

GOING WITH THE FLOW

A Sermon by The Rev. Dr. Arthur M. Suggs
Preached on the Fourth Sunday in Lent, March 26, 2017

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Two Ways to Broaden Your Thoughts

One of the courses that my wife teaches is called “Theory of Knowledge,” a high-school equivalent of a philosophy course. So by osmosis, I hear about a number of things that Tracy is going to be teaching to those kids.

One of the things I picked up in some of the readings for that class is the linkage between language and thoughts. That may seem obvious, but it’s deeper than simply the language we have. In our case, English, along with a smattering of a few other tongues, affects our thinking, what we think about, and in a sense our language limits the kinds of thoughts we have.

There are two ways to broaden those limits: One is the extent of our vocabulary. A limited vocabulary has been shown to have a genuine limit on the range of thoughts one is able to produce. Thoughts cannot be expressed without words. An insufficient vocabulary can’t be communicated as clearly as one would like or can’t enable nuances or connections to thoughts from other disciplines. Thus, broadening the vocabulary enhances our ability to produce the thoughts that we would like to have at our disposal if we can call up sufficient vocabulary to allow the mind to express the thought at hand.

Another way to broaden the limits of speech is extraordinarily powerful. It is to have knowledge of multiple languages. If you have English, for example, as your base to

learn other languages, regardless of what they might be, you can gain a sense of the way to accumulate concepts in English. If you can be understood differently in other cultures and in other languages, just simply experiencing that in a number of ways broadens your understanding of what a concept might be.

An Excursion into History via Words

Pondering the kinds of notions that Tracy has been teaching, I came across two books: One is by Owen Barfield, who wrote *History in English Words*. He is a philosopher of language, and his work has been called a “classic excursion into history through the English language.” The second one is by Jean Gebser, more of a cultural philosopher, who wrote *The Ever-Present Origin*. These two scholars produced one thought between them that arrested me. It caught my attention, and I had trouble letting go of this interesting thought, to the point I felt the need to preach on it.

The thought is this: Around the year 1700 or so, Western civilization began moving from an age of poetry to an age of prose. Let me give you an example: Here’s a simple sentence. First, look at it the way in which we would normally look at a remark of little interest in a casual manner. Then examine it in four different levels, as though we were philosophers of language. Here’s the sentence I made up just for practice:

“She Gazed Upon a Star.”

- **First Level — A Literal Sense**

If you're anything like me, what immediately comes to mind when I first see a woman gazing upon a star is that it's nighttime, so the stars are out. A person walked out, and she's looking up and sees a star. It's embarrassing to admit, but that's all I think about. I don't get any deeper than that as a rule.

- **Second Level — A Figurative Sense**

But let me take it further. This cost me some effort, and I acknowledge as much. In a figurative sense — in a more poetic sense versus a prose sense — it could be that the woman is longing for guidance. A star is a point of light in the darkness, and it has long been a symbol for guidance, and so it is also light upon her path, some direction for the way in which she wants to go. So in a figurative sense, it can mean a lot more than just simply looking at a star.

- **Third Level — A Metaphorical Sense**

In a metaphorical sense, this sentence means not only that the woman is longing for guidance, direction, light upon her path, but also that she's receiving it. She's in the process of looking at a star, but poetically she's receiving the guidance and the light and the direction that she had been longing for.

- **Fourth Level — A Mystical Sense**

And as if that weren't enough, gazing at the star means more than a metaphor. It is more of a mystical

kind of feeling, light in the darkness. In an archetypal sense, a star for a mariner means that a direction is being set for you. You're no longer just wandering, you're no longer lost. And so the woman seeking guidance has metaphorically received that guidance. Then, at this fourth level, she has found her route home. She is no longer listless or confused or lost.

All these senses are within one little sentence: “She gazed upon a star.” When we really think about that, what does the sentence mean? It can mean a whole lot more than standing outside at night, looking up.

A Walk in the Mystical Woods

I had an experience a number of years ago that I would describe now as mystical. I'll try to connect these thoughts in a bit. This experience wasn't like a flash of light. It didn't give me any direction in my life, nor did any of those kinds of senses, yet it was nevertheless an arresting, marvelous emotion. It was a beautiful summer afternoon, and I had decided to go for a walk in the woods and had chosen this particular tract that wetted my interest.

This was an old pine forest — old in the sense it struck me that decades ago it was probably one of those forests that had been planted in order to grow trees that would eventually become telephone poles. They were all planted in straight rows and had grown in line and had reached high toward the sky.

Except that day was long gone. These trees were well beyond the telephone-pole stage, so it was an old forest at this point, all pine. Walking through it was like walking on a car-

pet a yard deep. There were pine needles everywhere, and they sunk down as you hiked through, and this being a dry, sunny, summer afternoon, there was lots of crunching as you walked on the old pine needles.

Gathering Needles for a Pillow

True to my nature, I decided to lie down underneath one of the trees, so I gathered a bunch of needles, fashioned a pillow for myself, and laid down under one of these old pine trees. Lying there and looking up, the bright sunlight filtered through. There was a significant breeze, and I could hear the sound of the wind coming through the pine needles and could watch as the breeze swayed the branches, which affected the light filtering through the pine needles like a kaleidoscope. Soft, filtered light and soft, filtered sound wafted past my senses from the breeze through the pine needles.

Also true to my nature, I fell asleep, apparently for quite a while. I woke up probably an hour and a half later from my nap, shivering. Although I couldn't see it through the woods, apparently a thunderstorm was coming, and the temperature had dropped immensely as heavy clouds were gathering.

The Day Turns Somber, but It Is Beautiful

The sun was almost gone, and the weather had become rather somber as I squinted

through the trees. I could see fog winding its way around the trunks of the trees. The breeze had begun to strengthen quite a bit as it blew through. Having awakened with the shivers, I was now downright cold but did not want to get up just yet. Despite the change in weather, the atmosphere was strangely beautiful.

At this point, the fog was racing through the branches and past the trunks of the trees. The character of the light had completely changed. The character of the sound through the pine needles had also completely changed. It was a risk, but I just had to lie there and soak it up because it was so wonderful to see how one mood had changed to another in this old pine forest.

Suddenly, the fog turned to mist, and so it was time to get out of there because the rain was coming. Finally, I skedaddled away to find shelter.

Now, take that story, and put it on a shelf for a few minutes while I read you a poem, "Ode to the West Wind" by Percy Bysshe Shelley. He is one of the English Romantics, and he's also an atheist, except that he's written about spirit. The poem has five stanzas, and I've included all five for this reading version, although the sermon was limited to only the first and the fifth stanzas for time reasons. So just sort of sit back and soak it up.

ODE TO THE WEST WIND

Percy Bysshe Shelley

I

O wild West Wind, thou breath of Autumn's being,
Thou, from whose unseen presence the leaves dead
Are driven, like ghosts from an enchanter fleeing,

Yellow, and black, and pale, and hectic red,
Pestilence-stricken multitudes; O thou,
Who chariotest to their dark wintry bed

The winged seeds, where they lie cold and low,
Each like a corpse within its grave, until
Thine azure sister of the Spring shall blow

Her clarion o'er the dreaming earth, and fill
(Driving sweet buds like flocks to feed in air)
With living hues and odours plain and hill:

Wild Spirit, which art moving everywhere;
Destroyer and preserver; hear, oh hear!

II

Thou on whose stream, mid the steep sky's commotion,
Loose clouds like earth's decaying leaves are shed,
Shook from the tangled boughs of Heaven and Ocean,

Angels of rain and lightning: there are spread
On the blue surface of thine aëry surge,
Like the bright hair uplifted from the head

Of some fierce Mænad, even from the dim verge
Of the horizon to the zenith's height,
The locks of the approaching storm. Thou dirge

Of the dying year, to which this closing night
Will be the dome of a vast sepulcher,
Vaulted with all thy congregated might

Of vapours, from whose solid atmosphere
Black rain, and fire, and hail will burst: oh hear!

III

Thou who didst waken from his summer dreams
The blue Mediterranean, where he lay,
Lull'd by the coil of his crystalline streams,

Beside a pumice isle in Baiæ bay,
And saw in sleep old palaces and towers
Quivering within the wave's intenser day,

All overgrown with azure moss and flowers
So sweet, the sense faints picturing them! Thou
For whose path the Atlantic's level powers

Cleave themselves into chasm's, while far below
The sea-blooms and the oozy woods which wear
The sapless foliage of the ocean, know

Thy voice, and suddenly grow gray with fear,
And tremble and despoil themselves: oh hear!

IV

If I were a dead leaf thou mightiest bear;
If I were a swift cloud to fly with thee;
A wave to pant beneath thy power, and share

The impulse of thy strength, only less free
Than thou, O uncontrollable! If even
I were as in my boyhood, and could be

The comrade of thy wanderings over Heaven,
As then, when to outstrip thy skiey speed
Scarce seem'd a vision; I would ne'er have striven

As thus with thee in prayer in my sore need.
Oh, lift me as a wave, a leaf, a cloud!
I fall upon the thorns of life! I bleed!

A heavy weight of hours has chain'd and bow'd
One too like thee: tameless, and swift, and proud.

V

Make me thy lyre, even as the forest is:
What if my leaves are falling like its own!
The tumult of thy mighty harmonies

Will take from both a deep, autumnal tone,
Sweet though in sadness. Be thou, Spirit fierce,
My spirit! Be thou me, impetuous one!

Drive my dead thoughts over the universe
Like wither'd leaves to quicken a new birth!
And, by the incantation of this verse,

Scatter, as from an unextinguish'd hearth
Ashes and sparks, my words among mankind!
Be through my lips to unawaken'd earth

The trumpet of a prophecy! O Wind,
If Winter comes, can Spring be far behind?

Hearing the Whistling Through the Trees

“Make me thy lyre, even as the forest is.” That’s the line that caught my attention and brought back the event I had in the woods. The nature of poetry is highly metaphorical, in that the wind isn’t the wind in the poem at all. Rather, Shelley is talking about Spirit, the Spirit with a capital S, his Spirit. He also mentions destroyer and preserver, and here’s where the poet’s atheism is not very convincing to me because those are the names of Shiva and Vishnu, respectively, in the Hindu religion. The two of them are the primary aspects of Brahma the divinity. And the lyre is of course music.

And so what Shelley is really saying is that his Spirit is blowing through him like the wind through the forest. In other words, he had heard it before. He had lain down at the trunk of a tree and listened to his heart as well as hearing the wind whistle through the trees.

I needed to say all of that in order to address our text, as Phyllis Martin read in the middle of this passage (Philippians 2:6): “Though he was in the form of God, he did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant and being born in human likeness.”

Kenosis Is the Emptying of Oneself

The key to that passage, the key that grabs everybody’s attention if you’re a New Testament scholar at all is that notion of emptiness. Kenosis is the Greek word for self-emptying, pouring yourself out.

And here’s where thinking more deeply about a passage matters because at Level One, the literal level, it’s plain as day, but it’s not the whole story. At Level One, yes, you’ve got self-sacrifice, you’ve got resignation, you’ve got surrender. You must go to Jerusalem, even though you know very well what’s going to happen there. Just do it: Judgement, cross, pain, forsakenness. Self-emptying, even though he was in the form of God. But that’s just Level One.

At the higher levels, God is constantly out-pouring. The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit can trust that self-emptying, knowing that the space created will be filled. Like a waterwheel of divine love, the Father empties all of himself into the Son. The Son receives and empties all of himself into the Spirit. The Spirit receives and empties all of himself/herself into the Father. The Father receives, and the cycle continues.

As one of my teachers, Fr. Richard Richard Rohr explains, “It’s no good telling people to let go if they can’t be assured they will be re-filled. Emptying *and* refilling. That is the pattern of reality, an infinite, eternal flow of love, of divinity.

“If you’re protecting yourself, if you’re securing your own image, and identity, then you’re holding on. Your ego remains full of *itself*, the opposite of kenosis. Resisting the pouring in, refusing to pour out.

“We don’t want to typecast the Father as the only infinite one, the Son as the only immanent one, and the Spirit as the only intimate one. All is absolutely given to each other and let go of.

“But when all three of those divine qualities start drawing *you* into the flow, then you’re at home with infinity, immanence, and intimacy — all three.”

Your Spirit Lends Grace *Through* You

The deeper truth is that the Spirit is blowing through you, playing you as the music of the trees, sometimes in darker times and darker tones, sometimes in brighter and sunnier times and tones. But Spirit is blowing through you always, softly and gently, like

filtered light, lending grace *through you*, unto our world.

Our task is to awaken to it, and to align with it.

Amen.

Addendum

For this sermon, by way of example, I made up the sentence “She gazed upon a star.” I then talked about the obvious Level 1 meaning that was of a woman or a girl outside on a clear night looking up at a star. Two parishioners, having heard the sermon, told me that was not all that came to their minds.

For one, she immediately envisioned a girl standing in one of the aisles at a CVS Pharmacy, and she turned around to see Cher, Cher being the star.” The other was of a girl knee-deep in the ocean surf, having reached down and picked up a starfish, and she was holding it and gazing upon it.

I see this as yet one more example of the wonderful and beautiful meanings to be found in language, as well as of the difficulty of speaking precisely when one wants the meaning to be singular.

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