosperity, and security of Americans in general. While Herod’s history has unfortunately been our history, his fear and jealousy need not be ours.

My heart aches at the anguish of mothers and fathers separated from their crying children, and my sense of justice stirs because I know these innocents, both adults and children, have done nothing to deserve such treatment. It is not unlike the breaking up of families in the former days of slavery. And there is no requirement in law that such be done, no law mandating or even allowing such treatment.

In empires of antiquity, huge statues of emperors dominated harbors. In our democracy, instead, we accepted an immense statue of Lady Liberty from the people of France, which stands in the New York waters in solidarity with those elsewhere in the world who seek freedom. Chains of bondage lie broken at her feet. The date of the Declaration of Independence marks the tablet she holds in her left hand. Her torch, raised by her right hand, is a beacon of open-mindedness. The whole figure is a welcome to humans who seek release from bondage and tyranny, who celebrate the declaration that all are created equal and endowed with rights by a Creator, and who seek enlightened intelligence rather than fearful and jealous fixations.

Mr. Sessions, do not put Lady Liberty’s feet back into chains. Please do not mute the call for freedom from the tyranny of monarchs—be they political or psychological. Do not snatch that torch away from Lady Liberty, leaving an iron fist in its place.

Sincerely,

Anthony J. Blasi

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1. B.A. St. Edward’s University, Austin, Texas; M.A., Ph.D. sociology University of Notre Dame; M.A. biblical studies University of St. Michael’s College (Toronto), conjoint Th.D. Regis College Toronto and University of Toronto. His books on early Christianity include *A Methodological Guide for Social Scientific Inquiry into Earliest Christianity*, 2018; *Social Science and the Christian Scriptures* (3 volumes), 2017; *Handbook of Early Christianity: Social Science Perspectives*, edited with Paul-André Turcotte, and Jean Duhaime, 2002; *A Sociology of Johannine Christianity*, 1996, *Making Charisma: The Social Construction of Paul’s Public Image*, 1991; and *Early Christianity as a Social Movement*, 1989. With Paul Sullins, he edited *Catholic Social Thought: Reflections on the Compendium*. Dr. Blasi retired from Tennessee State University in 2012. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Tom Keene is a poet/activist who put his roots down in San Antonio in 1964. Soon after he began writing poems. His poems have been published in *Huehuetitlan Journal*, *El Placazo*, *National Catholic Reporter*, San Antonio *Express-News*, *Harmony* magazine, *Latin America Press* (Lima, Peru), and *The Palo Alto Review*. Anthologies include *Poets of the Springs and Poets of the River* (audiotape). Latitudes Press published his first book of poems, *The Waters of Becoming*, in 1989. His latest book is *Flowers for Love Makers, Peace Builders and God Seekers* (2008). In 2008 the Texas Society of Poets awarded him the $400 Therese Lindsey prize in their annual contest. He also won first prize in the internationally judged 4th annual Dancing with Words Poetry Contest. Keene holds graduate degrees in Theology, Applied Theology, and Psychology. He has worked as a community organizer, advocate for the handicapped, freelance writer, university professor, consultant on nonviolence for the Archdiocese of San Antonio, and as a therapist for at risk children and their families in the Alazan-Apache Courts for the San Antonio School District. He was a founding member of the San Antonio Archdiocesan Justice and Peace Commission. He was also a founding member and officer of the San Antonio Community Radio Corporation, a parent organization of Texas Public Radio and station KSTX. From 1981-1986 he served as coordinator for Latin America Assistance, which The San Antonio *Light* described as the city’s “premier” advocacy organization for Central American issues. In the 1990s, he presented a weekly social commentary for San Antonio’s Catholic Television. Now retired, his current activities with various conversation groups seek to engage people in meaningful discussions about things that matter. Tom’s poems are assembled online at http://www.tomkeenesmuse.com/index.php. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See the *Resolution concerning Abortion and Ministry in the Local Church* of the General Board of American Baptist Churches in the U.S.A., 8006.5:12/87: “We acknowledge the diversity of deeply held convictions within our fellowship even as we seek to interpret the Scriptures under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Many American Baptists believe that, biblically, human life begins at conception, that abortion is immoral and a destruction of a human being created in God’s image (Job 31:15; Psalm 139:13-16; Jeremiah 1:5; Luke 1:44; proverbs 31:8-9; Galatians 1:15). Many others believe that while abortion is a regrettable reality, it can be a morally accept able action and they choose to act on the biblical principles of compassion and justice (John 8:1-11; Exodus 21:22-25; Mathew 7:1-5; James 2:2-13) and freedom of will (John 16:13; Romans 14:4-5, 10-13). Many gradations of opinion between these basic positions have been expressed within our fellowship.” It should be noted that considerable interpretation is required to find support for any given position on abortion from the biblical citations that are provided. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. *A Social Statement on Abortion*, adopted by a more than two-thirds majority vote at the second biennial Churchwide Assembly of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, meeting in Orlando, Florida, August 28-September 4, 1991. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. A Southern Baptist Convention meeting passed a resolution that said in part, that “the messengers to the Southern Baptist Convention meeting in Columbus Ohio, June `6-17, 2015, affirm the dignity and sanctity of human life at all stages of development, from conception to natural death….” [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. The common English translation gets this wrong: “Life must be protected with the utmost care from the moment of conception….” The Latin reads, “Vita igitur inde a conceptione, maxima cura tuenda est; abortus necnon infanticidium nefanda sunt crimina.” If the intent were to indicate life is present “from the moment of conception,” the Latin would have read “de puncto conceptionis.” [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Again, English readers have been at the mercy of a faulty translation: “…procured abortion is *the deliberate and direct killing, by whatever means it is carried out of a human being in the initial phase of his or her existence, extending from conception to birth*.” The Latin of the key phrase reads “inter conceptionem decurrit et partuitionem; *inter* clearly means “between,” not “from…to.” [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. The *Social Statement on Abortion* adopted by a more than two-thirds majority vote at the second biennial Churchwide Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) meeting in Orlando, Florida, August 28-September 4, 1991: “Although abortion raises significant moral issues at any stage of fetal development, the closer the life in the womb comes to full term the more serious such issues become. When a child can survive outside a womb, it becomes possible for other people, and not only the mother, to nourish and care for the child. This church opposes ending intrauterine life when a fetus is developed enough to live outside a uterus with the aid of reasonable and necessary technology. If a pregnancy needs to be interrupted after this point, every reasonable and necessary effort should be made to support this life, unless here are lethal fetal abnormalities indicating that the prospective newborn will die very soon.” See also the Minutes of the 217th General Assembly in 2006 of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), p. 905: “We may not know exactly when human life begins, and have but an imperfect understanding of God as the giver of life and of our own human existence, yet recognize that life is precious to God, and we should preserve and protect it.” And: “We affirm that the lives of viable unborn babies—those well-developed enough to survive outside the womb if delivered—ought to be preserved and cared for and not aborted.” [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Under traditional moral doctrine, filling out forms for purposes of seeking an exemption is a case of mediate material cooperation that is permissible, rather than immediate moral cooperation, which is not permissible. The form-filling itself does not enable what is thought to be an abortion to occur. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. “Many regard conception (up to 72 hours after coitus), others implantation (7 days), as the beginning of an inviolable life. But while such life is human in origin and potentially human in character, the integration of bodily functions and the possibility of social interaction do not appear until later. Alternative candidates for the beginning of significantly human life are the final fixing of the genetic code (3 weeks), the first central nervous system activity (8 weeks), brain development and cardiac activity (12 weeks).” *United Church of Christ General Synod Statements and Resolutions Regarding Freedom of Choice*, Eighth General Synod, 1971, p. 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. *Social Principles: The Nurturing Community. Abortion.* United Methodist Church webpage. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. *United Church of Christ General Synod Statements and Resolutions Regarding Freedom of Choice*, Eighth General Synod, 1971, p. 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. It is necessary to insert this information because the official “learning objectives” of American history classes in Texas maintain that the Civil War was not about slavery. When two San Antonio school districts adopted the “learning objectives,” the public television station, either by coincidence or design, rebroadcast the Ken Burns Civil War documentary series, which quotes the secessionist leaders why they were seceding and organizing their armies. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Theodor W. Adorno et al., *The Authoritarian Personality*. New York: Harper, 1950. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Charles Y. Glock and Rodney Stark, *Christian Beliefs and Anti-Semitism*. New York: Harper & Row, 1969. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. I am indebted to numerous people with whom I have consulted for this statement. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)